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# *Religious Dissociation and Liberal Separation: Inside a Christian Brotherhood and a Masonic Lodge*

## Abstract

Recent years have seen a flourishing of everyday experimentations with the category of religion: the “spiritual but not religious,” “religionless” Christians, and many more. Why is there such proliferation of popular experimentation with—and often distancing from—the category of religion? This article explores two such cases of experimentation, a religion-disavowing evangelical Christian brotherhood in Mexico and a Masonic lodge in Switzerland, and shows how, in these two cases, disavowing religion is in part a response to problems associated with a founding principle of liberalism, the separation of private conscience from public citizenship. Subjects of liberal separation are vulnerable to feelings of cloistered conscience and hollow citizenship, problems that are inherent to liberal separation, as evidenced by Freemasonry’s age-old experimentations. These problems are also, however, exacerbated by dwindling popular faith in the institutions of religion and liberal democracy, as evidenced by contemporary evangelical trends of which the Christian brotherhood is exemplary. Such experimentations can be distinguished between those that collapse conscience and citizenship and those that defend the separation while still looking for indirect connections. This contrast is also highlighted by the comparison of religion-disavowing evangelical Christians and Freemasonry.

*Keywords:* Religion; Liberalism; Secularism; Spirituality; Ethnography.

## *Introduction*

IN SEPTEMBER OF 2021, the Masonic lodge in a city in Switzerland where I had been a participant for four years celebrated its 150th birthday. The commemoration began on a sunny Friday morning in front of a statue of one of modern Switzerland’s founding fathers and a

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member of the National Federal Council (Switzerland's seven-member executive branch).<sup>1</sup> Ten members of my lodge had assembled there that morning, in black suits and black ties, and when I arrived they were discussing who was going to clamber up the 20-foot statue and wrap a Masonic apron around its waist. A few local politicians, a historian, and some members of the local press had also been invited. The lodge chose to inaugurate its 150th birthday celebration at the statue because the founding father is a mythical former member. Like some of the national founding fathers in France and the United States, we know that he is an architect of his country's modern liberal institutions, we know that he was an engaged Freemason, and we can assume some relationship between the two kinds of engagements, but its precise nature is unknowable.

Francis, a member of our lodge and director of a Swiss Masonic research group, read to us from a ritual Masonic text that the founding father wrote about the Masonic vocation; evidence, Francis says, that the stakes of Freemasonry today are similar to those of the early years of the modern Swiss Confederation. The vocation that this 19th-century national founding father attributes to Freemasonry is one of bridge-building across the growing chasms that divided contemporary society. Underneath the lines of political and religious division, transcending the private ambitions of material accumulation, Freemasonry sows the seeds of unity and common interest; and as the dividing forces of civil society advance—private ambition, competition, material accumulation, and public political and religious conflict—the ranks of Freemasonry have to grow in kind in order to counteract their divisive effects.

It is a vague and idealistic rendering of the Masonic vocation, and even in the time of the 19th-century founding father of Swiss liberalism, it is above all an affair of the social imaginary [Taylor 2004]. Still 18th-, 19th-, and early 20th-century Freemasons had their prominent characters they could look to in order to fuel their social imaginary. Francis insists that we should see contemporary parallels in the words of that 19th-century Masonic liberal politician, but the divergences are also palpable, and he acknowledged them in a subsequently diffused interview with a local radio station:

In the years of the mid-19th century, Freemasonry was very connected to the political milieu [...] This link, however, has been largely lost over the years. Back then the lodges served as a place of reflection. It was not that the lodges influenced

<sup>1</sup> I am not naming the politician in the interest of preserving the anonymity of the lodge.

politics, rather they were places where politicians could test their ideas and enrich them in order to then put them to practice in public life.

The link between Masonic activity inside the temple and public civic engagement was always, Francis suggests, symbolic, indirect. Politicians could use the lodge as a virtual testing ground for the ideas they were considering pursuing in their public roles. The specifics of whether, how much, and where this was actually happening are unknowable, but figures like our lodge's national founding father made them easily imaginable. These days, in Switzerland, as in most places, there are no such prominent public figures to look to, and so Freemasons have to find other means of animating their social imaginary.

Ten years earlier I had accompanied six members of the Good News Businessmen's Brotherhood (GNBB)<sup>2</sup> on a trip north from Mexico City, for seven hours through the night in a large van with cushionless metal benches for seats, to a small city in San Luis Potosí, where a local GNBB chapter had arranged to host a daylong training session on "Eventos Xtrategicos (Strategy Events)." Sixty-some brothers from around Mexico had accepted the invitation to spend a Saturday learning what Eventos Xtrategicos are, and how and where to best put them to use.

