

GODS AND GURUS IN THE CITY OF ANGELS: AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON, SWAMI  
PARAMANANDA, AND LOS ANGELES IN THE 1920S

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## ABSTRACT

Gods and Gurus in the City of Angels: Aimee Semple McPherson, Swami Paramananda, and Los Angeles in the 1920s

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This project focuses on two case studies as representative examples of Los Angeles' progressive tolerance in the period of the 1920s: The Pentecostal mega-church of Aimee Semple-McPherson, and the Vedanta Ashram of Swami Paramananda. Both religious institutions opened in Los Angeles in 1923, just thirteen miles away from each other, and continued to thrive side-by-side throughout the twentieth century until present day. Each religious figure spoke to a part of the growing Los Angeles population: McPherson's staunchly Christian, emotionally-driven, Hollywood-style ministry appealed to a large number of Los Angeles natives and newly-arrived immigrants, rocketing the emerging Pentecostal denomination into nationwide fame. Swami Paramananda's message, conversely, offered a universalistic tolerance, appealing to those struggling to grasp America's continued attachment to a strictly Christian message in a rapidly expanding world. Both institutions offer insight into the ability of remarkably varied religions to co-exist peacefully within a shared space.

Beyond the exploration of these two figures and their religious groups, this project also approaches the broader topics of religious pluralism in 1920s Los Angeles, the impact of immigration and urbanization on the religious diversity of Southern California, and the shifting religious climate of post-WWI America generally. This paper engages urban sociological theory and postcolonial thought to analyze the effects of rapid population growth and the rural-urban shift on religious environments in 1920s Los Angeles. This analysis has implications for the present, as American cities continue to struggle with managing diversity of religious beliefs and expressions.

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## INTRODUCTION

On January 1, 1923, in Echo Park, Los Angeles, the first mega-church in America was inaugurated by the charismatic yet controversial minister, Aimee Semple McPherson. The opening marked the pinnacle of her career and the dawn of the burgeoning Pentecostal evangelical movement. Staunchly Christian, unapologetically emotional, and distinctively modern, the Angelus Temple represented one future of religion in America. Just thirteen miles away in the San Gabriel foothills, a very different institution prepared to open. Its founder, the charismatic yet controversial Indian guru Swami Paramananda, was a direct disciple of the famed Indian Swami Vivekananda. His religion differed greatly from McPherson's: it was decidedly universalistic, drenched in eastern mysticism, and yet also distinctively modern. Paramananda's monastery, called Ananda Ashrama, represented another future of religion in America. This thesis tells the story of how these two very different symbols of America's religious futures could both arise in 1920s Los Angeles and how their twin beginnings reveal the complex forces behind California's grand experiment with religious diversity.

In the following pages I argue that Los Angeles in 1923 presented a unique environment for the simultaneous embrace of these two very different religious figures. The first part of this thesis is dedicated to exploring the distinct religious pluralism that arose in Los Angeles in the 1920s. By 1923, Los Angeles was on its way to becoming one of the most diverse cities in the most diverse country in the world. While this diversity could easily have led to cultural and religious hierarchies and inequalities within the city, it instead stabilized into the acceptance and general tolerance of a wide variety of belief systems. I argue that two primary catalysts contributed to this religious pluralism and must be understood separately, even if their interconnections are impossible to completely disentangle. First, the cultural and religious shifts

occurring across America in the 1920s contributed to the formation of Los Angeles's religious pluralism. These included a dramatic population shift from rural areas to urban areas and the subsequent emergence of an organized backlash against modernity through the burgeoning Fundamentalist movement and groups like the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>1</sup> Second, the dramatic domestic and international immigration into Los Angeles during the 1920s created an almost instantaneous metropolis. This new kind of city was different from previous "frontier cities" in both the number and kind of immigrants who chose to settle in Los Angeles. These two elements—the cultural/religious shifts in America in the 1920s, and the remarkable rise of the Los Angeles metropolis during this period—provide the background to examine the rise of this religiously pluralistic environment. To analyze of the roots of this religious pluralism I employ various works in the field of urban sociology, cultural theorists such as Homi Babha, and sociologists of religion such as Wade Clark Roof. The consideration of these theorists and exploration of events in Los Angeles during its rapid formation allow us to uncover the ways that a pervasive religious pluralism could develop in this city.

After establishing the kind and character of the religious pluralism of 1920s Los Angeles, the second part of this thesis turns to case studies of Swami Paramananda and Aimee Semple McPherson. I argue that in their rise to popularity, both Paramananda and McPherson conformed to and extended this modern, pluralistic environment. After examining their stories separately, I argue that both of these figures modernized their religious movements as well as their outreach strategies to take advantage of the urban, Hollywood-style environment in which

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, "modernity" will refer to the shift from a primarily rural to a primarily urban population in the U.S., as well as the technological advancements that globalized these emerging cities. The Fundamentalist movement will be further defined below, but generally refers to the conservative Christian movement that arose in the early twentieth century and advocated a literal reading of the Bible.



they found themselves. A deeper understanding of the overlapping strategies behind these two religious leaders can reveal how the gods and gurus of Los Angeles came to flourish side by side.

In the conclusion, I speculate on the contemporary implications of these two cases studies. While in many ways the development of Los Angeles was exceptional, its circumstances and catalysts can be dissected and explored for their applicable qualities to today's increasingly diverse cities. While Los Angeles represented a frontier both geographically and culturally when it developed in the early twentieth century, today many other cities struggle with questions of rapid immigration, cultural diversity, and diverse religious expression. The ways these questions were answered in the emerging City of Angeles can present potential answers to these same questions arising across the United States today.

### Cultural Shifts in America in the 1920s

The cultural shifts occurring in the United States during the 1920s strongly influenced the development of Los Angeles. The emerging California city was intimately tied to the population changes, cultural shifts, and urbanization occurring across the country in the 1920s, not in small part because much of the population of Los Angeles came directly from the heart of the country: the Midwest. This region was experiencing some of the most extreme forms of cultural change in the entire United States in the early twentieth century, and was home to many of the reactive movements responding to them as well. While experiencing urbanization, technological advancement, and shifting gender roles from the workplace to the family unit, the Midwest also propagated the second wave of the Ku Klux Klan and welcomed new staunchly conservative Christian movements that reemphasized the importance of tradition and cultural uniformity. It was in this contradictory period and from this region that Los Angeles received many of the

immigrants who would develop the sleepy town into a diverse city. Thus, the changes of this period help contextualize the social forces that paved the way for the emergence of Los Angeles.

The 1920s marked a shift in American population distribution from primarily rural, farming-centered collections of townships to a primarily urban population influenced by an emerging mass culture. At the turn of the twentieth century, two-thirds of Americans still lived on farms or in communities of less than 2,500, resulting in a country of primarily small-town populations not yet aware of the changes that a modern mass culture would bring.<sup>2</sup> Before the 1920s, the white, rural culture that represented the American majority held values that were largely Protestant, self-denying, and valuing thrift and sobriety (at least in principle). As historian Gilman Ostrander has shown, the rural farm life encouraged bible study, church attendance, and abstinence; all appropriate Protestant behaviors associated with national patriotism and American-style religion.<sup>3</sup>

With American involvement in World War I, a cultural shift occurred as women left at home gained access to more jobs and automobiles, inciting a new sense of freedom and autonomy that translated into greater legal rights. Increased leisure time and incomes after the war meant more travel and mobility, and people moved from the countryside to the opportunities and excitement of the city in droves. In the 1920s a mass urban culture quickly overtook the rural culture, creating a new majority view that stood in sharp contrast to the principles valued by rural farmers: leisure, glamour, fame and indulgence were now the fad.<sup>4</sup> By 1930, America was statistically an urban nation, and in many ways its cultural transformation was tied to this

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<sup>2</sup> See Gilman Ostrander, "The Revolution in Morals," in *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America: The 1920s*, eds. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody (Ohio State University Press, 1968), 323.

<sup>3</sup> Ostrander, "The Revolution in Morals," 323-325.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Goldberg, *America in the Twenties* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 83.

demographic shift.<sup>5</sup> These cultural shifts, and the backlash against them, reveal a country struggling with modernity and concerned with its effects on the social, political, and religious spheres of American society. The major events of this nationwide process would produce the diverse environment in Los Angeles that enabled a new religious pluralism to develop.

One of the most widely-acclaimed studies of these cultural shifts is Robert and Helen Lynds' *Middletown*. Focusing on the Midwestern town of Muncie, Indiana (renamed "Middletown" for purposes of anonymity) as their representative case study, the Lynds record the changes in technology, education, religious adherence, and urbanization occurring across small-town America at the turn of the twentieth century. Their case study focuses on the cultural changes that were occurring on both the family and societal levels and that would spread Westward with increasing migration in the 1920s. On the family level, the expanding availability of credit, paired with the increase in women's contribution to household incomes, enabled more families to purchase homes rather than rent. Household technological advances greatly reduced the labor required in the home, but also created new material focuses that became the means by which many families determined their "place" in the emerging social hierarchy of mass culture. Soon, automobiles and home appliances dictated where one stood on the social ladder, leading to immense pressure for children as well as adults to live up to new material standards. These shifts toward modernity represent the cultural changes occurring across America in the 1920s, through seen most clearly in the small towns of the American Midwest. Midwesterners migrating to Los Angeles in the 1920s were motivated by the persistent push toward modernity and improved life comforts indicative of United States sentiment in the 1920s, and the search for this improved lifestyle would ultimately shape the physical design and culture of Los Angeles. But while the

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<sup>5</sup> Ostrander, "The Revolution in Morals," 341.

immigrants arriving in Los Angeles during this period contributed to the modern urbanization trend, many of them were also concerned about what these cultural shifts meant for their small-town traditional values.

Small-town norms pushed back against many of these modernizing developments across America, often leading to conflicting responses and unintended outcomes. On the family level, the still strictly-enforced social norm of abstinence until marriage remained in place in many small, close-knit towns. When paired with young couples' increasing ability to purchase homes earlier in life, these social limitations meant that couples used their comparable economic success to marry younger. But as the marriage age fell after 1890, divorce rates rose.<sup>6</sup> Young married couples soon realized their long-term incompatibility and women took advantage of their newly found economic opportunities to seek divorce. These conflicting social norms faced in many American small towns represent the painful transition from close-knit, conservative towns to larger, diverse urban metropolises experienced by many people leading up to the 1920s.<sup>7</sup>

This transitional period often entailed conflicting social standards, inter-generational conflict, and discordant urban-rural relationships. In some extreme cases, this push and pull of modernity incited fierce backlash. The seemingly rapid cultural transition in America that led to more rights for women, improved technology and increased social freedoms of the city created fear and resentment among those pining for America's rural past. The major forms of this backlash are represented in the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan and the popularization of the Fundamentalist movement in the early 1920s. Both of these forms of backlash would affect Los

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<sup>6</sup> See Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & World, 1929), esp. 111-127.

<sup>7</sup> Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, esp. 132-140.

Angeles and its religious leaders, and help form the culture and religious environment that emerged in the city.

American cultural norms on race and gender were in flux during the 1920s, generating backlash in many ways, particularly in the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan in America. In contrast to the primarily Southern, racist group of the nineteenth century, the Ku Klux Klan of the twentieth century was more geographically dispersed and aimed its hatred against all things non-white and non-Protestant. As historian Robert Miller explains, the Klan's targets were hardly small in scope:

It was as though an outraged citizenry participated in a gigantic police line-up to identify the enemies of society, with each 'good' American fingering a different suspect: uppity Negro, conspiratorial Catholic, avaricious Jew, dirty Mexican, wily Oriental, bloody-handed Bolshevik, scabrous bootlegger, fancy 'lady,' oily gambler, fuzzy internationalist, grafting politico, Sabbath desecrator, wife-beater, homebreaker, atheist evolutionist, feckless-faithed Modernist, scoffing professor, arrogant intellectual, subversive socialist, slick urbanite, simpering pacifist, corrupt labor organizer.<sup>8</sup>

The Klan emerged with particular force in the mostly homogenous Midwestern states, partially as a response to the increasing migration of minority groups across state lines and subsequent economic competition. This influx of minority groups, paired with the urbanization occurring across the country, led to the association of immigrants and city growth with the downfall of traditional, rural Midwestern values.<sup>9</sup> In the 1920s, the Klan presented itself as the protector of the American ideals of old in a country that was increasingly full of dangerous new perspectives shifting into new ideals. In many ways, the cultural problems perceived by the Klan represented the very questions addressed by the population of Los Angeles, including cultural diversity, multiplicity of religious expression, and gender role upheaval.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Moats Miller, "The Ku Klux Klan," in *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America: The 1920s*, eds. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press), 216.

<sup>9</sup> Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 483.

The Klan rejected the notion of leniency toward many of the progressive cultural changes occurring across the United States, but it was compelled to respond to the modernizing role of women, which it did in sometimes conflicting ways. In her book, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*, Kathleen Blee explores the conflicted relationship between women and Klansmen in the 1920s, highlighting the creation of the “WKKK” in 1923 that gave voice to women seeking leadership roles among the group’s ranks. This new wave of the Klan was advertised to the public by a publicity team headed by a woman, Elizabeth Tyler, who redefined the Klan’s image through the modern mediums of advertisements and publicity campaigns. Tyler’s strategy of broadening the scope of the Klan’s “enemies” to include Jews, Catholics, and immigrants in addition to African Americans appealed to many white Midwesterners who were fearful of these groups’ increasing influence in their primarily homogenous societies.

While the Ku Klux Klan was largely disbanded (for a second time) due to internal conflict and scandals among its leadership by the mid-1920s, during its short tenure it nevertheless placed significant economic pressure on both individuals, minority-owned businesses and religious groups. Many churches received financial incentives from the KKK, meant to persuade church leaders to teach a message consistent with Klan ideology, and effectively altering some church messages and membership.<sup>10</sup> This group represented a significant portion of Americans struggling to cope with increased migration, urbanization, and subsequent diversity in American towns throughout the 1920s. The Klan’s threatening presence would reach as far as the West Coast, even affecting Aimee Semple McPherson’s ministry as she encountered the persuasive methods of the KKK in her Angelus Temple. As Midwesterners

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<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Women and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

migrated westward in droves, their responses to modernity, both progressive and backsliding, would follow with them.<sup>11</sup>

Another significant backlash to the cultural shifts of the 1920s became known as the Fundamentalist movement. This Christian reform effort emerged in the early twentieth century with the publishing of the “The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth.” Distributed between 1910 and 1915, and published as a collection in 1917 by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA), this series of volumes was written by a group of Protestant ministers and outlined the goals of Fundamentalists, including universal reading of the Bible through literal interpretation.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to its later manifestations, the early Fundamentalists spurned American political activism in favor of an individual-driven social movement. Its focus was to orient American culture away from threatening modernity and back to its traditional, small-town values.

By the 1920s Fundamentalists were struggling to formulate an appropriate response to the post-WWI cultural shifts occurring in America. As noted above, these shifts were driven primarily by rural-urban population shifts and the development of a materialistic mass culture, but were facilitated through useful technological advancements in mass communication, like radio and film. The Fundamentalist movement saw itself as a reaction against these cultural changes, while also recognizing the value in embracing those material advancements that could benefit the growth of the movement. Subsequently, Fundamentalist leaders frequently adopted the mediums of radio and film to disseminate their messages, while the movement simultaneously continued to reject the pitfalls of modernity.<sup>13</sup> The Fundamentalist movement

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 2, “A city of Strangers” for further analysis of the rapid migration from the Midwest to Los Angeles, and the subsequent effect on the religious environment

<sup>12</sup> Douglas C. Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 28-40.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

often walked the line between embracing modernity and rebuffing it during the movement's first incarnation at the beginning of the twentieth century; mirroring the struggle with modernity that the country as a whole faced during this period of rapid change.

The rapid rise of the Fundamentalist movement's popularity culminated in the Scopes trial of 1925. William Jennings Bryan, a leading figure of the Fundamentalist movement, joined the prosecution's team in the lawsuit against John T. Scopes, a general science teacher who had taught evolution in his class in violation of Tennessee law. In a reversal of Fundamentalist expectations, the Scopes trial and its showy displays of moral extremism became known as the final stance of a struggling, backwards movement. Despite ultimately winning the verdict at trial, the embarrassment of the ordeal caused the Fundamentalist movement to largely remove itself from the public sphere until its reincarnation as a political force in the 1950s.<sup>14</sup>

Though its widespread appeal faded quickly after its initial wave of popularity in the 1920s, the Fundamentalist movement impacted American politics and religious views across the nation, and particularly influenced the city where it had been popularized: Los Angeles.<sup>15</sup> Other religious groups in Los Angeles would ultimately have to come to terms with the Fundamentalist movement, or face its backlash. In a city of both secularism and religious pluralism, the Fundamentalist movement represented a reversal of Los Angeles' vast religious eclecticism that highlighted the shifting religious and social boundaries of the 1920s generally. These shifting boundaries were particularly evident in Los Angeles, a city of many religious expressions and a

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<sup>14</sup> Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2006), esp. 267-279.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the origins and development of the Fundamentalist movement, see George Marsden's *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006). In introducing the beginnings of the "Fundamentals," Marsden writes that "*The Fundamentals* were conceived by a Southern California oil millionaire and edited by Bible teachers and evangelists" (118). While the Fundamentalist movement saw much of its success in the Midwestern and Southern states, its financiers and first organizers resided in California.



massive immigrant population unsure of which one to embrace. The Fundamentalist movement responded to this multiplicity of religious choice by doubling down on the Protestant religion it saw as slipping out of modern America's focus. Every new religious group emerging in Los Angeles, including the two case studies explored below, contended and coexisted with this movement.