Roberto, a gruff cowboy-like retired doctor from Reynosa, Tamaulipas, is the GNBB national director of Eventos Xtrategicos. He was presiding over this Xtrategicos training session, and he gave the opening remarks, setting the scene for us, offering a vision of what we had come to do and why. He began by congratulating us for being there, for traveling from around the country to dedicate a Saturday to this work—"many are called, few are chosen," he rather predictably told us. And then he presented the context of this particular calling. He painted a rather somber picture of a Mexico in crisis: corrupt and ineffectual politicians doing the bidding of organized crime; a crisis-prone economy that pillaged the peoples' resources to make the riches of a handful of cronies; ordinary people, struggling with scarce resources and opportunities, increasingly surrounded by violence in everyday life, and increasingly without systems of meaning or senses of purpose to guide and support them in their struggles. It is a standard story to which Roberto referred, a sort of cliché of national crisis that Good News brothers systematically invoke in larger organization-mobilizing gatherings, in order to remind each other of the stakes of their work. And it was going to get worse,

<sup>2</sup> I have given this organization and its members pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. "Freemasonry" is a broad organization and tradition that is neither possible nor

desirable to anonymize, but the lodges where I did my field work and their members are anonymized.

Roberto continued. “I am sure many of you have read that difficult times (*tiempos bien feos*) lie ahead,” Roberto said, alluding to a kind of reading that is a messy mix of biblical and political doom and gloom. “Hunger, war, suffering, destruction on a scale we have never seen before. We have some protection against these things but still we need to fight them, we need to fight the enemy on his own terrain. Sometimes Dr. Luis (the national president of GNBB-Mexico) talks about us as a SWAT team, really that is what we are, spiritually prepared first responders, a spiritual SWAT team ... places where God and the Bible have been driven out, these are the places that we are called to enter, to bring a message of hope, of life [...]” Getting this message of hope and life into places where the Bible and conventional religion have been excised is the special task of the Evento Xtrategico, and it requires particularly careful insistence on the nonreligious character of the invitations into a personal relationship with God that GNBB distribute.

GNBB and Freemasonry are very different kinds of organization, with one common feature that motivated my comparative ethnographic investigation, from which this article draws: both organizations cultivate relatively open theistic conceptions and sacred practices while also insisting that their organizations, practices, and beliefs are not “religious.” Why do these organizations distance themselves from the category of religion? Part of the answer, this article suggests, lies in a basic principle of liberal modes of governance, the separation of private matters of conscience from public affairs of civic engagement, and the problems to which liberal separation is susceptible.<sup>3</sup> The separation of private conscience from public civic engagement is a pragmatic solution to the problem of governing ethically diverse communities, but the solution comes with its own set of problems: the split leaves subjects vulnerable to feelings of cloistered conscience, the feeling that one’s pursuit of the good has little bearing on one’s public engagements; and to hollow citizenship, the feeling that public engagements are divorced from conscientious conviction. In disavowing the religious character of their organizations, GNBB and Freemasonry experiment with connecting engagements of private conscience with public civic engagements.

<sup>3</sup> In the cases of both organizations, experimenting with the terms of liberal separation is not the only reason for their disavowal of the category of religion. Like other kinds of “spiritual but not religious” orientations, keeping their distance from “religion” allows both groups to keep the parameters of

organizational belonging open [AMMERMAN 2013; BENDER 2010; FULLER 2001]. Furthermore, disavowing religion is also, in both cases, part of a practice of enchanting everyday life. These dimensions of religion disavowal are explored elsewhere [HILL 2017 and 2019] and in a book manuscript I am drafting.

The investigation was born of my attempts to understand the Good News Businessmen's Brotherhood's insistence that "God is not religion." "God is not religion" is a shorthand way for GNBB, an evangelical Christian businessmen's organization whose chapters I encountered in Mexico, to invite new recruits into the idea that God does not know jurisdictional bounds of liberal separation, that God is just as present and pertinent in the most public moments and engagements of one's life, in school, in government offices, in politics, and business meetings, as He is in the most private, intimate, solitary ones. The Christian brotherhood's disavowal of religion is part of a recent evangelical trend to distinguish the personal relationships with God that they cultivate from religion [Bielo 2009; Luhrmann 2012; Moore 2017]. Freemasons, on the other hand, have been pursuing vaguely theistic conceptions and sacred practices while disavowing their religious character since the organization's origins, which coincided with the emergence of liberal modes of governance in the aftermath of wars of religion. The comparison between GNBB and Freemasonry, therefore, highlights the fact that this sort of experimentation with the category of religion is as old as liberalism, and at the same time that recent trends of the erosion of both popular faith and of participation in the institutions of conventional religion and liberal democracy provide additional opportunities and incentives to experiment with possibilities for reintegrating engagements of conscience with those of citizenship.