While the decade of the 1920s is commonly remembered for its economic boom, technological advancement, and progressive social shifts, it was also a period of arduous transition for many Americans. This transition involved reckoning with an emerging mass culture, driven by a rapid rural-urban population shift that threatened to undercut the traditional mores of rural life. In extreme cases, this fear led to reactive movements and social groups bent on turning back the clock to a time of imagined simplicity and moral clarity. In many ways, both the national movement toward modernity and the backlash it inspired helped to shape American culture into what it would become. During the 1920s this form was still taking shape, molded by the pushes and pulls of the cultural conflicts at play. On the individual level, this conflict was most directly felt in the physical migration from rural to urban settings, and the social challenges this change entailed. On the national level, the push toward modernity was facilitated by new economic affluence and advancements in mass communication, which raised new questions on the appropriate responses to modernity. These cultural shifts touched Los Angeles as well, and the residents of the City of Angels offered new responses to the challenges created by modernity. The immigrants who arrived in Los Angeles during its rapid growth period in the 1920s were largely affluent Midwesterners or health-seekers from across the country, searching for a better quality of life. Their uprooted position led to an openness and willingness to transition into new religious and social groups, and toward an emerging religious pluralism in the city. The reasons

for Los Angeles' rapid population growth and subsequent cultural formation are essential to consider.

## A CITY OF STRANGERS: IMMIGRATION AND THE RISE OF LOS ANGELES IN THE 1920S

At the turn of the twentieth century, Los Angeles saw a sudden influx of migrants from around the country as the competing Santa Fe and Pacific Railroads introduced increasingly low railroad ticket rates. At the same time, advertising campaigns played up the healing climate and economic opportunities awaiting adventurous Americans out west.<sup>16</sup> California was presented as a land of fresh starts and endless opportunities, a new world “free from the racial, immigrant, and class conflicts troubling other regions.”<sup>17</sup> People came in search of health cures and new beginnings, but stayed for the real economic advantages available in the rapidly growing metropolis.

After 1900, the appeal of Los Angeles for immigrants from across the country became less a desire to continue a rural, agricultural vocation in fertile Western land, and more a search for an improved quality of life. These new Angelinos sought a well-rounded life of both work and rest; they wanted to “relax as well as to labor and to find personal fulfillment rather than economic opportunity.”<sup>18</sup> Many of these immigrants had already experienced a life of toil, both through the generations before them and through their own experience of rural farm life, and were “increasingly reluctant to be bound indefinitely to rural America.”<sup>19</sup> An agricultural boom in the early 1900s also left many of these farmers flush with new funds and eager to improve their livelihood in sunny California. A Midwestern farmer exodus occurred across the Middle

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<sup>16</sup> “Travel Figures Reveal Record Rush of Visitors: Piers, Rail and Bus Stations Packed Each Day with Crowds of Happy Humanity and End of Journey to the Land of Sunshine,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 1927.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 24.

<sup>18</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 72 (Fogelson quoting Stanton D. Kirkham).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

States: in Iowa, farmland bought for \$5 an acre in 1880 sold for \$75 an acre in 1905.<sup>20</sup> This newfound prosperity inspired many to move away from the Midwest and its physically demanding lifestyle.<sup>21</sup> As Kevin Starr notes, “in Los Angeles the worker, having left these things behind in the very act of relocating, was reluctant to take them up again.”<sup>22</sup> The immigration trend that began in the early 1900s continued on as the city grew in population and industry, thus by the period of highest immigration between 1920 and 1930, less than 4% of migrants to Southern California settled on farms, with the majority of them moving directly to the city of Los Angeles.<sup>23</sup> They were largely “people of moderate means who came west to retire, to take it easy rather than to have a good time.”<sup>24</sup> The new vocations of the former Midwestern farmers were left to be seen, but the appeal of Los Angeles was decidedly its ability to improve life through leisure, not through work.

This draw toward the developing California ideal drew multitudes westward in the early twentieth century, many of whom settled in the emerging metropolis of Los Angeles. As a result, in the decade of the 1920s, Los Angeles became the fifth largest city in the United States. An oil boom, emerging film industry, growing tourism, and impressive booster campaigns all came together to incite this immigration explosion.<sup>25</sup> Oil production in California increased from 4,000,000 barrels in 1900 to 105,000,000 barrels in 1920, much of it struck in Southern California.<sup>26</sup> The construction of new highways to accommodate the rapidly-popularizing

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<sup>20</sup> Carey McWilliams, *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land* (New York: Stratford Press, 1946), 163.

<sup>21</sup> Gilbert C. Fite, “The Farmers’ Dilemma, 1919-1929,” In *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America: The 1920s*, edited by John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody (Ohio State University Press, 1968), 67-69.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 94.

<sup>23</sup> McWilliams, *Southern California Country*, 135.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>25</sup> Starr, *Material Dreams*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> McWilliams, *Southern California Country*, 135.

automobile, as well as the securing of water supplies, enabled Los Angeles to become the central destination of a westward-expanding nation.<sup>27</sup> A flood of American migrants from the Midwest took off for greener pastures, and, much like for the semi-fictional Midwestern wizard, the road often ended in that dreamlike Emerald City on the West Coast: Los Angeles.<sup>28</sup>

The steady flood of new arrivals to Los Angeles encouraged city boosters to invest in extensive city planning campaigns, further growing the city in anticipation of the next flood of immigrants. As California journalist Carey McWilliams explained it, “the constant influx of people, bringing new ideas, new energy, new capital, was the hedge against which the promoters made their daring investments.”<sup>29</sup> Their bets paid off; Los Angeles increased immensely in population and diversity in the 1920s, bringing people from all over the world to the developing city. Japanese immigration to Los Angeles rapidly increased following eased immigration laws in Japan, and throughout the 1920s, increasing numbers of Mexican farmers found greater opportunities awaiting them over the border in Los Angeles.<sup>30</sup> Immigration to the city reached its highest rate “between 1920 and 1924, when at least one hundred thousand people a year poured into Los Angeles alone.”<sup>31</sup> What had once been a “sleepy agricultural town” quickly turned into a diverse cultural center and bustling metropolis.<sup>32</sup> The flood of immigrants that

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<sup>27</sup> Starr, *Material Dreams*, 25. See also: Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt*, 6-7.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin Starr comments on the inspiration for the book and movie, *Wizard of Oz*, as coming from the author’s frequent trips from his Midwestern home to his house on the West Coast (*Material Dreams*, chp. 4, 65-89).

<sup>29</sup> McWilliams, *Southern California Country*, 134.

<sup>30</sup> Fogelson explains that while the Immigration Act of 1924 prohibited all immigration from Asia to the United States, the previous influx of Japanese immigrants and the continued migration within America to Los Angeles meant that the Japanese population in Los Angeles continued to rise, increasing from 8,000 in 1910 to 35,000 by 1930 (*The Fragmented Metropolis*, 76-77).

<sup>31</sup> Barfoot, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Making of Modern Pentecostalism 1890-1926* (London, UK: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2011), 110.

<sup>32</sup> Starr, *Material Dreams*, 23.

arrived from both around the country and around the world had an enormous impact on the cultural and religious climate of Los Angeles.

These population changes were not gradual. Over the course of just one decade, from 1920-1930, the increasing ethnic diversity of Los Angeles transformed the once frontier farming town into a multicultural center. The rapid immigration of ethnic minorities to Los Angeles in the early twentieth century brought a wide array of new ethnicities, politics, and religions that competed for equal footing in the rapidly-expanding city.<sup>33</sup> As Starr notes, “Between 1920 and 1930, the Mexican-American population of Los Angeles tripled, from 33,644 to 97,116, surpassing San Antonio, Texas as the leading Mexican-American population in the United States.”<sup>34</sup> Japanese and African American immigration also rose rapidly, particularly between 1910 and 1930. Due both to immigration from Japan and internal migration from others parts of America, the Japanese population of Los Angeles increased from 4,000 in 1910 to 21,000 by 1930.<sup>35</sup> African Americans, migrating from the South and urban East in an attempt to find greater economic and social equality, increased in Los Angeles from 7,600 in 1910 to 39,000 in 1930. This fast rate of immigration, from both minority ethnic groups and Midwestern Americans, created a surge in Los Angeles’ population throughout the early twentieth century. By 1930, the population of Los Angeles reached nearly double that of San Francisco.<sup>36</sup> Though the inter-ethnic relations were not necessarily without conflict in Los Angeles because of this diversity, the wide array of ethnic groups still differentiated Los Angeles from other cities in the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>35</sup> US Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910. Volume 1. Population* (Washington, 1913), 854-855; US Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920. Volume IV. Population* (Washington, 1922), 729-731; US Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930. Volume II. Population* (Washington, 1932), 24-250, as printed in Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 76-77.

<sup>36</sup> Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 78.

early twentieth century. The effects of this diversity were significant to the cultural, and particularly religious, development of the city.<sup>37</sup>

Los Angeles did not develop as a “typical frontier settlement” as San Francisco did during the gold rush era, where rapid immigration meant a primarily transient, male population of laborers, who only much later brought their families and purchased homes. Instead, families usually migrated to Los Angeles together and began purchasing homes soon after.<sup>38</sup> This meant that families were investing in the future of Los Angeles soon after arrival. In the decade of the 1920s, “fully one-third of the Los Angeles population owned and occupied its own home,” creating, according to Starr, “committed citizenship, concern for schools, parks, playgrounds and good government.”<sup>39</sup> These immigrants’ previous identities as rural farmers had sparked new desires for their move out West: a comfortable life on a landscaped plot of land in a beautiful setting. They were tired of their previous lives of hardship, either through the toil of the land, or the overcrowded slums of the Eastern and Midwestern cities. Though they came in large numbers, many of these immigrants wanted similar things: the safety and friendly warmth of a small town within the material comforts of a large metropolis. It was this desire that led to the suburban sprawl well-known today in Los Angeles.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time that immigrants were purchasing the suburban homes that isolated them from the bustling city, these new arrivals to Los Angeles were trying to reorient themselves to their version of metropolitan life. The connections they had maintained through familiar social

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<sup>37</sup> See Wade Clark Roof, “Pluralism as a Culture: Religion and Civility in Southern California,” in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 612 (July 2007), 85-86. The effects of diversity on religion in Los Angeles will be explored later in this chapter.

<sup>38</sup> Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 83-84.

<sup>39</sup> Starr, *Material Dreams*, 71-72.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

settings, and particularly the familiarity of their religious institution, were now gone. They were in a process of redefining themselves through changes in work, social groups, ethnic minority status, and even religious affiliation that came along with the process of uprooting one's self and family. For many of them, this nebulous existence left them ungrounded and isolated in the city. The desire for Midwestern-style community life clashed with a desire for materialistically comfortable lives; a predicament for many of these new arrivals. While they no longer desired bleak rural isolation from city life, they also hoped to avoid the poverty and unpleasant overcrowding common to most cities, which necessarily meant expanding out into suburban areas.<sup>41</sup> This geographic imperative led Los Angeles to grow through sprawl rather than concentration of the population; an unusual model for most cities of the era.<sup>42</sup> But instead of creating comfortable homes where neighbors could visit one another at their leisure, these suburban homes served to cut residents off from each other; with no central point of meeting or nearby city center in which to congregate, communal interaction dwindled. Soon suburban areas expanded into sub-regions and people no longer even commuted to a common workplace in the center of the city, instead commuting to other suburbs with no communal overlap. As one Urban Studies scholar puts it, "suburbia is a collective effort to lead a private life."<sup>43</sup>

These newcomers also wanted the convenience and independence of individual vehicles for transportation, leading to the number of automobiles in Los Angeles County to rise from "under 200,000 in 1920 to over 500,000 in 1924,"<sup>44</sup> and making the automobile Los Angeles' preferred mode of transportation. But this dependence on the automobile only served to further

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<sup>41</sup> Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 145.

<sup>42</sup> See Foelgson's *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 142-145, especially Table 16 titled "Area and Density of Selected Metropolitan Districts, 1930" on pg. 143.

<sup>43</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 210.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.



decentralize the city and isolate suburban enclaves from one-another, as no centralized transportation system brought people to a central point. Hoping that material comfort could still be made consistent with small-town values and kinship, these newcomers “strove to recreate the cohesive communal life of their former farms and towns” in the ways most familiar to them.<sup>45</sup> They started social clubs and created events catered toward kindred spirits from specific states or regions of origin. None seemed to solve the problem of urban loneliness and anonymity. Many of these social struggles can be traced back to the impersonal nature of the city environment; a concept that many rural Midwesterners were quickly learning after arriving in the expanding Los Angeles metropolis.

### The Effects of Rural-Urban Change

Many of the cultural shifts occurring across America at the time were intensified in Los Angeles in the 1920s, particularly the national transition from a rural to urban population majority. It was this jarring move from a rural to urban environment, combined with the lack of a familiar community awaiting those migrants and the grand expectations of life in the American West that served as the three primary catalysts to the rise of religious pluralism in the city. For the immigrants who arrived in California in the 1920s (primarily from rural, Midwestern areas), the shift to an urban setting was socially and psychologically challenging. The incredibly fast rate of immigrant arrival meant that a city of strangers with no common community was forming in Los Angeles. This led many in Los Angeles to seek out new communal ties to replace those they had left behind during their move west. The forms of community available in rural and urban settings differ, however, and community building therefore required a transition from

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 191.

small-town familiarity to impersonal city culture. In sprawling, suburban Los Angeles, these ties were particularly difficult to establish, with no city center or common midpoint to congregate around. The expectations of those who moved to California, and particularly Los Angeles—renewed health, prosperity, and land—were intricately tied to the myth of the American West. This expectation served to exacerbate the individualistic approach to Los Angeles’ development, thereby further reducing the interpersonal ties within the city.

The shift from a rural to urban setting created new challenges for those looking to form community in the city. The adjustment to the new norms of an urban, rapidly-changing environment led to uncertainty for immigrants to Los Angeles. Those arriving in Los Angeles from across the country and internationally had been recently uprooted from their social and psychological understandings of their self, their identity.<sup>46</sup> The changes required in moving across the U.S. went beyond material changes in location, work, and property. This move also involved a change in lifestyle, social associations, and personal identity. The economic, geographic, social, and religious factors that made up their self-identity were now abandoned, and many of the new arrivals were not eager to take on their previous identities again. Instead, a new identity could now be formed by adopting the norms of their new location and culture.

On the individual level, the uprooting of oneself from one’s socio-geographic nexus involves a process of reorientation and even re-identification. As will be discussed below, many scholars have reflected on this identity transformation in cities, though it is perhaps one scholar’s theories on mimicry and hybridity in postcolonial thought that serves best to dissect the extraordinary circumstances of Los Angeles. Homi Bhabha comments extensively on the process

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<sup>46</sup> For more on this changing identity as a result of shifting location, see McWilliams, *Southern California Country*, 269; Putnam, *Bowling alone*, 204; Peter Berger, “Global Pluralism and Religion,” *Estudios Públicos* 98 (Autumn 2005), 6;

of identity transformation within the lens of the postcolonial environment, though with terminology and concepts that apply well to the environment of 1920s Los Angeles. Bhabha's extensive work on the transition from binary identities to fluctuating hybrid identities in people responding to the colonial and postcolonial environment can be applied to the nuances of the new urban environment as well. For Bhabha, culture is not consistently binary—there is not simply black and white, colonizer and colonized, outsider and insider, native and visitor. These identities are constantly shifting through hybridization—the process of blending identities.<sup>47</sup> This mixture extends people acting as actors mimicking elements of the society they find themselves in, and thereby adopting parts of the dominant culture while maintaining aspects of their previous identity. For Bhabha, this relationship was primarily significant for colonized-colonizer relationships, where the colonized mimics his colonizer, ultimately confusing the black-and-white labels of difference that kept them easily distinguishable.<sup>48</sup> But these ideas of hybridity and mimicry help explain the development of Los Angeles as well, for it is the shifting of identities and reorienting of culture within a strange, new, urban environment which challenged the immigrants to Los Angeles in the 1920s. In many ways they were eager to abandon their previous identities in favor of a new beginning in the American West, but the loss of their previous identity also required the grafting on of new, distinctly urban understandings in a mesh of new and old identities. This uprooting and reorientation process served as the catalyst to emerging pluralistic environments in this not-yet-formed metropolis.

Urban Studies scholars have since applied Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity to the city environment. Nezar AlSayyad grounds the theory of cultural hybridity in urban locales, arguing

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<sup>47</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 277-278.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-131.

that borderlands where cultures meet can offer a grounding space where mixed identity is formed. More than physical borderlands, these places are represented in areas where high immigration forms a borderland mentality, or, as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson describe, an “interstitial zone of displacement and de-territorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject.”<sup>49</sup> Los Angeles in the 1920s fits this model outlined by AlSayyad and his contemporaries: A metropolis requiring and instigating hybridization as a response to rapid cultural change. This rapid change also required migrants to Los Angeles to seek out a new community in which to root themselves. For many in the process of adjusting to their new urban environment, this transition proved difficult.

Second, the formation of Los Angeles was arguably counterproductive to the goal of facilitating community interaction, making the development of community particularly difficult in Los Angeles. During Los Angeles’ booming immigration period in the 1920s, norms of ethnic subjugation, cultural domination, and geographic concentration were already established and recognized as realities of urban life in many American cities. But for those immigrants arriving in Los Angeles, these concepts represented the evils of urban life; evils that could be avoided through an alternative approach to city living. For many of these relatively affluent immigrants, maintaining high quality of life in the city setting meant owning a plot of land and a large house. As a result of this demand for sprawling, suburban developments, Los Angeles was constructed through a series of decentralized zones, enabling it to maintain many different points of connection and community interaction that were never forced to meet in one city center. For many immigrants arriving to Los Angeles in the 1920s, this disconnectedness made the process

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<sup>49</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” in *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (Feb., 1992), 18.

of community building and identity reorientation even more difficult. Due to its multifaceted approach to urban development, Los Angeles offers a distinctive case study for urban sociologists that highlights questions of community, loneliness, and the rural myth that have long been contested within the academic study of cities.

Los Angeles' decentralized, fragmented model largely contrasts with early sociologists' understanding of the city. Primarily defined as an area of dense population with a single center of activity, the city was an emblem of society at its most advanced. As one of the first to tackle the sociological factors at play in societies, Emile Durkheim defined the shared point of social reference between members of these societies as the "collective conscious." For Durkheim, the collective consciousness is "the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society."<sup>50</sup> This consciousness lives outside of the individual, as it is contained in society and continues on as individuals pass away, but it is nevertheless sustained and enforced through the individual. It is expressed through the norms of society. Each society commonly possesses its own collective conscious, and as one moves from society to society, as is now more possible in the modern world, one needs to reorient to the collective consciousness of that new society. For Durkheim, this unifying force represents a solidarity that individuals within a society share, and which forms into agreed-upon norms of behavior within that society.<sup>51</sup> These norms morph into morality itself, as Durkheim writes: "What is moral is everything that is a source of solidarity."<sup>52</sup> Durkheim's view of a unified collective consciousness underlying individuals'

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<sup>50</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 2014), 39.

<sup>51</sup> Durkheim explains that these norms are codified into the laws of society as well, therefore breaking a law is really breaking with the norms valued by the society (*The Division of Labor in Society*, 42-43).

<sup>52</sup> Durkheim continues, arguing that without the society to base one's personal morality on, there would be no morality itself. Morality constitutes the bonds that tie us together as a society: "Cause all social life to vanish, and moral life would vanish at the same time" (*The Division of Labor in Society*, 331).

behavior is challenged by later sociologists and by the emergence of distinctly pluralistic societies, including Los Angeles.

Sociologists have long challenged and expanded on Durkheim's notions of collective consciousness, and more recently the field of Urban Studies has responded to Durkheim's notions of the collective consciousness within model of the modern city.<sup>53</sup> For early scholars of Urban Studies, the city was both a place where the individual could potentially reach maximum development in human advancement, and also a place of depersonalization and intense loneliness. Anthropologist Robert Redfield noted the sociological/anthropological consensus on urban life as "de- personalized, individualized, emotionally shallow and atomized, unstable, secularized, blasé, rationalistic, cosmopolitan, highly differentiated, self-critical, time-coordinated, subject to sudden shifts in mood and fashion."<sup>54</sup> This understanding of the urban environment was that of an isolating place for those not used to its harsh impersonality.

For early scholars of urban environments, even the positive aspects of the city were often dangerous and threatening. Georg Simmel's pivotal work on the psychology of urbanization explained the internal shifts that occur in the individual in the urban environment, arguing that the "metropolitan type of man" sets up inner defenses to protect himself from the "threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment, which would uproot him."<sup>55</sup> For Simmel, a general aversion exists between individuals in cities. Different from the interpersonal relationships that rural-dwellers are able to foster, those in cities must be impersonal and

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<sup>53</sup> Urban sociologists have added to the definition of a "city" over the years, but most definitions work off of Max Weber's original description of a city as "a settlement of closely spaced dwellings which form a colony so extensive that the reciprocal personal acquaintance of the inhabitants, elsewhere characteristic of the neighborhood, is lacking" (Weber, *Economy and Society* vol. 2, 1212).

<sup>54</sup> Robert Redfield, *The Cultural Role of Cities*, 65.

<sup>55</sup> Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, Ed. Richard Sennett. (New York, NY: Meredith Corporation, 1969), 48.

mutually cautious, if only for volume of people.<sup>56</sup> However, this process also leads to an objective approach to others; an equalizing of people occurs in the mind of the metropolitan man, to whom all persons are equally impersonal, as opposed to the rural man, who still harbors “pettiness and prejudices” toward those with whom he is more intimately tied.<sup>57</sup> This objectivity through personal distance leads to true freedom for Simmel, and consequently the metropolitan man can live based on intellect entirely, with no chains to emotional prejudices tying him down.<sup>58</sup> Thus through harsh depersonalization, cities create fairer individuals, but this process requires isolation from and mutual fear of others in the urban setting.

The more recent trends in urban sociology have recognized that meaningful links of social connectedness can form in cities, despite the gloomy outlook taken by early Urban Studies scholars. Michael P. Smith and Thomas Bender have both criticized the past outlooks of Redfield and Simmel, arguing that their harking back to a “good old days” of rural camaraderie is nothing more than myth. It is even dangerous, as it serves to “delegitimize social conflict situations” that occurred in rural societies, implying that we must continuously strive for an idyllic past that “never was, and never can be.”<sup>59</sup> The urban environment is not more impersonal as previous scholars believed, but provides different avenues for social connection that must be navigated.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 52-54.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 55. For more discussion on the effects of urban environments on the individual, see Louis Wirth’s work on heterogeneity in cities, particularly within Albert Reiss’s volume *On Cities and Social Life: Selected Papers* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 1964. Many subsequent urban scholars have critiqued these works, especially Michael Smith, who critiques Redfield, Wirth and Simmel simultaneously in his work *The City and Social Theory* (New York, NY: St. Martins Press), 1979. (202). See also Thomas Bender’s work, particularly *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 1978, for a similar rebuttal to Redfield, Wirth and Simmel.

<sup>58</sup> For more on Georg Simmel’s contribution to Urban Studies, see: Andrzej J. L. Zieleniec, “Simmel, Georg” in *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*, ed. Ray Hutchison (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2010), 718-722.

<sup>59</sup> Michael P. Smith, *The City and Social Theory* (New York, NY: St. Martins Press, 1979), 202; See also Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1978).

This more nuanced view of city culture and community offers a less condemning view of the potential for social connection in the urban setting.

Both of these theories on urban society help contextualize Los Angeles' social and religious development. Whether Los Angeles was the entirely impersonal, bustling city of past urban sociologist perspective, or a place of potential interpersonal advancement that simply required a different approach than rural settings, the city was still a social obstacle for its many new arrivals. As new Los Angeles residents faced the uprooted identity struggle of migration and arrived in a new, urban setting without familiar communal ties, a new pluralism began to emerge. This response to the multiplicity of beliefs trying to find expression in the developing city would come to create an open, diverse, and eclectic environment for religious expression.

Lastly, the appeal of Los Angeles extended from the wider draw to the mythical American West. As Frederick Jackson Turner famously commented in his 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," America's expansion into the West represented a "perennial rebirth" of the nation as the frontier expanded and repeatedly evolved from primitive governments and economic systems on the frontier into developed societies. The move westward represented an internal shift from a primarily European identity to a newly-developed American one. The frontier changed its Eastern explorers as they encountered it, leaving a mark on them that finally differentiated them from Europeans.<sup>60</sup> It was this journey and adventure to the unadulterated land of the West that molded the new American mindset,

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<sup>60</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Report of the American Historical Association*, 1893. Turner advanced that the move towards an "untouched" land marks a universal move of humanity through the stages of evolution—a reenactment of the transition from hunting tribes to rudimentary settlements with primitive farming strategies, and eventually to industrial societies.



according to Turner, and it was the search for this internal transformation that continued to draw Americans West for generations after.

Though Turner's thesis is considered oversimplified and Eurocentric to many historians today, by introducing the concept of cultural construction in the American West it provides the basis through which the understanding of the Western Myth can be understood.<sup>61</sup> While Turner proclaimed the frontier and its adventurous spirit "closed" at the end of the nineteenth century, this myth continued to be applied to Los Angeles even in the 1920s, when city boosters identified the emerging city as a symbol of renewed health, opportunity, and prosperity. For many immigrants to the city, the Western Myth offered hopes of a new beginning and promising opportunity.

The new immigrants lured to Los Angeles by the Western Myth brought with them a swift cultural shift. As many historians have noted, evidence of the rapid increase in diversity "manifested itself" in the array of religious groups that began in Los Angeles throughout the 1920s.<sup>62</sup> Unlike the other large city in California, San Francisco, which matched the city culture and ethnic makeup of the East Coast much more closely, Los Angeles was decisively eclectic; importing its identity from various places, and refusing to choose one underlying style, industry, or religion to define the city as a whole. As cultural studies scholar Leo Braudy said, "Los Angeles in the twentieth century became a kaleidoscope of multiple images."<sup>63</sup> This identity was

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<sup>61</sup> Many scholars later contested Turner's thesis, arguing that it failed to take into consideration the influence of American Indian and Spanish residents encountered along the move westward. For more on this argument, see Patricia Limerick's "Closing the Frontier and Opening Western History," in *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (London, UK: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 17-32.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Tom Sitton and William F. Devrell eds., *Metropolis in the Making : Los Angeles in the 1920s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 214, 202: "Such significant growth in population and in racial and ethnic diversity manifested itself in the religious traditions that set down roots in the metropolis in the 1920s."

<sup>63</sup> William Deverell and Greg Hise, eds., *A Companion to Los Angeles* (West Sussex, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2010), 272.

purposefully (though not uniformly) constructed and reconstructed; it was the ideal western frontier, where one could start again and make himself into what he wanted to be, within a city that was constantly reinventing itself as well. Perhaps more apt than being called the “city that grew,” Los Angeles has perhaps best been labelled the city that “has been conjured into existence.”<sup>64</sup>

The individualism, eclecticism, and rapid growth of Los Angeles created a sentiment of endless possibilities and limitless opportunity in a city not yet tied down to one norm or pattern. Though these same attributes of the city eventually failed to form meaningful community for the immigrants to Los Angeles, upon arrival to the city it was those unknown factors that incited a sense of adventure and possibility. As Carey McWilliams put it, “In the process of moving westward, the customs, practices, and religious habits of the people have undergone important changes. Old ties have been loosened; old allegiances weakened.”<sup>65</sup> It was this uprooting of identity, the impersonal nature of the city, and the sense of renewed potential and possibility tied to the myth of the American West that came together to facilitate the distinct religious pluralism of Los Angeles.

### The Rise of Religious Pluralism in the West

In the struggle to attain social cohesion in Los Angeles, churches were seen as one potential avenue of interpersonal connection, and in the first immigration wave at the turn of the twentieth century, they had largely been successful in that role. Protestant-based citizen groups grew civic institutions and encouraged social engagement in the development of the city. But

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<sup>64</sup> McWilliams, *Southern California Country*, 134.

<sup>65</sup> McWilliams, *Southern California Country*, 269.

when the more diverse immigrants of the 1920s arrived in mass numbers, these civic groups and the Protestant churches behind them were unable to keep up with the masses.<sup>66</sup> The increasingly disconnected and diverse populace was less tied to the homogenous community churches, and a large secular constituency took root. Though many of Los Angeles' immigrants arrived from rustic towns where church attendance was a community activity, in Los Angeles, only one in five affiliated with a congregation in 1927.<sup>67</sup> This new diversity of beliefs meant that religious affiliation, even within the previously popular Protestant churches, was no longer a unifying force within communities. Religious homogeneity was left by the wayside as another small-town, community-building activity that could not easily be transferred to metropolitan life.

The attempt to create a small town atmosphere in a large metropolis through suburban sprawl, decentralized transportation and social and religious groups unsurprisingly failed, leaving a population of disillusioned, isolated city dwellers. Despite their wishes, the suburban residents of the increasingly decentralized Los Angeles could not turn their city back into the small town they had previously known. While in many ways this model of city-building was unsuccessful, this rapid flocking-together of strangers into the new city of Los Angeles enabled a new religious pluralism to emerge.

The prevalence of new religious institutions, established both in the form of new approaches to traditional Christianity and as new religions altogether, set Los Angeles apart from

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<sup>66</sup> See Gregory Holmes Singleton, "Religion in the City of Angels: American Protestant Culture and Urbanization, Los Angeles, 1850-1930," PhD diss., 1976, University of California, Los Angeles. History, United States, 218-220. Singleton argues that it was the change in Los Angeles' civic needs that ultimately made Protestant cohesion as a means for civic engagement "obsolete:" "...the largest city in an important state could not hope to remain a cohesive community of local interests" (219-220).

<sup>67</sup> Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 194. Fogelson emphasizes that these newcomers still "considered religion beneficial," but motivating congregants to commit to consistent church attendance was a challenge for churches in Los Angeles.

other metropolises of the early twentieth century. The Encyclopedia of Urban Studies mentions the unusual place of Los Angeles within the field of Urban Studies, calling it a city of “hybrid alliances.”<sup>68</sup> In addition to intra-national migration, a vast array of immigrant populations arrived from Asia, the Middle-East, Europe, and Mexico, bringing with them religious forms that had never been established in American cities before.<sup>69</sup> While Eastern religions would eventually gain nationwide prominence in the 1960s, Los Angeles in the 1920s was already seeing a significant influx in Eastern and Mid-East religions arriving with their immigrant populations: Baha’i, Buddhism, and yoga training centers were all introduced to Los Angeles in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>70</sup> These rapid changes in the religious climate of Los Angeles motivated some to reach out in tolerance or even join these new religious groups, while causing others to react with fear and distain. The many religious options open to the religion-seekers of Los Angeles, and the ways they chose to react to these new religious possibilities, define the social environment of the American West, and particularly Los Angeles.

The myth of the West surrounding Los Angeles, and the immigration pattern it produced, caused the city to become the antithesis of the East-Coast urban center. Its location in the frontier culture of the West and the already-diverse state of California ensured an eclecticism that was enhanced through rapid migration to the city. This diversity of ethnicity, background and cultures extended into a diversity of religious belief as well. Unlike the cities of the East Coast

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<sup>68</sup> Walter J. Nicholls, “Los Angeles School of Urban Studies,” in *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*, 469-473. The entry comments on more than religious diversity, but on the diversity of ethnicities and classes as well: “At the same time, Soja maintains that the weakening of universalizing and essential political truths has provided ideological openings for establishing new hybrid alliances across traditional political divides (ideological, racial, class, spatial). In such a context, actors can form common alliances around pragmatic issues that bind them together, with internal differences often viewed as assets in the common struggle for social justice. Whereas modernist epistemologies based on universalizing truths made the development of alliances across traditional political and ideological divides difficult, more relativized and reflexive postmodern ways of thinking make these types of alliances more feasible.”

<sup>69</sup> Sitton and Deverell, *Metropolis in the Making*, 202.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 210-2011.

and Midwest that had more established norms and traditions, many different religious beliefs and ethnicities vied for the opportunity for recognition and legitimacy among the people of Los Angeles. Sociologist and religious studies scholar Wade Clark Roof calls this relationship between minorities in Southern California the “new religious pluralism,” a relationship “characterized by a greater openness and acceptance of globally based religious diversity.” Roof attributes this relationship to the lack of any “strong religious establishment in Southern California,” which he believes altered the approach to “tolerance” between religious groups.<sup>71</sup> Roof further explains the approach to religion in Southern California as different than other regions of America: “in Southern California relations between faith communities were negotiated in a context where, first, religious custom played much less of a role and, second, no one tradition exercised a strong dominance over the culture.”<sup>72</sup> Historian Eldon Ernst agrees, arguing that in the American West “most religious groups came to know both majority and minority experiences as well as general equality.”<sup>73</sup> Ernst argues that the West offered a different approach to the established norms of cities dominated by one pervasive religious understanding.<sup>74</sup> According to Ernst, in the West, “the international, interracial, intercultural engagements predominate” over a focus on any one, overwhelming assumption.<sup>75</sup> This Western pluralism meant that no religious group was given a default position as either a minority or

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<sup>71</sup> Roof, “Pluralism as a Culture: Religion and Civility in Southern California,” 85-86.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Eldon G. Ernst, “American Religious History from a Pacific Coast Perspective,” In *Religion and Society in the American West: Historical Essays*, eds. Carl Guaneri and David Alvarez. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 12.

<sup>74</sup> Ernst argued that this particular religious pluralism could only be found in the West for both geographical and sociological reasons. The adventure of westward expansion and the wildness of western lands stimulated an openness to new experiences that could not easily be duplicated in the already-developed East. Ernst comments that “Frederick Jackson Turner had declared the frontier closed, but the westward movement continued unabated” and “Religion in the American Far West reflects and penetrates its regional cultural ethos, which helps locate both its distinctive qualities and its commonality with religion in other social contexts.” From “American Religious History from a Pacific Coast Perspective,” 17, 21.

<sup>75</sup> Ernst, “American Religious History from a Pacific Coast Perspective,” 3.

majority group upon arrival in Los Angeles, creating a space for religious expression with fewer assumptions of power and majority status than in other cities.

This diversity did not just place different beliefs together in a close area where they were required to coexist, but incited a new approach to religion. Philip Goff recognizes this phenomenon, stating that years of study of the American West have shown how “pluralism” evolved as a philosophy, particularly in the urban West, where “diversity is often celebrated, not just tolerated.”<sup>76</sup> While a traditional understanding of religious tolerance referred to a minority group’s struggle to gain “concessions from a coercive religious and cultural establishment,” Southern California shifted that assumption to one of a more equal playing field among religions.<sup>77</sup> To Ernst, “The Far West qualified all definitions of the religious mainstream and all pretensions to Christian hegemony.”<sup>78</sup> Both authors add, however, that this heterogeneous blend contained a crucial dose of secularity, which served as a check on the ability of any one religious group, or the preference for religion general, to dominate public opinion.<sup>79</sup>

This pluralism can be defined as an active social (and not just legal) equality of religious groups among people. Religious studies scholar Diana Eck explains pluralism as “the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest

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<sup>76</sup> Philip Goff, “Religion and the American West,” in *A Companion to the American West*, ed. William Devereell (West Sussex, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 295.

<sup>77</sup> Roof, “Pluralism as a Culture,” 85-86. Roof’s quote in context contrasts the situation of Los Angeles with that of the nation as a whole, as analyzed by sociologist Ray Hutchison: ““Because there has not been a strong religious establishment in Southern California, the trajectory for religious pluralism here differs significantly from Hutchison’s (2003) more general model for the country. Religious tolerance, the early phase Hutchison describes, came about as a result mainly of religious minority efforts at gaining concessions from a coercive religious and cultural establishment. Efforts at gaining some level of tolerance from a Protestant majority fill the pages of American religious history, especially in early New England (85-86).”

<sup>78</sup> Ernst, “American Religious History from a Pacific Coast Perspective,” 3; Roof, “Pluralism as a Culture,” 84.

<sup>79</sup> Ernst, “American Religious History from a Pacific Coast Perspective,” 3, 13.

differences.”<sup>80</sup> Beyond diversity, which is an observable fact in the United States but requires no necessary response, pluralism “requires participation” with those of diverse religious backgrounds.<sup>81</sup> The pluralistic environment implies a place where the approach to religion takes other religious followers into consideration, rather than assuming one religious understanding as universal. Not all religious forms within generally pluralistic environments need to embrace explicit pluralism, as is evident by the fact that Christian Fundamentalism also flourished in Los Angeles in the 1920s. However, the normative individual perspective in religiously pluralistic environments recognizes and respects multiple religions, sometimes in spite of the exclusivist rhetoric of the individual’s religious institution. Peter Berger explained the effects of this pluralism on the individual’s consciousness:

Religious pluralism also has important implications for the subjective consciousness of individuals. This can be stated in one sentence: Religion loses its taken-for-granted status in consciousness. No society can function without some ideas and behavior patterns being taken for granted. For most of history religion was part and parcel of what was taken for granted. Social psychology has given us a good idea of how taken-for-grantedness is maintained in consciousness: It is the result of social consensus in an individual’s environment. And for most of history most individuals lived in such environments.<sup>82</sup>

It is thus the shift from an unchallenged religious worldview to a religiously diverse understanding that uproots the beliefs of the adherent and causes the questioning of religious assumptions. This revised perspective and reevaluation of one’s worldview leads to a greater tolerance of difference, and ideally, an egalitarian pluralism. This is the environment that Los Angeles was moving toward during its population boom in the 1920s.

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<sup>80</sup> Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a ‘Christian Country’ has become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2002), 70.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Berger, “Global Pluralism and Religion,” 6.

Scholars have applied Peter Berger's cultural analyses to the development of the American West, and Southern California particularly. Wade Clark Roof argues that Berger's theory of pluralism through expanded self-reflection applies best to Southern California, where an unprecedented number of religions coexisted together as the West developed. Because of this widespread exposure to many different beliefs, the pressure to conform to a dominant religion—as frequently arose in many emerging American cities—did not apply to the circumstances of Los Angeles. As Roof remarked, "Religious and spiritual communities of many kinds have flourished in Southern California, each free to recruit members or followers without strong normative pressures upon them to adjust to a dominant faith."<sup>83</sup>

Southern California, and specifically Los Angeles, developed a pluralism that not only subdued previously dominant religious groups, but *created* a new approach to religion. When no religion was assumed, all were eligible. This idea of expanding pluralism largely extends from Mark Silk's writing on evolving social pluralism in American history. While religious groups technically enjoyed equal legal protection from the American government throughout American history, this equality was hardly true on a social level. Until very recently, religions falling outside of the relatively narrow popular definition of "Christianity" were often discriminated against and excluded from the social benefits of belonging to the "de facto American establishment."<sup>84</sup> For the immigrants arriving in Los Angeles in the 1920s, this evolving

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<sup>83</sup> Roof, "Pluralism as a Culture: Religion and Civility in Southern California," 85.

<sup>84</sup> Silk continues: "General Christianity was pan-Protestantism, occupying the top tier of American religious pluralism. Non-Protestants were relegated to a second tier" (Mark Silk, "Defining Religious Pluralism in America: A Regional Analysis," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 612 (Jul., 2007), 66). Silk also argues that the regional interpretation of religion's role in society differs across the country, but an especially eclectic pluralism long existed in California: "Beyond the rights-based individualism of Kennedy-era religious pluralism lay the uncharted spiritual territory of the Pacific region (California, Nevada, and Hawaii), where eclectic styles of religion have long flourished (Roof and Silk 2005). The region is uniquely open to diversity; the people within religious communities there feel remarkably free to absorb aspects of other traditions into their spiritual lives. This reflects the legacy of a particular history of migrations, conquests, and mixes of faith traditions that have come to coexist across the region" (70).



pluralism made a significant difference in determining how they were able to recreate their identities in the modern metropolis.

More than offering a safe environment for minority religious groups to practice their beliefs, the culture formed through the vast migration and unfocused, eclectic creation of Los Angeles acted as a positive force, wherein religions were fostered and religious leaders were drawn to start their fringe religion. As is shown below, the Pentecostal preacher Aimee Semple McPherson purposefully chose Los Angeles as the location from which to launch her fringe religious movement, as it presented the most fertile ground for a potentially rapidly growing, previously unknown religion. Philip Goff also gives nod to the urban West as a creative place for approaching religion, where the relations between religions and their members are transformed, and where “syntheses develop within diversity.”<sup>85</sup> This blend of religious forms emerging the West, and particularly in Los Angeles throughout the 1920s, created an environment where the newly-arriving population had ample options for religious expression, and unusually low societal expectations to pick any one. This formula led to the creation and popularization of many religious sects unheard of in most parts of the country.

Sociologically, this diversity meant that Durkheim’s collective consciousness had not developed in the urban environment of Los Angeles, but had instead remained unfixed and open to a variety of different consciousness, thereby preventing any social code from predetermining religious adherence. Unlike Durkheim’s idea of a unifying solidarity or consciousness underlying the culture of the city, Los Angeles instead formed as a firmly diverse and decentralized locale where multiple religions could flourish. Beyond simply tolerating religious experimentation, Los

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<sup>85</sup> Goff, “Religion and the American West,” 295.

Angeles fostered an environment that was particularly open to the arrival of new religious groups, leading to heterogeneous religious exposure for immigrants coming from the much less diverse environments of the Midwest.

The resultant psychological effects were that of a second uprooting for the new arrivals; beyond the physical uprooting that led them to California, these immigrants faced the loss of what Berger calls “taken-for-grantedness” in their approach to religion. No longer could the old worldview supply all of the answers in the rapidly expanding world represented in Los Angeles; the differing religions of the city now needed to be contended with, leading to a consciousness of choice rare in other American cities of the time. For immigrants to Los Angeles, these choices, paired with the lack of an established identity and subsequent “mimicry” of the identities found in the city, led to a rare religious pluralism. This pluralism is exemplified by the coexistence of Aimee Semple McPherson’s Angelus Temple and Swami Paramananda’s Ananda Ashrama.

## CASE STUDIES OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN LOS ANGELES

## Aimee Semple McPherson and Angelus Temple



*Figure 1: Aimee Semple McPherson (source: Foursquare Heritage Archives)*

In the years of following the First World War, as diverse religious movements were in the height of development in Los Angeles, the renowned evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson made her way across the country with the hope of finally setting down roots. As she already enjoyed a nation-wide reputation as an evangelist and faith-healer before arriving in Los Angeles, McPherson found no trouble attracting crowds of both middle and working-class people to her following. City officials welcomed her with open arms, regarding McPherson as potentially appealing to new residents and attractive to tourists who together would help grow Los Angeles.<sup>86</sup> The city was to eventually claim that McPherson even reduced city crime rates by converting “radicals and all kinds of criminals” back to a more socially friendly path through her form of Christianity.<sup>87</sup> Her message was not as readily accepted by all, however, and in fact McPherson’s revolutionary style of preaching and engaging in the modern world of Hollywood

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<sup>86</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 27.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

made her one of the most controversial religious figures of her day. These unconventional approaches to church leadership led to the great successes in Los Angeles that made McPherson a significant figure in America's religious history. McPherson's path to success was laced with struggles over religious identity, gender roles, and an increasingly materialistic and affluent society, all timely issues of a distinctly modern American religious figure.

Aimee Kennedy was born in rural Canada in 1890. Her parents raised her as a Christian, but her experiences in high school classes, and particularly her biology class's acceptance of evolution as opposed to a biblical explanation for life, shook her faith. Then in 1907, a Pentecostal revival swept through her town, bringing with it the preacher Robert Semple, whom Kennedy would marry in 1908. The newly-married couple traveled extensively through Canada and the U.S. together in an attempt to spread their new Pentecostal faith.<sup>88</sup> The two were fated to have only a short romance, however, and soon after arriving in China with the goal of evangelizing to the local population, Robert died of dysentery, leaving his young wife devastated, alone in a foreign country, and eight months pregnant. Conscious of her loneliness and the hardship of raising a child alone, Aimee quickly returned to the U.S. and made the practical decision to remarry, choosing Harold McPherson as her second husband. Her second marriage was defined by deep unhappiness, chronicled by the now-named Aimee Semple McPherson as a period of continued loneliness, never fully overcome after the loss of her first husband.<sup>89</sup> It was during this period of depression and perennial physical ailments surrounding the birth of her second child that McPherson felt she was called by God to turn to a life of ministry. Believing this to be the pivotal moment that turned her away from her would-be

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>89</sup> Barfoot, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Making of Modern Pentecostalism 1890-1926*, 31, 53.

domestic role into that of a religious leader, McPherson made the decision to leave her second husband. Packing her bags and taking her children late one night, McPherson left her old life and, without even informing her husband of her departure, moved to her parents' house in Canada to begin her ministerial career.<sup>90</sup>

McPherson's chosen form of Christianity, known as Pentecostalism, had only emerged in America a few years before she encountered it, and was still largely seen as a fringe division of Protestant Christianity. No better place could be found to disseminate its message than the place where it first experienced widespread popularity: Los Angeles. In the spring and summer of 1906, the "Azusa street revival" led by Pentecostal minister William Seymour sparked the beginnings of the charismatic Christian movement that would eventually spread all over the world. Seymour was an African American who was raised in Mississippi and born to former slaves. His upbringing inspired his belief that religion should draw "no color line," as every person, regardless of skin color, was equal in God's eyes.<sup>91</sup> Seymour is largely credited with initiating the Pentecostal movement at the Apostolic Faith Mission on Azusa Street, where he led his congregation through a summer filled with emotional sermons and the emergence of "speaking in tongues," the distinctive element of Pentecostalism. Seymour soon realized his religious goal by building a following of white and black Americans worshipping together under one roof. This new charismatic movement (along with the Fundamentalist movement also emerging in Los Angeles in the same period) originated as a truly democratizing effort: by focusing on God's perceived role as the great equalizer, both rich and poor became equally worthy of acceptance and access to the afterlife. This concept was particularly appealing to

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 133.

working-class migrants, who made up large swaths of the Pentecostal congregation throughout its development.<sup>92</sup> This was the tradition that McPherson stepped into only a few years after its emergence.

After spending years travelling around the United States heading tent revivals and prayer healings, McPherson decided to settle down in Los Angeles and begin the work of combining Pentecostalism and Hollywood “show biz style” into her own, truly modern religion.<sup>93</sup> She was eventually able to raise the \$300,000 necessary to build her dream church, all from donations elicited from her dedicated followers. She continuously reminded her followers in her monthly newsletter, “Bridal Call,” that the church was built by its members, and was completely dependent on their support throughout the construction process. In one issue, McPherson requests her readers to “just close your eyes before you lay this page aside and ask the Lord what he would have you do about the doors, windows, chairs or general building fund of this great structure which is to shine as a little house set upon the hill whose beams shall reach o'er land and sea.”<sup>94</sup> On January 1, 1923, Aimee Semple McPherson opened her 5,300-seat megachurch in Echo Park. The church, named Angelus Temple, eventually boasted a membership of over 20,000 people, and displayed a beauty and glamour fitting for the home and era of budding Hollywood.<sup>95</sup> The location at Echo Park allowed for a peaceful respite from the fast pace of life in the growing metropolis, while also being located near major roads and with easy access to the rest of the city.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011), 14-15.

<sup>93</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, “The Echo Park Revival Tabernacle News,” *The Bridal Call* Vol. 5 no. 12 (May 1922), 20.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>96</sup> Echo Park is sandwiched between Hollywood and downtown Los Angeles.



Figure 2: Inside Angelus Temple (source: Foursquare Heritage Archives)

McPherson experienced years of both fame and scandal at Angelus Temple.<sup>97</sup> Her most controversial period followed her supposed kidnapping from Venice beach in 1926, and suspicious reappearance in a Mexican border town a month later.<sup>98</sup> Headlines reported the anguish of her followers and the premature memorial services held one month after her disappearance, with one *Los Angeles Times* article claiming that 11,000 people attended the services.<sup>99</sup> The reports continued after McPherson's reappearance and through the drawn-out trial that questioned the circumstances of her return.<sup>100</sup> While the mystery of her disappearance

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<sup>97</sup> The scandals originated both from McPherson herself and from her ideological opponents: Intellectuals in the post-WWI era criticized McPherson's approach as an extension of the wider culture that was being corrupted by advertisement and cheap entertainment. For them, McPherson's "illustrated sermons, catchy hymns, and radio programs contributed to the crisis in American intellectual life" (Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 29).

<sup>98</sup> Her mysterious disappearance made headlines as "the tears and smothered sobs" of her followers wished for her safe return. "Aimee Semple McPherson Believed Bathing Victim: Police and Members of Congregation Patrol Beach in Vain Search for Trace of Missing Pastor," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1926.

<sup>99</sup> "Thousands Honor Aimee: Life History of Noted Evangelist Reviewed at Three Memorial Services at Temple," *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1926.

<sup>100</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* covered McPherson's life and scandals extensively. Some of the most prominent headlines to grace the paper on the subject of Aimee Semple McPherson's reappearance and subsequent trail were:

was never fully settled, rumors of an associated sex scandal soon increased public interest and exploitation by local newspapers. In response to this humiliating coverage, McPherson developed a massive publicity campaign to counteract the rumors, portraying herself as an innocent, weak woman who was suddenly taken away from the safety of her home, thereby using common stereotypes of the feminine persona to contradict the image she had previously developed as a strong, capable preacher.<sup>101</sup> Speculation over her disappearance and shrouded romantic life continued to haunt her until her death, appropriately enshrining McPherson's memory in the aura of mystery and scandal that had defined many aspects of her life.

McPherson's impact on the growing Pentecostal movement and on women's role in religious leadership were profound. Her meeting with modernity was not always without struggle, however. While McPherson was able to tie Pentecostalism to Hollywood-style glamour and modern publicity techniques, she simultaneously rejected modernist Christians and new (non-Christian) religious groups emerging in Los Angeles as "un-American," thereby feeding into the Fundamentalist-style backlashes to modernity prevalent in the 1920s. McPherson remains a controversial figure even today, with mystery, criticism and admiration surrounding her memory. While her constant search for publicity became a double-edged sword in her scandal-ridden life, her efforts to incorporate modern presentation style and advertising techniques into an emerging Pentecostal religion catapulted Pentecostalism into one of America's fastest-growing religions.<sup>102</sup>

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"Man Asserts Aimee Seen Prior to Reappearance: Mexican Village Episode Related; Grand Jury Issues Subpoenas for Evangelist and Mother," *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1926; "Transcript Reveals for First Time Aimee McPherson's own Story as Related Under Oath to County Grand Jury," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 30, 1926; "Series of Defense Witnesses Introduced to Substantiate Various Parts of Story Related by Aimee McPherson on Return," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 28, 1926.

<sup>101</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 112.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.



### Swami Paramananda and Ananda Ashrama



*Figure 3: Swami Paramananda hiking at Ananda Ashrama in 1923 (used with permission from Ananda Ashrama.).*

In the same year that Angelus Temple held its grand opening in Echo Park, an Indian Guru bought an isolated farm property just thirteen miles down the road in La Crescenta. The French family who had previously owned the property found the area of La Crescenta so isolated that they decided they needed to move closer to town to have better access to services and other people.<sup>103</sup> The guru who purchased the land was named Swami Paramananda, and he intended to turn the old farm into an Indian-style monastery, or “Ashrama,” dedicated to a form of Hinduism known as Vedanta.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Sister Murtimatananda, interview by author, personal interview, La Crescenta, May 3, 2014.

<sup>104</sup> Polly Trout, *Eastern Seeds; Western Soil: Three Gurus in America* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2001), 9.

Swami Paramananda's Hindu tradition first appeared in America at the World's Parliament of Religion, hosted by the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, in which Swami Vivekananda acted as the representative of Hinduism in America. Vivekananda presented his own modern form of Hinduism at the World's Fair that year, a universalistic understanding that saw all religions as pointing to one ultimate truth behind them all. This new take on Hinduism quickly found popularity in both the West and in Vivekananda's native India, and continues to be the most popular interpretation of Hinduism to this day.<sup>105</sup> He referred to his form of Hinduism, called Vedanta, as a philosophically-influenced religion originating from ancient Hindu texts: the Vedas and Upanishads. Vivekananda spread his variation of Hinduism throughout the United States for the rest of his life, gaining both Indian-born and American-born devotees.

One of these devotees was Swami Paramananda, a member of Vivekananda's monastic order in India who travelled to America in 1906 to aid in the development of the New York Vedanta Society. Paramananda soon found that his egalitarian, tolerant teachings appealed to many Americans looking for an alternative to traditional Christianity. Paramananda attempted to align his Eastern religion with the culture and beliefs of his Western followers. He often compared Vedantic texts to other Western philosophies, highlighting the points of overlap and emphasizing their significance in proving equality of religions.

Paramananda also strove to establish the legitimacy of the Vedantic religion by connecting it to ancient Hindu texts. In his book *Principles and Purpose of Vedanta*, Paramananda explains that Vedanta claims its roots in the ancient Hindu text known as the Vedas, which, as Paramananda claims, were passed down "from time immemorial."<sup>106</sup> Vedanta

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>106</sup> Swami Paramananda, *Principles and Purpose of Vedanta* (Cohasset, MA: Vedanta Centre Publishers, 1937), 7.

claims that all spiritual teachings, including that of the “Greek, German, and other Western philosophies” stem from the Vedas.<sup>107</sup> These common threads found within all religions prove the universality of spiritual thought. Vedanta is therefore rooted in “eternally existing laws” shared by other religions and philosophies and culminating in the recognition of one “Supreme Being” which has had many manifestations in various religions, but represents the nature of creation and the essence which connects all people together.<sup>108</sup>

This universalistic approach to religion offered a particularly tolerant and accepting view of other traditions not found in many religions of the 1920s. By interpreting all religions as essentially leading back to the same conclusions, Paramananda and his Vedantic teachings offered a way for Americans at the turn of the century to come to terms with the many existing religions they were now becoming aware of around the world, without having to completely reject their own tradition. Paramananda’s appeal to the universality of all religions while maintaining a Western appearance and approach to his message simplified the complex questions of who was right or wrong in the rapidly changing world of the 1920s.

Paramananda envisioned a utopian society in his California Ashram. He hoped it would become a monastery that could implement selfless service and personal transcendence to a level that would lead to a more meaningful existence for the individuals living there. While spiritual pursuits alone could lead to egocentrism, Paramananda saw the community setting of Ananda Ashrama as forcing communal-inspired selflessness. He hoped his disciples would act as models of the true spiritual life for the outside world by living in harmony with nature, in continual

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

meditation, and in selfless service to others.<sup>109</sup> The community would be both a monastery for men and women who wished to dedicate their lives to Vedanta, and a religious center for outside visitors. His vision remained small, with the Ashram primarily dedicating its energies to those in residence and an intimate group of followers, bringing around 100 people in the first years of the Ashram.<sup>110</sup> Paramananda's ideal was not inconsistent with this size; he wished to align with the Hindu monastic tradition of a guru with few select followers living together, acting as a model of spiritual discipline to the world. Readjusting to Western devotional styles required Paramananda to incorporate larger, church-like weekly meetings as well.

Due to the relative geographic isolation of Ananda Ashrama at the time of its construction, as well as the insular approach Paramananda took toward the community of La Crescenta, the monastery largely went without harassment or complaint from neighboring religious institutions, even in a time when fear of the unknown was enveloping many communities throughout the country. Paramananda, and Vedantic tradition as a whole, expressed no interest in proselytizing to the outside community. Because of its universalistic approach to religion, Vedanta extolled the equality of all religions in leading people to the "ultimate truth." Whether one practiced Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, one was still truly practicing the Vedantic worship of a shared ultimate creator, according to Vedantic belief. It was therefore pointless to convince others to abandon the religious tradition they felt most comfortable

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<sup>109</sup>Sara Ann Levinsky, *A Bridge of Dreams: The Story of Paramananda, a Modern Mystic—and his ideal of all-conquering love* (New York, NY: Inner Traditions International, 1984), 273-274.

<sup>110</sup> "Cult will Settle in Hills: Hindu Philosopher Leaving Boston to Establish Colony on Land Purchased Near Mt. Lukens," *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1923. Historian Laurence R. Veysey notes that many more could be found at the Ashrama during major gatherings: "In the late 1920's Swami Paramananda, representing Vedanta, would attract up to several hundred people on a major Sunday occasion at his Ananda Ashrama." In Laurence R. Veysey, *The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Communities in Twentieth Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 212.

practicing those beliefs in. If one wished to recognize the universality of all traditions by practicing Vedanta, one was free to do so, but no pushing toward that tradition was necessary.

Once asked if he was a missionary, Paramananda replied that he did not believe in conversion. His intention, he claimed, was instead to “infuse the Spirit which changes and transforms the lives of men.”<sup>111</sup> Paramananda did not want to change his followers’ religious loyalties, but reveal to them that they had been part of his religion all along. Because Ananda Ashrama did not impose its message on the outside community through proselytization, it was largely able to escape public criticism and even notice. Its rational approach to religious heterogeneity and non-emotional service style meant that the community attracted few extreme personalities, instead drawing in primarily upper-middle class professionals looking for practical answers to the challenge of an expanding world. As one author put it, Paramananda’s interpretation of Vedanta “was an elite movement within its own realm,” attracting few outside of the upper classes, thus keeping his discipleship small in number.<sup>112</sup> While Paramananda spread his message across the country through many different modern media tools, the institution in La Crescenta remained small-scale and undisturbed by the outside community.<sup>113</sup>

The Swami’s personality was often heralded as both serene and playful. His child-like demeanor came to represent his perfect simplicity and rejection of the complex desires of the material world. His joyful persona often welcomed simple enjoyments, as one author notes: “The private side of Ashrama life contained moments of relaxation and gaiety. During hot weather, both in Boston and California, the Swami would fill his car with as many sisters as it could

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<sup>111</sup> Levinsky, *A Bridge of Dreams*, 154.

<sup>112</sup> Veysey, *The Communal Experience*, 212.

<sup>113</sup> Sister Murtimatananda, interview by author, personal interview, La Crescenta, May 3, 2014.

possibly contain and they would all go to the nearest beach for a swim.”<sup>114</sup> One disciple described Paramananda as someone who “never seemed of this earth, although no one was more happy, more warmly human.”<sup>115</sup> But despite his often cheerful moods, Paramananda was generally viewed as thoughtful, earnest, and wise; all qualities that were crucial to creating the guru image his disciples revered. He promoted austere discipline within monastic life, and encouraged his followers to find fulfillment without material possession, despite his own personal enjoyment of Western clothing styles and automobiles.<sup>116</sup> While some saw these dual aspects to his persona as conflicting, Paramananda’s disciples knew him to be a complicated personality, a truly Westernized Eastern guru.

Paramananda’s leadership style brought modernization and gender equality to the Eastern religious movement, a quality that still could not be found in many Christian communities in the 1920s. Paramananda’s willingness to use modern communication methods and an Americanized style to spread his message of tolerance and universalism attracted many Americans searching for an alternative to restrictive Christian beliefs. Ananda Ashrama existed peacefully and successfully in Los Angeles largely due to the particular charisma and American-style teachings of this Indian guru.

Both Swami Paramananda and Aimee Semple McPherson took steps to position their religious messages within a modern, mainstream American religious understanding. Though their personal backgrounds and religious traditions represented two distinct paths, their shared

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<sup>114</sup> Veysey, *The Communal Experience*, 238.

<sup>115</sup> Sister Daya, *The Guru and the Disciple: My Life with Swami Paramananda* (Cohasset, MA: The Vedanta Centre, 1976), 8.

<sup>116</sup> Veysey, *The Communal Experience*, 227.

strategies for attracting a following in Los Angeles reveal their similarities as leaders, as well as the underlying culture developing in their emerging city.

## SHARED STRATEGIES

These two religious leaders created movements that successfully responded to the questions and needs of religious seekers in 1920s Los Angeles, but they were also successful because of the tools they used to disseminate their message. A similar formula laid behind their success, comprised of three primary strategies. First, both leaders mainstreamed and modernized their respective movements. McPherson downplayed the most controversial aspects of Pentecostalism and linked it to the popular, and already much more widely accepted, evangelical movement; Paramananda consciously linked his Eastern movement with prominent Western ideologies and adapted his religious services to Western models. Second, both leaders were outspoken and sometimes controversial advocates for the equality of women in religious affairs. Finally, they both consciously called upon the symbols and methods of the age of mass communication to ensure that their respective messages could reach the broadest audiences. McPherson employed radio and advertising, consciously linking herself with the glamour of Hollywood; Paramananda also used radio and even altered his personal style to reach out to perspective adherents. Both leaders succeeded in introducing a new form of religion to an increasingly diverse metropolis and ensuring its success through similar methods, though in very different religious traditions.

### 4.1 Mainstreaming the Message

The successful effort to widen the appeal of Pentecostalism to reach mainline Protestants largely served to elevate McPherson to one of her movement's most successful advocates throughout its emergence in the early twentieth century. Though McPherson's affinity for Pentecostalism began with her introduction to the charismatic practice of speaking in tongues as



a Canadian youth, as a minister McPherson downplayed this distinctly Pentecostal activity when spreading her message. McPherson recognized the need to link her modern Christian movement back to traditional Protestantism in order to reach mainstream Christian audiences—a large subset of the Los Angeles population that could not be ignored if Pentecostalism was to expand.<sup>117</sup> McPherson therefore downplayed the charismatic aspects found most suspicious by the public, and focused instead on the goal of “saving” as many people as possible through spreading the concepts of Christianity; a message that appealed to those beyond Pentecostal lines and incorporated broad Protestant interests (see Figure 4).<sup>118</sup>

This popularizing strategy was extremely successful. As McPherson biographer Chas Barfoot put it, McPherson “took the movement out of the back alleys and put it on the major boulevards.”<sup>119</sup> McPherson brought Pentecostalism into the mainstream, attracting swaths of followers along the way. Church records show that McPherson appealed to people across socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and nationality, but some patterns can be found.

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<sup>117</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 40-41. Angelus Temple Archivist, Steve Zeleny adds that McPherson always encouraged members to be “baptized in the Holy Spirit,” which can be taken as a reference to encouraging them to speak in tongues (Steve Zeleny, Interview with Amy Hart, Personal Interview, Angelus Temple, Echo Park, Feb. 4, 2015).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>119</sup> Barfoot, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Making of Modern Pentecostalism 1890-1926*, 200.



*Figure 4: Aimee Semple McPherson in front of the dedication plaque on Angelus Temple in Echo Park (source: Foursquare Heritage Archives).*

Church records from between 1923-1929 show 3,497 members registered at McPherson's Angelus Temple. Of those, 2,226 recorded their type of employment (see Figure 5). 36% of those respondents can be grouped into "blue collar/working class" work, with 15% indicating a "white collar/middle-upper class" employment, and 48% listed as "other" types of employment that do not indicate income level or employment type, such as "housewife," "student," or religion-based identifications such as "evangelist."<sup>120</sup> Thus, of those who identified themselves

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<sup>120</sup> Definitions and guidelines for "blue collar" and "white collar" employment are taken from the *Bureau of Labor Statistics*.

as either working blue-collar or white-collar jobs, 70% of respondents can be identified as blue collar workers, and 30% as white collar workers (See Figure 6).

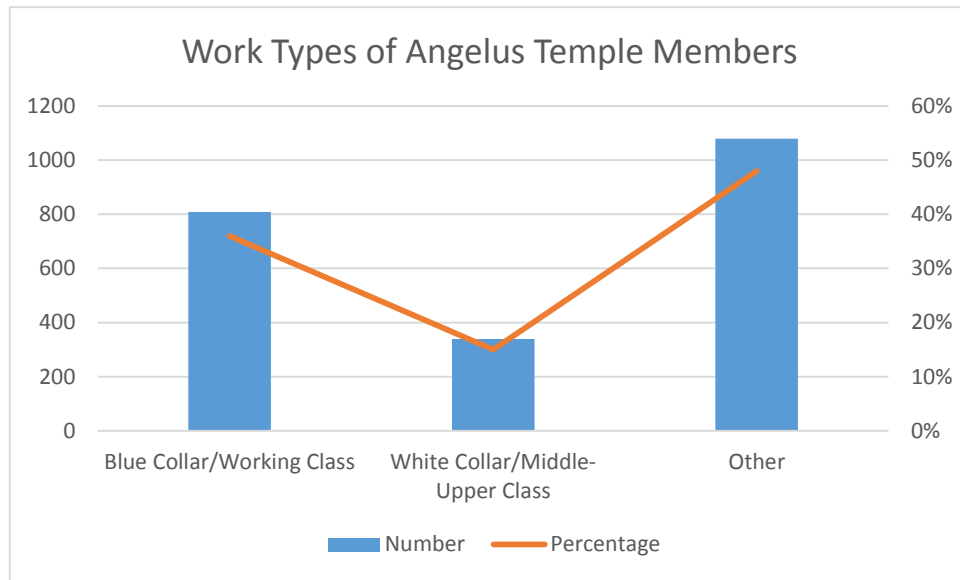


Figure 5: The number and percentages of blue collar/working class employment, white collar/middle-upper class employment, and other employment types as recorded in Angelus Temple records. For further data analysis, see Appendix 1.

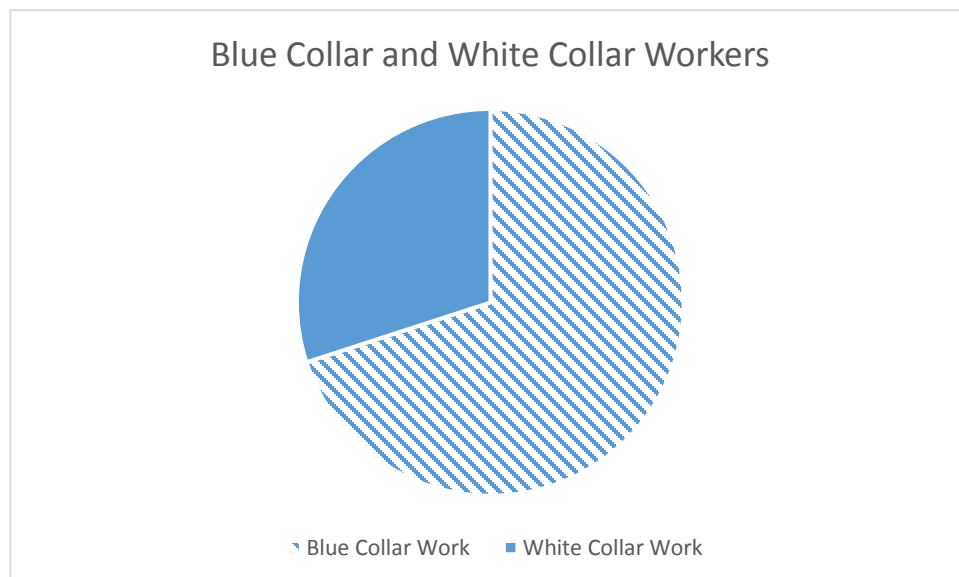
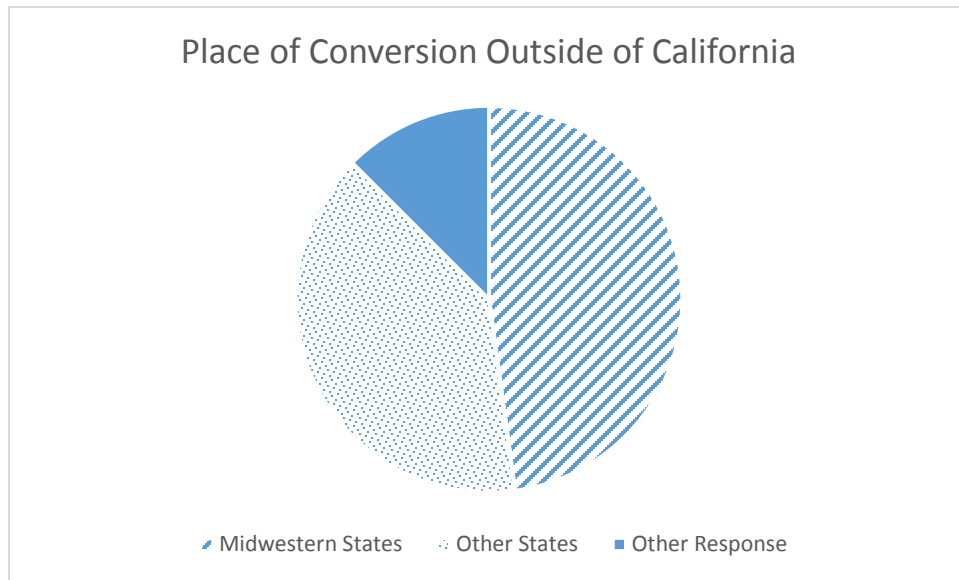


Figure 6: The percentage of blue collar and white collar workers registered in Angelus Temple records.

Of 3,356 members who announced their gender on membership records between 1923 and 1929, McPherson attracted 2,204, or 66% females and 1,152, or 34% males. Of the 2,570 members who stated their ethnicity/nationality, 1,968, or 77% identified themselves as either American, white, or a variation of white such as Caucasian. 602 members, or 23% of the congregation, identified themselves as an ethnicity or nationality other than white or American, with over 50 groups identified (see Appendix 2).

2,268 members identified their “place of conversion” to the Christian religion in McPherson’s membership records, and while stating the place of conversion as “California” or “Angelus Temple” does not reveal the geographical origins of the member, stating states or countries outside of California point to a probable personal tie to that place, either as the place of birth or the temporary home of the member. Thus, looking at patterns regarding the place of conversion can reveal important patterns about who was attracted to Angelus Temple as well. Of those who listed their place of conversion, 1,221 or 53% listed California or Angelus Temple. Of the 1,047 who listed their place of conversion as somewhere outside of California, 501 or 48% listed their place of conversion as one of the twelve Midwestern states, 415 or 39% listed another state outside of the Midwest, and 131 or 13% listed another country or place (see Figure 7). 15 members listed “radio” as part or all of their “place” of conversion (see Appendix 3).



*Figure 7: Places of conversion outside of California listed by Angelus Temple members.*

McPherson's message and style opened her emerging Christian tradition to a wide array of ethnic groups, nationalities and socioeconomic groups, though many of her followers were in the low to middle classes, female, and self-identified as white or simply American. Many of her members came from the Midwestern states, especially Iowa (70 members), Illinois (83 members) and Missouri (81 members). Membership records at Angelus temple reveal a variety of people from all walks of life attending McPherson's church, from the African American "domestic" to the Chief of Staff of the KKK (listed as an occupation). This diversity of peoples attests to McPherson's success in mainstreaming her religious message.<sup>121</sup>

McPherson's attempts to meld Pentecostalism with mainline Protestant messages represented a meeting in the middle with the Los Angeles population, which was more open to religious exploration than those of more established urban settings, but could still be pushed more easily into a familiar congregation than a completely foreign one. In a turn away from other

<sup>121</sup> Data provided by Steve Zeleny, Foursquare Heritage Archives, Feb. 4, 2015

revivalist movements, McPherson emphasized the positive, loving features she found in her image of God, over instilling a fear of death and hell in her sermons. Her sermons often entailed long-syllabled, singing monologues evoking the mercy and love of God through personal anecdotes and metaphors that created an entertaining, personal message. In one sermon that alluded to the love of swimming that contributed to McPherson's mysterious 1926 disappearance from Venice Beach, McPherson uses a personal anecdote to engage her church audience:

I love to swim. For me it is the most healthful of exercises. Though now I tend to attract so big a crowd wherever I go, I have just about given it up. But it's a wonderful thing to swim....I used to teach swimming a little bit. The first thing you must teach your students is that the water will hold them. That you must stop fighting the water; trust the water, it will hold you up. Use all of that energy to *get* somewhere. And when you finally get there you just lie back and do nothing. Let your hands and feet go. And then when you find the water *will* hold you, for it will, use all of that energy to *get* somewhere, Amen? And, oh, you just rely on the Lord.<sup>122</sup>

McPherson's relatable sermons often presented herself as a friend of the church congregation; a relatable person who only wished to share her stories and experiences with those who joined her in church.

McPherson also allied with the burgeoning Fundamentalist movement, advocating the rejection of modernist, liberal churches and railing against the scientific theory of evolution as threatening to Christianity. On multiple occasions McPherson even invited Fundamentalist spokesman William Jennings Bryan to speak at Angelus Temple, and held an all-night prayer vigil in support of Bryan during the famed Scopes trial.<sup>123</sup> In 1923, McPherson also opened the Angelus Temple Evangelistic and Missionary Training Institute in an effort to train young ministers in this hybrid Pentecostal-Fundamentalist religion McPherson had popularized. Her

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<sup>122</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, sermon (MP3 recording, Angelus Temple, Los Angeles, February 1938), [http://www.foursquare.org/sister\\_aimee](http://www.foursquare.org/sister_aimee), accessed April 2, 2015.

<sup>123</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 37.

alliance between Pentecostal teachings and more popular Protestant interpretations came to be called the “Foursquare Gospel,” referring to her message that incorporated the four elements of body, soul, spirit, and eternity through its interpretation of God. As McPherson chimed, it was “A perfect Gospel! A complete Gospel for body, for soul, for spirit, and for eternity. . . . In my soul was born a harmony that was struck and sustained upon four, full, quivering strings, and from it were plucked words that sprang and leaped into being— the Foursquare Gospel.”<sup>124</sup> In a thorough consumption of all available metaphors, the significance of the Foursquare Gospel was also related to the account of God in Ezekiel “as a being with four different faces: a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle,” and also as representing the four phases of Jesus in the Gospels: the savior, the baptizer, the burden-bearer and the coming king.<sup>125</sup> By differentiating her ministry from other Pentecostal churches, McPherson created flexibility in her message, and was thereby able to open her gospel to the wider community more familiar with the traditional (and emerging Fundamentalist) Protestant messages.

McPherson struggled with balancing the social politics of Los Angeles with her own religious tradition, particularly in the area of race relations. McPherson had a mixed relationship with the Ku Klux Klan, which was a movement contradictory to her own religion’s multiracial roots but that offered financial incentives that could aid the spread of her religious message. McPherson approached the KKK as a movement she could use to her advantage, though her ideology did not align perfectly with them. As one of McPherson’s biographers wrote about her relationship with the KKK, “McPherson seems to have wanted it both ways.”<sup>126</sup> She agreed with the KKK’s fear that America was being threatened from an abstract, foreign force that could

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>125</sup> “Our Story: the History and Future of the Foursquare Church,” The Foursquare Church, <http://www.foursquare.org/about/history>, accessed April 2, 2015.

<sup>126</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 32.

undermine the American Protestant tradition. At the same time, McPherson had held integrated revivals in the South before her arrival to Los Angeles, and invited all ethnicities to receive the Foursquare Gospel message.<sup>127</sup> McPherson's biographer Matthew Sutton relays a story told by McPherson's daughter, Roberta, of a day when McPherson publically denounced the Klan in Angelus Temple. When a group of Klansmen appeared at her service in full garb, McPherson changed her sermon to tell the tale of a young African American man welcomed by Christ to his church, before denouncing the mission of the Klan.<sup>128</sup> McPherson's mixed approach to the Klan was shared by many in Los Angeles at the time, and representative of the shifting religious and cultural boundaries that required response in the modernizing metropolis. In the end, McPherson worked with those who could help her disseminate her message and grow her religious empire; even if parts of their goals were contradictory with her messages.

Swami Paramananda also appealed to existing Western ideologies to make his new religion more palatable to a broader portion of the Los Angeles population. He drew explicit links between Western and Eastern ideologies in an attempt to show the compatibility of the two, even writing a book titled *Emerson and Vedanta*, which draws links between the writings of Transcendentalist author Ralph Waldo Emerson and the scriptures of Vedanta. To Paramananda, Emerson and his Transcendentalist cohorts had repeatedly recognized the universality of all religions and the true oneness of individuals; a teaching critical to Vedanta and supportive of its universalistic philosophy.<sup>129</sup> Paramananda specifically found overlap between Emerson's concept of karma and idea of interconnectedness between all people that is found within both classic Hindu texts and newer Vedanta teachings.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 30-34.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Swami Paramananda, *Emerson and Vedanta* (Cohasset, MA: Vedanta Centre Publishers, 1918), 14-15.



Paramananda, much like McPherson, emphasized the positive role of religion in improving the individual and society, though for Paramananda this positive message was inherently inclusive and universal. In his book titled *Christ and Oriental Ideals*, Swami Paramananda emphasized that his religious purpose was “not in any way to prove the supremacy of one religion over another, but to find a sympathetic chord which may serve as a common synthesis for all.”<sup>130</sup> He often compared the Bible with select Hindu scriptures to emphasize overlaps in their underlying messages:

The Hindu Scriptures declare, ‘what a man thinks, that he becomes’; so also we read in the Bible, ‘as a man thinketh in his heart so is he.’ For this reason, Vedanta forbids us to dwell on the thought of sin; because sin can never beget righteousness. No one can ever gain strength by brooding over his weakness.<sup>131</sup>

By using Christian terminology like “sin,” and frequently returning to a conceptualization of God as the “Father,” Paramananda made his message accessible to a Western audience. Finding and pointing toward the overlap in scriptural understandings enabled Paramananda to shape Vedanta’s image into that of an Americanized, Western-friendly religion, suited for those looking for a more open and tolerant belief system in a quickly-expanding world. Paramananda even led Christmas services at Ananda Ashrama, thereby associating himself with the many Christian institutions available in Los Angeles.<sup>132</sup> His sermons and announcements often ran side-by-side to the church announcements in the *Los Angeles Times*, and Paramananda often went so far as to encourage conversion to Christianity as a step toward an Eastern universalistic understanding.<sup>133</sup> In a rapidly-changing city, where knowledge of other cultures and religions was constantly increasing, a religion that saw all others as essentially one was increasingly

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<sup>130</sup> Swami Paramananda, *Christ and Oriental ideals*, (Cohasset, Mass.: The Vedanta Centre, 1923), 9.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>132</sup> “Churches Hail Christmas: Pageants and Musical Programs to Augment Sermons on Christ's Nativity,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 20, 1930.

<sup>133</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, Jul 4, 1927.

appealing. Paramananda's appeal to the universality of all religions while maintaining a Western approach to his message simplified the complex questions of who was right or wrong in the rapidly changing world of the 1920s.<sup>134</sup>

Paramananda styled Ananda Ashrama after Western religious institutions in a manner that also appealed his American devotees and kept the monastery from being stamped an Eastern outlier in the Los Angeles area. Originally, Paramananda had aspired to build his monastery in the Indian Ashram style, facilitating one-on-one interactions between the disciples and their teacher, who acted as a focal point in the Ashram organization. He soon realized, however, that many Americans with a Christian background were accustomed to a lecture-style weekly service that needed a larger building for presentation-style meetings. Paramananda thus directed his followers and to construct a temple to address those needs, bringing the monastery closer to the Western conception of religious institutions.<sup>135</sup> Members arrived for Sunday meetings "just as [they would] to any other church," a tradition initiated at the Ashram with Swami Paramananda and continued throughout the institution's existence.<sup>136</sup>

Mission-style buildings surrounded by courtyards, emblematic of the popular architectural style of Southern California, made up the Ashrama (see Figure 8). This structural design both served to fit in with the "California Spanish" style of the region, and gave the Ashrama the simple appearance that would emphasize its universalistic approach, as opposed to the more elaborate façade of the traditional Hindu ashram.<sup>137</sup>

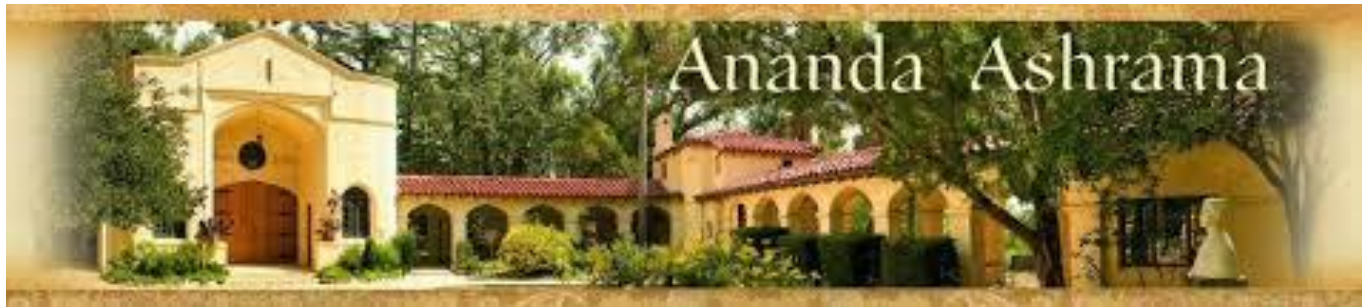
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<sup>134</sup> Trout, *Eastern Seeds; Western Soil*, 104.

<sup>135</sup> Sister Murtimatananda, Interview with Amy Hart, Personal Interview, La Crescenta, May 3, 2014.

<sup>136</sup> George Garrigues, "Center Helps Ease Worldly Burdens: Truth Center," *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 1960.

<sup>137</sup> For more conversation on the development of the "California Spanish" architectural style and how it came to be known as Southern California's distinctive style, see Starr's *Material Dreams*, Chapter 8: "Designs for Living: Architecture in Southern California, from the Bradbury Building to the Watts Towers," 181-230.



*Figure 8: The temple and courtyards of Ananda Ashrama in La Crescenta (used with permission from Ananda Ashrama).*

As a local newspaper described the style of buildings: “In its design it is purely Spanish style with tiled roof, patio and arcaded walk or cloister....one feels as if one had stepped back into mediaeval Europe.”<sup>138</sup> The main courtyard wall contains an engraved quote by Paramananda written in style reminiscent of a King James gospel typography (see Figure 9). It gives all-encompassing and general encouragement to passersby: “Hold aloft this light and stand firm to thy post, till all wandering souls have reached their goal in safety. Service brings strength and renewed life; love cures all weariness, and faith, the shining jewel of life, performs all miracles.” These broad universalistic messages accompanied by familiar Western design helped to attract a primarily Western congregation over immigrants from India or East Asia, a phenomenon that has continued at the ashram to this day.<sup>139</sup> Paramananda’s attempts to align the style and services at Ananda Ashrama with the expectations of his primarily Western congregation aided in the successful reception of the monastery in Los Angeles.

<sup>138</sup> “Will Dedicate Ashrama Cloister Sunday Afternoon,” *The Record-Ledger*, October 30, 1924.

<sup>139</sup> Sister Murtimatananda, Interview with Amy Hart, Personal Interview, La Crescenta, May 3, 2014.

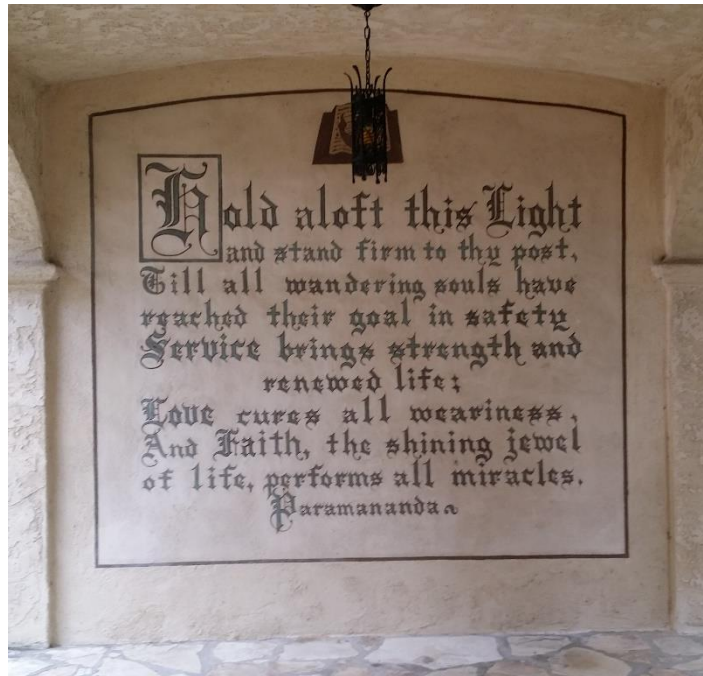


Figure 9: Epigraph at Ananda Ashrama (picture taken by author).

Both leaders created new adaptations of their religion that spoke to the new Los Angeles. They styled and presented their beliefs in a way that the people of Los Angeles in the 1920s could make sense of and therefore latch on to. Their decision to cater to the Western public who surrounded them altered some of the superficial aspects of their religions, but allowed them to reach out to the multitudes who otherwise would have been isolated from their messages.

#### 4.2 Women as Leaders

The gender-egalitarian messages of both McPherson and Paramananda appealed to a public responding to modern questions of shifting gender roles and the morality of sex-determined hierarchies.<sup>140</sup> For Paramananda, the equality of the sexes was never a question.

<sup>140</sup> See Judy Gabriel, "Helping East Meet West in La Crescenta Ashram," *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 1985.

When he purchased the La Crescenta farm that would eventually become Ananda Ashrama, Paramananda arrived on the property with a primarily female discipleship. This community of followers who first lived on the property was self-reportedly made up of “hardy pioneer women,” who together built and developed much of the infrastructure of the property in its early years of existence, in partnership with other volunteers and followers of Paramananda, both male and female.<sup>141</sup> At the time of its purchase, the isolated community of Ananda Ashrama was self-sustaining and relied on these female members to maintain the facilities and tend the land. Eventually both male and female monks lived on the property full-time, in addition to the outside members who attended weekly worship services headed by Paramananda or one of his disciples. But during these early years, when women comprised the bulk of Paramananda’s following, Ananda Ashrama’s foundations were (literally) built on the strength of women.

At the time, Paramananda’s strictly egalitarian message was seen as extreme for its unwavering view of women as equal to men in every sense, including their ability to take on leadership roles. Paramananda was Swami Vivekananda’s only representative in the United States to offer women the opportunity to participate as equal members in full-time monasticism, thereby differentiating himself from not only other Eastern religious leaders, but many Western religions as well.<sup>142</sup> Paramananda put his message into action by offering the three top leadership roles in his ministry to women, and naming his niece, Gayatri Devi, as his would-be successor at the time of his death. This modern and egalitarian interpretation of Vedanta caused division in Paramananda’s monastic order upon his death in 1940. In the tradition of the larger order, Paramananda’s parent monastery attempted to assign a new monk to succeed

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<sup>141</sup> Ananda Ashrama. *Hold Aloft the Light: The Story of Ananda Ashrama 1923-1973*. Printed by Ananda Ashrama, 1973.

<sup>142</sup> Trout, *Eastern Seeds; Western Soil*, 80.

Paramananda. But while the larger Vedantic community refused to acknowledge the leadership of Paramananda's chosen successor, Gayatri Devi, because of her gender, Paramananda's communities in Boston, Cohasset, and La Crescenta rallied behind her, leading to their break from the larger monastic order.<sup>143</sup> Gayatri Devi became "the first female head of a Hindu community in the United States," a position she held until her death in 1995.<sup>144</sup> Her position as a female leader was made possible by this truly modern guru, who challenged the traditional gender roles still held by many, even in the West.

McPherson challenged commonly held assumptions surrounding gender in 1920s America as well. By acting as a charismatic leader and role model for women looking for a way to escape traditional roles, McPherson walked the line of advocating progressive gender norms while upholding traditional religious values. The two years of marriage to her first husband, Robert Semple, served as the only time in McPherson's adult life where she was content with the role of silent supporter to a bold, well-spoken male preacher, happy to "wash the dishes and cook and do the things a wife should attend to."<sup>145</sup> The devastating loss of Semple and the stifling nature of her second marriage forced McPherson to reconsider the role of women, particularly in the religious sphere, and turned her from a path of domesticity to what she considered her prophetic calling. McPherson's decision to leave the well-trodden path of wife and mother to pursue the path of a traveling minister may have appeared as a spontaneous decision, but it became a life-long long shift. As Matthew Sutton put it, McPherson "never again adhered to traditional gender norms or returned to domesticity."<sup>146</sup> McPherson chose the path of the

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Barfoot, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Making of Modern Pentecostalism 1890-1926*, 31.

<sup>146</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 12-13.

independent, single woman, and she was put under the microscope by a criticizing public for much of her life because of it.

McPherson drew criticism from her contemporaries for her marital history. Fellow Los Angeles ministers claimed that she did not take marriage or women's traditional domestic role seriously, even going so far as to blame her for Los Angeles' slightly higher divorce rate compared to the rest of the country.<sup>147</sup> McPherson was not deterred by her association with the wayward female archetype, however, and instead increasingly became more involved in social activism for women. She dedicated her efforts to helping women who were victims of "rape, incest, and physical abuse," often inviting young pregnant women into her home to live while she arranged job training and child-rearing lessons for them.<sup>148</sup> Though she faced harsh criticism from ministers across Protestant denominations, McPherson stood firm in her conviction that God could call anyone, male or female, into leadership.<sup>149</sup>

McPherson's unwavering view that she had been personally appointed to her mission by a divine power remained her primary defense of her role in public life throughout her career. McPherson compared herself to the Biblical prophet Jonah, particularly in relation to their shared "trials" which came before their understanding of God's calling for them: his involving a whale, hers involving the unhappiness of her second marriage. Because of the Pentecostal tradition's deep respect for the prophet model involving trial and eventual liberation by God, McPherson was able to successfully reference this comparison and simultaneously justify her multiple marriages as a part of a higher, divine plan.<sup>150</sup> As far as McPherson believed, it was God who

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>149</sup> Kristy Maddux, "The Feminized Gospel: Aimee Semple McPherson and the Gendered Performance of Christianity," *Women's Studies in Communication* 35 (2012): 46.

<sup>150</sup> Barfoot, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Making of Modern Pentecostalism 1890-1926*, 54-56.

had directed the events of her life, including her ascent to ministerial fame, and therefore no earthly force could shake her conviction of women's equal ability to lead.

Ironically, McPherson's advocacy for her own ability to lead a church despite her gender paired with timely critiques of the "feminization" of Christianity. Charismatic movements like McPherson's Pentecostalism were accused of emphasizing emotional expressions of faith, physical movement and dancing, and Jesus as a loving, caring friend; all traits seen as feminized interpretations of Christianity.<sup>151</sup> This new type of Christianity, often expressed in travelling revival movements, gave women a chance to act in more leadership roles as the activities occurring in the church fit the traditional sphere of women's activity. Women who as a gender were expected to act more emotional and sensitive than men, could relate to and take charge of this new form of Christian understanding in a way not accessible to the intellectually-driven male preachers of traditional Protestantism.<sup>152</sup> McPherson's approach to Christianity was considered emotional and embodied by many Los Angeles preachers, who criticized her theatrical performances and dramatic healings as feminized approaches to Christianity. McPherson's contemporary and fellow preacher Bob Schuler frequently criticized McPherson for her overly emotional sermons, even questioning the intelligence of those who would be attracted to McPherson's theatrical performances over intellectual reflection.<sup>153</sup> McPherson herself was deemed too fiery, enthusiastic, and excited on stage. One local journalist made a food analogy to describe McPherson's style, calling it "Tobasco sauce religion" and concluding, "I like some seasoning, but I must have some food put under it or it gives me 'heartburn.'"<sup>154</sup> Despite these

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<sup>151</sup> Maddux, "The Feminized Gospel," 45.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>154</sup> A. W. Orshipper, "A Quest for Spiritual Food," *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, Vol. 120, issue 32, August 9, 1928.



critiques of her message and its style, McPherson continued to advocate for the ability of women to lead Christian churches that attracted both men and women.

Both Paramananda and McPherson advocated for the ability of women to hold leadership positions at a time when this stance was unpopular in their respective traditions. Paramananda fought the more traditional approaches in his monastic order to ensure equal opportunity for his female disciples. McPherson acted as a role model for future female leaders through her own example. She claimed the calling of a higher authority to justify the abilities of all women, not only herself, to lead. Though each of these religious leaders argued for gender equality as a response to the specific challenges of their own traditions, they found common ground over an issue that was timely and controversial, finding resonance with many living in Los Angeles in the 1920s.

#### 4.3 A Religion for the Modern Age of Mass Communication

McPherson found modern technology, and particularly the radio, an answer to her prayers. She believed that this medium was the only way to maximize the dissemination of her message and attract the largest amount of followers possible. McPherson was fully convinced of the potential for radio after “numerous followers, who heard her first on the radio, sought her out in person at revival meetings.”<sup>155</sup> In 1924, McPherson even became the first woman to own and operate a Christian radio station when she opened KFSG, the Los Angeles-based radio station dedicated to the dissemination of her sermons and the spread of the Foursquare Gospel. McPherson soon began recording her Sunday sermons for distribution through the radio,

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<sup>155</sup> Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial*, 65.

reminding her audience in one sermon that “a recording is being made of my message this morning, so if everyone would say ‘amen’ every once in a while...”<sup>156</sup> Her embrace of the radio medium was timely: at the time of its creation, KFSG was one of the first radio stations to be licensed in Los Angeles and the third station in the United States owned entirely by a religious organization.<sup>157</sup>

When radio was not enough, McPherson employed alternative advertising techniques to gain an audience. Some advertising methods used by McPherson included a “slogan-plastered Gospel Car,” leaflets dropped from airplanes, and McPherson’s regular entrance into the Pasadena Rose Parade, which led to a sweepstakes prize one year for riding a float built in the likeness of Angelus Temple.<sup>158</sup> McPherson even hired her own “publicity director” who maintained a positive relationship with the press to further advertise her message.<sup>159</sup> McPherson capitalized on the growing public appeal of “human interest” journalism by sitting for many interviews with the press.<sup>160</sup> Phonographs of her sermons were published and recorded on transcription disks that could be rebroadcasted worldwide. These appeals to modern entertainment and advertisement methods often placed Angelus Temple members in a paradoxical position that described few others: they “were savvy to the ‘new’ and the modern without also taking on a cynical contempt for old religious doctrines.”<sup>161</sup> Their embrace of modern technologies aided in the dissemination of their message, but the conservative values of

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<sup>156</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, sermon (MP3 recording, Angelus Temple, Los Angeles, December 10, 1939), [http://www.foursquare.org/sister\\_aimee](http://www.foursquare.org/sister_aimee).

<sup>157</sup> Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial*, 57, 68. See clarifications on this historical account in Jim Hilliker, “History of KFSG: Pioneer L.A. Christian Station Stops Broadcasting after 79 Years,” <http://jeff560.tripod.com/kfsg.html>, accessed May 15, 2015.

<sup>158</sup> “Angelus Temple Winner: Float Wins Grand Sweepstakes Prize of Tourney Parade; Glendale Chamber is Second,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 2, 1925. Also see Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial*, 63.

<sup>159</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 82.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>161</sup> Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial*, 77.

their tradition remained impenetrable to the temptations of modernity. While neighboring Hollywood influenced many marketing and styling decisions at Angelus Temple, their social convictions remained firmly in the tradition of old.

McPherson incorporated Hollywood style into her religious services as well. She employed friends and admirers working in the film industry to construct “sets” each week that would draw new members to her glamorous services. The impressive choir and orchestra of Angelus Temple performed both secular and religious tunes, as props and visuals were arranged around the stage to engage the “audience” in a complete sensual experience.<sup>162</sup> Even McPherson’s personal image shifted over time to accommodate Hollywood flair. After the publicity and scandal of her 1926 disappearance and reappearance, McPherson began donning modern fashion and hairstyles in an attempt to restructure her image to Hollywood standards. She purposefully lost weight and made plans to star as herself in biographical films of her life. McPherson truly came to embody the Hollywood celebrity: one who could be both well-known while shrouded in the mystery surrounding her personal life. McPherson even built her own Hollywood-style castle outside of Los Angeles and married her third husband, an actor, in 1931. In 1944, at the age of fifty-three, McPherson died of a mysterious drug overdose that left many questions remaining over her life and death.<sup>163</sup> In both her life and death, McPherson incited baffle and bewilderment, but it was through this embrace of scandal and fame that she presented herself as a truly modern American religious figure.

Paramananda also embraced modern forms of advertisement and personal style in a similar fashion to McPherson. By the time of his arrival in Los Angeles, Paramananda had

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<sup>162</sup> Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 72.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 271. McPherson’s followers continue to argue that her death was due to an unexpected physical response to a normal dose of sleeping pills.

already attracted followers across the U.S. who had seen or heard him speak through the modern advertising methods he often employed, including radio broadcasts and newspaper advertisements.<sup>164</sup> His universalistic beliefs were usually draped in familiar Christian messages, and his announcements were often placed alongside church advertisements in Los Angeles newspapers. The *Los Angeles Times* frequently printed Paramananda's words, beliefs, or announcements of events at Ananda Ashrama, as well as smaller local newspapers including the *Record-Ledger*, *Los Angeles Express*, *The Crescenta Valley Ledger*, *Los Angeles Examiner*, and *the Morning Tribune*. In advertisements run weekly in the *Los Angeles Times* after the opening of Ananda Ashrama, Paramananda advertised his Sunday services alongside Christian churches, theosophist groups, self-help clubs, and even advertisements for Aimee Semple-McPherson's famed sermons (see Figure 10).<sup>165</sup>

Paramananda also issued a weekly message on Los Angeles radio station KHJ, often following scriptural readings from a local Christian pastor.<sup>166</sup> His messages emphasized the loving, universalistic "Christ of the Orient," who could be best understood through Vedanta. As he states in one radio sermon: "We never find the great spiritual teachers coming with aggressive

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<sup>164</sup> Trout, *Eastern Seeds; Western Soil*, 85.

<sup>165</sup> Display Ad 23, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 1, 1924.

<sup>166</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1927, A5; *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1927.

spirit to convert the world. They live gently, their appeal is low and tender. Christ brings the message of love and it must be realized through love.”<sup>167</sup>

**HEAR-SEE AIMEE SEMPLE McPHERSON in "THE STORM" ANGELES TEMPLE Sunday 7:00 P.M.**

**CHRISTIAN SCIENCE**  
The following Christian Science Churches of Los Angeles are all recognized branches of The Mother Church, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, Massachusetts, and hold services as follows:  
First Church—134 S. Alvarado St., Sunday, 11 a.m., 8 p.m.; Wednesday, 8 p.m.  
Second Church—19 Adams St. at Hoover, Sun., 11 a.m., 8 p.m.; Wed., 8 p.m.  
Third Church—214 S. Hope St., Sunday, 11 a.m., 8 p.m.; Wednesday, 8 p.m.  
Fourth Church—1505 Pasadena Avenue, Sunday, 11 a.m.; Wednesday, 8 p.m.  
Fifth Church—207 Hollywood Blvd., Sun., 11 a.m., 8 p.m.; Wednesday, 8 p.m.  
Sixth Church—1472 Sunset Ave., Sun., 11 a.m., 8 p.m.; Wednesday, 8 p.m.  
Seventh Church, 3411 Wilshire Blvd., Sun., 11 a.m., 8 p.m.; Wednesday, 8 p.m.  
Eighth Church, 1424 Wilshire Blvd., Sun., 11 a.m., 8 p.m.; Wednesday, 8 p.m.  
Ninth Church—416 S. New Hampshire, Sunday, 11 a.m., 8 p.m.; Wed., 8 p.m.  
Tenth Church—910 W. 4th St., Sunday, 11 a.m., 8 p.m.; Wednesday, 8 p.m.  
Eleventh Church—2120 W. 10th St., Sunday, 11 a.m.; Wednesday, 8 p.m.  
Twelfth Church, Van Nuys—4311 Lynn St., Sunday, 11 a.m.; Wednesday, 8 p.m.  
Thirteenth Church—1745 Edgewood Pl., Sun., 11 a.m., 8 p.m.; Wed., 8 p.m.  
Fourteenth Church, Silver City—248 Waverley Ave., Sun., 11 a.m.; Wed., 8 p.m.  
Fifteenth Church—1840 S. Gramercy Place, Sun., 11 a.m.; Wed., 8 p.m.  
Sixteenth Church, Eagle Rock—Woman's Clubhouse, Sun., 11 a.m.; Wed., 8 p.m.  
Seventeenth Church—4822 Santa Monica Blvd., Sunday, 11 a.m.; Wednesday, 8 p.m.  
Eighteenth Church—1712 W. 4th St., Sun., 11 a.m.; Wed., 8 p.m.

**THE LITTLE FRIENDLY CHURCH**  
INVITES YOU TO ATTEND THE  
**Banquet of All Nations**  
AT THE  
Biltmore Hotel, November Tenth  
The theme and entire program will center around the address by Frederick A. Libby on "HOW TO BUILD INTERNATIONAL GOOD WILL."

**FIRST FRIENDS CHURCH, Phone Vandike 7514**  
DAVID E. HERBY, Pastor. 928 West 3rd Street.

**HOLLYWOOD LUTHERAN CHURCH**  
DEDICATION SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 1924.  
Services, 11 a.m., 7:30 p.m. Dedication services, 2 p.m.  
Come and see the beautiful building and hear the wonderful pipe organ.  
Excellent speakers.  
—Good Music.  
Hear Prof. Hugo Kirchhofer, Leader of Hollywood Community Sing, at 3 p.m.

**The Christadelphian Ecclesia of Los Angeles**  
**FREE BIBLE LECTURE**  
SCRIPTURAL AND REASONABLE—ONE GOD AND FATHER OF ALL.  
UNSCRIPTURAL AND UNREASONABLE—THREE IN ONE AND ONE IN THREE.  
**SUNDAY EVENING, NOV. 2ND, AT 7:30**  
Benevolence Hall, Foresters' Building, Tenth and Olive.  
SEATS FREE. ALL WELCOME. NO COLLECTION.

**COME TO THE TENT**  
52nd and Central—2:30 Lord's Day and 7:30  
Every Evening Except Saturday

**AMANDA CHAPEL** CATHARTY CENTER  
"The Church of Religious Liberty"  
11:00 a.m.—Sermon by Rev. William C. Jeff, Pastor.  
—"THE BIBLE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS."  
3:00 p.m.—Public Conference on the Bible in the Public Schools.  
Next Sunday, November 9th, Radio Sermon over KLL.  
Conquering Night, every Friday, 8:00 p.m. Motion Picture.

**OLIVET GOSPEL HALL—Santee and Washington**  
Sunday Services—Sunday School 9:45 A.M. Bible Class 10 A.M.  
Breaking of Bread 11 A.M. Gospel Meeting 7:30 P.M. Tuesday, 8 P.M. Prayer Meeting. Thursday, 8 P.M., Ministry of the Word.

**GOSPEL HALL** 1225 West Jefferson Street, near Vermont  
Original Services of Catholicism gathered onto the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Earth Day at 11 o'clock. Breaking of Bread at 1:00 p.m. Preaching of the Gospel. Wednesday, 7:45. Prayer Meeting. Friday, 7:45. Bible Reading. CHRIST DIED FOR THE UNGODLY.

**UNITED BRETHREN CHURCHES**  
First—432-53 West 15th Street. Services: Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11:00 a.m., and 7:00 p.m.; C. E. Services, 4:30 p.m.; Wed. Evening Prayer Meeting, 7:00.

**Swami Paramananda — Ananda Ashrama**  
Ninth and Fremontville Ave., La Cressman. Sunday, Nov. 2nd, SPECIAL SERVICE, 2:30 p.m. Dedication of Ashrama Chidaler. All welcome. Ashrama Masters will meet again and direct care at Fern. Ave., La Cressman, Tues. 2 to 3 p.m.

Figure 10: Advertisement page in the Los Angeles Times showing both Aimee Semple McPherson and Swami Paramananda's advertisements on the same page, albeit different sizes (source: Los Angeles Times).

Paramananda's messages were spread through various other radio stations as well, including KGFH, on which Paramananda (addressed as "the Rev. Swami Paramananda" in the local newspaper review afterward) and three members of Ananda Ashrama performed a variety show filled with piano numbers, French songs, and poetry readings.<sup>168</sup> Paramananda used modern mediums and popular approaches to spread his religious message in familiar and common ways to the thoroughly modern Los Angeles public.

<sup>167</sup> "Doctrine of Jesus Shown Only in Christ-Like Life: Scriptures, Says Swami in KHJ Sermon, Do Not Give Real Christian Insight," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1927.

<sup>168</sup> "Swami Paramananda on the Radio," *La Crescenta Valley Herald*, February 18, 1927.

Paramananda's reportedly cheerful, informal persona, as well as his fondness for dapper American fashion, popularized him as a truly Americanized guru.<sup>169</sup> While his distinctly Western apparel drew criticism from many of his contemporaries, it enabled him to reach out to those Americans who might have otherwise been fearful of this foreign guru and his strange religion. Unlike many Eastern gurus, Paramananda bought elegant cars and enjoyed tennis, cricket and soccer. Called the "movie star swami," his embrace of Western materialism was decidedly assimilatory: He believed it allowed him to relate to his Western devotees and make them more comfortable around him.<sup>170</sup> As Paramananda put it:

When I first came to this country....I imagined that people expected me to talk philosophy, but I found out later that automobiles create a quicker point of contact. As soon as I learned to drive a motor car I had an unfailing topic of sympathetic conversation with everyone I met.<sup>171</sup>

Paramananda's embrace of Western style and modern technologies allowed him to attract Western followers who otherwise might have found Vedanta to be a foreign and therefore unapproachable religion. But, as one author notes, this embrace of modernity largely remained at a superficial level, and Paramananda "would not compromise the philosophy [of Vedanta] to suit Western tastes."<sup>172</sup> Just as McPherson used modern technology and style to her advantage up to the point where it could potentially threatened her conservative leanings, so Paramananda incorporated Western style and methods on superficial levels to benefit and grow his cause.

While these two religious institutions differed dramatically in both style and beliefs, they succeeded in establishing a following in Los Angeles in the 1920s by the same means. Both

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<sup>169</sup> Trout, *Eastern Seeds; Western Soil*, 85.

<sup>170</sup> Judy Gabriel, "Helping East Meet West in La Crescenta Ashram," *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 1985.

<sup>171</sup> Levinsky, *A Bridge of Dreams*, 198.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

institutions boasted a charismatic leader who led their followers away from prevalent forms of Protestant Christianity and into an emerging belief system that offered alternative answers to the prevailing questions of the time, particularly the need to respond to a rapidly changing and expanding world. While McPherson responded to this question by doubling down on the centrality of Christianity to American life, Paramananda approached the modernizing world and its many new religions by expounding their equal legitimacy. Both leaders also employed modern methods to spread their message and gain followers, particularly the timely tool of radio. Both leaders challenged prevailing notions of gender roles, thereby riding the wave of shifting social constructions indicative of 1920s American society. Their questioning of women's role in society reflected the ideas and arguments of many feminist groups of the era, though both leaders fell somewhere outside of feminist thought of the time. Although their doctrinal responses to modernity fell at extreme ends of a spectrum, these two leaders were parallel in their recognition of the need to respond the America's changing social climate with new answers and explanations. Their approaches to religion fit the needs of different subdivisions of Los Angeles in its time of rapid growth and development, thereby enabling them to experience both short and long-term success, proven by the continued presence of both institutions in Los Angeles to this day.

## 5 CONCLUSION

A portrait of life in Los Angeles in the 1920s may best be drawn by observing one of its citizens. Through Angelus Temple's member records we know details of many members of the church congregation, one of which was Fannie Hayden. Fannie identified herself as a hairdresser of German ethnic origin, whose place of conversion to Christianity was Iowa but at the time of her membership she resided on Neosho Avenue in Los Angeles, about a half hour away from Angelus Temple by automobile. Fannie was a married female who joined Angelus Temple in 1924, along with many others just like her. But why was Fannie drawn to Los Angeles, and then to find community at Angelus Temple? Reasonable assumptions can be made based on wider national trends at the time. Perhaps Fannie had lived her life on a farm or in a rural small town in Iowa, and hoped to have a career in the growing city on the West Coast. Perhaps she and her family had benefited from the agricultural boom of the early twentieth century and had the financial means to give up the farming lifestyle in search of a more comfortable life. Or perhaps Fannie or her husband had been sick, and sought the health cure of sunshine and salty breezes that Los Angeles was famous for. Whether any of these reasons had brought Fannie to Los Angeles or not, they had brought many others just like her at astounding rates in the 1920s. Fannie represents the common face of the Los Angeles immigrant of the 1920s, and through her story the developing culture of Los Angeles can be traced.

Why did Fannie become a member at Angelus Temple, instead of at Ananda Ashrama or any of the other emerging religious groups of Los Angeles? To answer this question, too, we can offer reasonable hypotheses based on the information known. Perhaps she heard one of McPherson's powerful and energetic sermons broadcasted on her radio station or recorded and distributed through phonographs. If she had turned the dial a bit and encountered Paramananda's



radio sermons, her path may have been different. Perhaps, when perusing the morning newspaper, Fannie's eyes glossed over Paramananda's smaller advertisement and rested on McPherson's large, eye-catching one. Perhaps Fannie heard of the charismatic female preacher in town who acted as a role model for women hoping to learn to follow their own calling, regardless of their gender; however, she might have been just as likely to be attracted to Paramananda's largely female following and the leadership positions he gave women. Perhaps Fannie visited McPherson's impressive Temple, met other former Midwesterners there, and finally felt like she had found a community of like-minded people in the lonely city; she may have established that connection before she was able to stumble upon Ananda Ashram up the road.

Regardless of her reasons, Fannie is representative of many people arriving in Los Angeles in the 1920s and trying to find a new home, career, social connections, and religious affiliation to define themselves. Many of the same problems with loneliness, uprooted population, and lack of strong community faced by Los Angeles immigrants like Fannie are faced across the United States today. While the turn of the twentieth century brought new trends in urbanization and immigration that uprooted people from community in Los Angeles, the turn of the twenty-first century saw this uprooting from community expand nation-wide. In multiple surveys taken in 1999, over 80% of Americans believed there needs to be "more emphasis on community, even if that put more demands on individuals."<sup>173</sup> Though people recognize their desire for more community, some of the same trends that disrupted communal life in 1920s Los Angeles have increased and continue to disrupt community involvement today. The use of

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<sup>173</sup> Studies are from various publications, including: *The Public Perspective* (April/May 1999): 15; *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 1999, A12; Mark J. Penn, "The Community Consensus," *Blueprint: Ideas for a new Century* (spring 1999). As Printed in Putnam's *Bowling alone*, 25.

automobiles, for instance, has increased since the 1920s, to the extent that by 1990 “America had more cars than drivers.”<sup>174</sup> Public transit, walking, carpooling, has all decreased while driving private vehicles has steadily increased. Consistently, studies have shown that each additional 10 minutes spent in a car cuts community involvement by 10 percent.<sup>175</sup> Observations like these and the chord they struck with Americans are the major reason that political scientist Robert Putnam’s crossover academic and popular book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, became a national bestseller.

Partly because of this time spent commuting alone in private vehicles, studies have shown that the suburban setting is the most detrimental setting for community involvement. Unlike small towns with high levels of social interaction and interpersonal engagement or condensed cities with common points of meeting, suburban settings have neither. As they increasingly separate the individual from the work place and promote increased segregation by race and class, suburban sprawl leads to an introversion that offered no links for social interactions among peoples.<sup>176</sup> As Americans moved to the suburbs, they became more and more alone. Immigrants to Los Angeles experienced this isolation its extreme form, as the very makeup of the city was developed around the preservation of the suburb and the accommodation of the automobile.

In 1920s Los Angeles, as in towns and cities across the country today, isolating factors like suburban sprawl and increased automobile use disrupted community. In Los Angeles, these disruptions, along with the rapid immigration to the city, led to the development of a religious pluralism uncommon to the time. Today, religious pluralism and the presence of many religious

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<sup>174</sup> Putnam, *Bowling alone*, 212.

<sup>175</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 212-213.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

organizations in cities are the norm, and people are increasingly less attached to traditional structures of religion. Recent studies estimate that 14% of Americans now claim no religious preference, and this group is on the rise. These non-religious people, or “nones,” are less tied to community and social networks.<sup>177</sup> They are more likely to vacillate between religious groups and do not feel intimately tied to any of them. Thus, the experience of the immigrant in 1920s Los Angeles is increasingly becoming the experience of all Americans.

Los Angeles represented a new frontier in America, both geographically and culturally, but many of the defining features that seemed so revolutionary and modern in the 1920s have become the norms of city life across the country today. Religious groups were plentiful, and their sheer numbers and novelty meant they were actively seeking out members and congregations. No one religion claimed complete dominance over the city, and while each confirmed its own set of convictions, all were aware and conscious of the others. This awareness caused a mutual understanding, as the reality of so many new people, new ideas and new cultures arriving in Los Angeles meant that no single religion could adopt them all. The religion that appealed to Fannie might not appeal to a fellow Angelino, whether that person had also arrived from Iowa or had come from Georgia, Texas, or even Japan. Thus, each religion reached out to the part of the population it could best attract, hoping to grow along with the city.

The religiously pluralistic environment that was limited to Los Angeles in the 1920s can now be seen from New York to Honolulu. The rise of an Ashram and a new Fundamentalist mega-church a few miles from each other is hardly newsworthy, even in conservative towns like Fresno. What was remarkable then is normal now. Perhaps analyzing Los Angeles’ subsequent

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<sup>177</sup> Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith. "The Nones: Social Characteristics of the Religiously Unaffiliated," *Social Forces* 87, no. 3 (2009): 1251.

struggles and responses to diversity could offer insights as the rest of America comes to terms with this new pluralism.

## §

Many new religions and religious leaders appeared in Los Angeles during this period of rapid growth, only two of which have been explored here. Though these two leaders represented very different religions and appealed to different audiences, their techniques and strategies for creating a following in Los Angeles were strikingly similar. By popularizing their message and shifting their religions' image into one more palatable for the mainstream Los Angeles populous, both leaders gained popularity. By promoting the leadership abilities of women in a time of gender role upheaval and transition, they firmly placed themselves on an inclusive and forward-thinking path, albeit within constraints. Finally, by reaching out to the public through modern means of mass communication, both leaders made their religions more accessible and appealing to the public at large. Though any number of religious leaders could be examined as a study of religious diversity in 1920s Los Angeles, the oddity of these two figures is their similarity despite their differences. Their parallels reveal a common Los Angeles culture that was forming in the 1920s and that each of these figures successfully harnessed in the effort to gain popular appeal.

While the particular issues and context of 1920s Los Angeles differ from today, Paramananda and McPherson may structurally guide our analysis of contemporary gurus. While the modern communication methods of their day were radio and phonograph, today's outreach methods may be social media and internet marketing. While Paramananda and McPherson attempted to broaden their respective movements' message to reach the largest number of people, we have the continued legacy of mega-church pastors and charismatic leaders that draw

crowds by offering less demanding and more popularized versions of traditional faiths. While the question of women's ability to lead does not plague cities today in the same ways it did in the 1920s, parallel questions concerning sexual orientation and gay marriage easily act as modern proxies that are used by leaders to differentiate themselves. Thus while the particularities of the social and technological world of 1920s Los Angeles have been left behind, the approaches of McPherson and Paramananda continue to seem remarkably relevant. Just as Fannie chose her religious institution in the lonely city by considering a variety of factors, so today the gurus of American cities provide new and compelling responses to the social issues of our time in hopes of attracting the next disconnected, wandering newcomer.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

Data for Figures 4 and 5 was collected by Steve Zeleny in Foursquare Heritage archives in Echo Park, CA.

Occupations listed (duplicates have been removed):

ACCESSORY STORE MANAGER	BOILERMAKER HELPER	COOK
ACCOUNTANT	BOOK KEEPER	COOPER
ACETYLENE WELDER	BOX MAKER	COSMETICIAN
ACTOR	BRICK LAYER	COST CLERK
AGENT	BRICK MASON	COUNTY CLERK
ANTIQUE DEALER	BROKER	COURT MANAGER
ANYTHING	BUILDER	COUSULTING ENGINEER
APARTMENT OWNER	BUSINESS COLLEGE	CRANE OPR
APT. HOUSEWORK	BUSINESS GIRL	CREAMERY MAN
ARCHITECT/DESIGNER	BUSINESS MAN	CREDIT
ARCHITECTURAL ENGINEER	BUSINESS MGR	CRIPPLE
ARTIST	BUTTON HOLE MAKER	CRUSADER
ASST. MGN. CLEARING HOUSE	CABINET MAKER	CULINARY WORKER
ATTENDANT	CAFETERIA	DAIRYMAN
AUDITOR	CALENDAR FACTORY	DANCER
AUTHOR	CANDY FACTORY	DAY WORK
AUTO DEALER	CANDY SALESGIRL	DECORATOR
AUTO ELECTRICIAN	CAPENTER CONTRACTOR	DELIVERY WORK
AUTO INSPECTOR	CARETAKER	DENTAL ASSIST
AUTO MECHANIC	CARPENTER	DENTIST
AUTO PAINTER	CARRIER	DIES-SINKER
AUTO REPAIRER	CARTOONIST	DINING ROOM
AUTO SHOP	CASHIER	DISABLED AMER VET
AUTO WASHER	CHAUFFEUR	DOMESTIC
AUTO WASHING AND GREASING	CHEF	DOMESTIC/COOK
AUTOMOTIVE ELECT BUSINESS	CHILD'S NURSE	DRAFTSMAN
BAKER	CHIROPRACTOR	DRESSMAKER
BALL PLAYER	CHOCOLATE DIPPING	DRUGGIST
BAND DIRECTOR	CHRISTIAN WORKER	DRY CLEANER
BANK CLERK	CITY HALL	EDUCATOR
BANKER	CITY INSPECTOR	ELECTRICAL ENGINEER
BANKING	CIVIL ENGINEER	ELECTRICIAN
BARBER	CLEANING EST.	ELEVATOR OPR
BATTERY FACTORY	CLERICAL WORK	ENG. FOREMAN
BEAUTY PARLOR	CLERK	ENGINEER
BED MAKER	COLLECTING RENTS	ENTERTAINER
BEE-KEEPING	COMMON LABOR	ESCROWS/STENOGRAPHER
BINDERY	CONDUCTOR	EVANGELIST
BLACKSMITH	CONFECONARY	EX SWITCH MAN
BLDG CENTER	CONSTABLE U.S. GOV.	EXAMINER (CA INSPECTOR)
BOARDING HOUSE	CONSTRUCTOR	FACTORY OPR
BOARDING HOUSE MGR	CONTRACTOR	FANCY PRESSER

FARMER  
 FINISHER  
 FIREMAN  
 FITTER'S HELPER  
 FLOOR GIRL  
 FOREMAN  
 FOUNDRY MAN  
 FREIGHT CAR MAN  
 FRUIT GROWER  
 FRUIT PACKER  
 FRUIT RANCHER  
 FUNERAL DIRECTING  
 FUR FINISHER  
 GARDENER  
 GEN. CONTRACTOR  
 GENERAL BUSINESS  
 GENERAL LABORER  
 GENERAL OFFICE  
 GENTLEMAN  
 GOODYEAR TIRE  
 GOSPEL MINISTRY  
 GOVERNESS  
 GRAIN BUSTER  
 GRINDER  
 GROCER  
 GROCERY CLERK  
 HAIRDRESSER  
 HEAD JANITOR  
 HEALTH DEPT. INSPECTOR  
 HEATING ENGINEER  
 HOME DUTIES  
 HONEY SALES  
 HORSESHOER  
 HOSPITAL MAN  
 HOTEL WORK  
 HOUSE  
 HOUSE DUTIES  
 HOUSE HOLDER  
 HOUSE MAN  
 HOUSE WIFE  
 IMPORTS/EXPORTS  
 INDEPENDENT  
 INDUSTRIAL ARTS TEACHER  
 INS.-REAL ESTATE  
 INSPECTOR  
 INSTRUCTOR  
 INSURANCE  
 INVALID  
 JANITOR

JANITRESS  
 JOURNALIST  
 KEEP HOUSE  
 KITCHEN PORTER  
 KKK-CHIEF OF STAFF  
 LABORATORY WORKER  
 LABORER  
 LADIES DRESSES  
 LANDRY WINDOW CLEANERS  
 LATHER  
 LAUNDRY  
 LAWYER  
 LIBRARIAN  
 LINEMAN  
 LINEN ROOM WORK  
 LOADER (COCA COLA BOTTLING)  
 LOCKSMITH  
 LUMBER  
 MACHINE OPERATOR  
 MAIL CARRIER  
 MAIL MAN  
 MANUFACTURER  
 MARBLE SATHER HELPER  
 MARBLE WORKER  
 MASSEUR MALE NURSE  
 MASTER PLUMBER  
 MATRON  
 MATTRESS MAKER  
 MEAT CUTTER  
 MECH. ENG/DRAFTSMAN  
 MECH. ENGINEER  
 MECHANIC  
 MERCHANT  
 MESSENGER  
 METHODIST DEACONESS  
 MILK SALESMAN  
 MILL FORMAN  
 MILL MAN  
 MILLINER  
 MIL-SOLDIER  
 MINER  
 MINERAL BATHS  
 MINISTER  
 MISSIONARY  
 MOLDER  
 MORTERMAN  
 MORTICIAN  
 MOTHER  
 MOTORMAN  
 MULTIGRAPHING

MUSICIAN  
 NANNY  
 NATURE DOCTOR  
 NEWS PAPER  
 NEWSBOY  
 NIGHT WATCHMAN  
 NURSE  
 OFFICE MANAGER  
 OFFICE WORK  
 OPERATOR  
 ORDER CLERK  
 PACIFIC TEL & TEL CO.  
 PACKER  
 PACKER OF PAINT  
 PAINT CONTRACTOR  
 PAINTER  
 PANTRYMAN  
 PASTOR  
 PHARMACIST  
 PHOTOGRAPHER  
 PHYSICIAN  
 PIANIST  
 PIANO TEACHER  
 PIANO TUNER  
 PIPE FITTER  
 PLASTER CONT.  
 PLUMBER  
 POLICE PATROL  
 POOR HOUSE  
 PORTER  
 POST OFFICE CLERK  
 POULTRY MAN  
 PREACHER  
 PRESS FEEDING  
 PRESSMAN  
 PRINTER  
 PUBLISHER  
 PULLMAN COACH  
 QUILTING  
 RADIO DEPT.  
 RADIOS  
 RAILROAD WORKER  
 RANCHER  
 REAL ESTATE AGENT  
 RECEIVING CLERK  
 REFINERY  
 REPORTING CLERK (UPS)  
 RESTAURANT CHIEF BUTCHER  
 RESTAURANT MANAGER  
 RESTAURANT WORKER

RETIRED  
REVENUE AGENT (FED)  
ROLLER TURNER  
ROOMING HOUSE  
SALESMAN  
SALESWOMAN  
SAMPLE MAKER  
SCOUT EXECUTIVE  
SEAMSTRESS  
SECRETARY  
SERVICE MANAGER  
SERVICE STATION  
SEWING  
SHEET METAL  
SHIPPING CLERK  
SHIRT MANUFACTURER  
SHOE MAKER  
SHOE SHOP (OWNER)  
SIGN WRITER  
SILK LAMP SHADES  
SINGER  
SLICKERMAN  
SO CAL TEL CO  
SOLICITOR

SOUL WINNER  
SPECIAL OFFICER  
STAGE MANAGER  
STAGEHAND  
STATE MANAGER, IL  
STEAM FITTER  
STEAM SHOVEL ENG.  
STEEL CHIPER  
STENOGRAPHER  
STEVEDORE  
STOCK CLERK  
STOCKBROKER  
STREET BOND CLERK  
STUDENT  
SUPERINTENDENT  
SURVEY  
TAILOR  
TEACHER  
TELEGRAPH OPERATOR  
TILE  
TOOLER  
TOURIST  
TRAV FRIEGHT AGT  
TRUCK DRIVER

TRUNK LINER  
TYPIST  
UNDERWRITER  
UNEMPLOYED  
UPHOLSTERER  
USED CARS  
UTILITY  
VEGETABLE GIRL  
WAITER  
WAITRESS  
WARD MAID  
WAREHOUSE  
WATCH MAKER  
WATCH MAN  
WINDOW CLEANER  
WIRE FIXTURING  
WOOD WORK  
WORKING FOR JESUS  
WORKMAN  
WRAPPER  
WRITER

## Appendix 2

Data on the nationalities/ethnicities of members was collected by Steve Zeleny in Foursquare Heritage Archives in Echo Park, CA.

Nationalities/ethnicities listed (duplicates have been removed):

100 PERCENT	J-HEBREW-
AMERICAN	ITALIAN
ARMENIAN	JINDA-HINDU
AUSTRIAN	LITHUANIAN
B-COLORED	L-SPAN-GRM
BOHEMIAN	L-SPANISH
BRITISH	NEW ZEALAND
CALIFORNIAN	NORSE
CANADIAN	NORWEG
CAUCASIAN	NORWEG-AMER
CROATIAN	NORWEG-DTCH
CZECH	POLISH
DANISH	RUSSIAN
DUTCH	SCANDINAVIAN
ENG-AMER	SCOT-CANAD
ENG-	SCOTCH
CANADIAN	SCOTCH-SWED
ENG-IRISH	SCOT-ENG
ENGLISH	SCOTS-IRISH
ENG-PENN	SCOTS-IRSH-
DUTCH	ENG
FILIPINO	SWED-AMER
FINNISH	SWEDISH
FRENCH	SWISS
FRN-AMER	WELSH
FRN-DUTCH	WELSH
FRN-ENG	ENGLISH
FRN-GRM	WHITE
FRN-IRISH	WHT-AMER
GERM-AMER	YANKEE
GERMAN	YUGOSLAV
GREEK	
GRM-AMER	
GRM-NORWEG	
HOLLAND	
HUNGARIAN	
IN-AMER	
INDIAN	
INDIAN	
IRISH	
ITALIAN	
JAPANESE	
JEW	
J-HEBREW	

### Appendix 3

Data on the place of conversion was collected by Steve Zeleny in Foursquare Heritage Archives in Echo Park, CA.

Places of conversion listed (duplicates have been removed):

4SQ	MO
AL	MS
AR	MT
AT (Angelus Temple)	NC
AT-RADIO	ND
AUSTRALIA	NE
AZ	NEW ZEALAND
BILLY SUNDAY	NH
TABERNACLE	NJ
CA	NM
CANADA	NORWAY
CN	NV
CO	NY
CT	OA
DAKOTA	OC
DENMARK	OH
ENGLAND	OK
FINLAND	OLINDI
FL	OR
GA	PA
GERMANY	RI
GREECE	ROME, ESA
HOLLAND	RUSSIA
IA	SC
ID	SCOTLAND
IL	SD
IN	SOUTH AFRICA
IRELAND	SWEDEN
KS	SWITZERLAND
KY	TN
LA	TX
LATVIA	UT
MA	VA
MANILA	VT
MD	WA
ME	WI
MI	WV
MN	WY