In the cases of both GNBB and Freemasonry, experimentation with the terms of liberal separation is largely an affair of what Charles Taylor [2004] calls the social imaginary. That is to say, the experimentations have little impact on policy or the institutional reality of the separation of conscience from citizenship, but the organizations do offer their members practices that allow them to feel and imagine new kinds of possible connections between their ethical convictions and their public engagements. As my Masonic lodge commemorated 150 years of its existence, we gathered at the base of a statue of one of Switzerland's founding national fathers and a founding member of our lodge; Francis invited us to consider the way the founding father's Masonic and civic engagements might have indirectly, enigmatically intertwined, and he invited us to consider the resonances between the founding father's vision of a Freemasonry that transcends the lines of religious, political, and economic division and our own understanding of Freemasonry's contemporary vocation. The connections cultivated between conscience and citizenship, in the founding father's time and our own, are indirect, enigmatic, and ultimately unknowable, but nevertheless stimulative of

the social imaginary. GNBB, on the other hand, disavows religion as a way of imaginatively collapsing the private conscience/public citizenship divide, and their *Eventos Xtrategicos*, in which they think of themselves as a “spiritual SWAT team” bringing their invitations to a personal relationship with God to secular spaces like schools and police stations, are practices that stimulate their imaginary integration of conscience and citizenship.

In what follows, I first describe the general problems to which liberal separation is susceptible, the same problems to which GNBB and Freemasonry formulate very different responses. These problems are inherent features of liberalism—evidenced in part by the fact that Freemasons have been responding to them since the origins of liberal modes of governance. At the same time, recent years have seen a decline in popular faith and in participation in institutions of religion and liberal democracy, which suggests that there might also be more opportunities and incentives to experiment with the terms of the liberal separation of private conscience from public citizenship. The story of national crisis that GNBB tell as they make their spiritual SWAT team trainings and interventions taps into the sentiment of eroding popular trust in religious and liberal democratic institutions. Finally, the article concludes with some discussion of how these two cases of popular experimentation with the category of religion compare with other related cases, and it proposes distinguishing between modes of experimentation that aim to collapse the liberal separation of private conscience from public citizenship, and those that seek to defend it while still looking for some means of their integration.

### *Liberal Separation: Inherent Problems and Contemporary Crises*

#### *The Inherent Problems of Liberal Separation*

Liberalism’s basic pluralism-managing premise entails separating engagements of the conscience from affairs of citizenship, such that the former can be freely and privately pursued while the latter can be commonly undertaken independent of all kinds of differences in conscientious practices, beliefs, and commitments. In practice, however, this kind of split between private conscience and public citizenship is problematic: ethical conscience, however private and intimate, is always built in and through some kind of self-transcending notion of common *public*

good; and the rights and obligations of citizenship, however public and official, are meaningfully incarnated and enacted in individual subjects insofar as they appeal to personal notions and principles of goodness. Subjects of liberal separation are therefore vulnerable to feelings of relative seclusion of conscience and hollowness of citizenship. This is the inevitable cost of liberalism's pragmatic strategy for managing ethical pluralism, a point that a long tradition of communitarian criticism has repeatedly made from a range of different conservative, feminist, Marxist, and theological perspectives [e.g. Koselleck 1988; MacIntyre 2007 [1981]; MacKinnon 1989; Marx (1844) 1975; Milbank 1991].

In addition to the meaningful problem of conscience/citizenship division, the liberal-separation solution to ethical diversity also contains an inherent logical problem, a problem of categories and definitions. The separation of matters of conscience from those of citizenship requires defining their respective jurisdictions. Traditionally, at least in liberal democracies in Europe and the Americas, these lines are drawn with the category of religion: "religious" practices, symbols, and beliefs are designated as such in order to confine them to private life and to ensure that they are kept at a distance from political engagements and processes. This separation of religion from politics, however, requires knowing first of all what "religion" is; and how are we to collectively define which practices, beliefs, organizations, speech, and signs count as "religion" if not through the political means that are supposed to be kept separate from all things religious? A number of scholars have shown how the liberal necessity to define the boundaries of religion as a legal category, ironically, politicizes religion more than it assures its separation from politics [Asad 2003; Cady & Hurd 2010; Fitzgerald 2007; Mahmood 2016; Stack, Goldenberg and Fitzgerald, 2015; Sullivan 2005].

In theory, the separation is intended, on the one hand, to protect free religious practice, belief, and association from political interference, and, on the other, to protect political institutions and decision-making from religious influence.<sup>4</sup> Both kinds of protection, however, require politicizing adjudications about what counts as "religion," decision-making processes that cannot help but build and burn bridges between particular religious communities and political institutions and officials. In order for

<sup>4</sup> In the case of the U.S. Constitution, for example, the First Amendment addresses both sides of the secular injunction in what has come to be known as the "establishment clause" and the "free exercise" clause: "Congress shall make no law respecting an

establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Separation, however it is configured, is always in the name of this kind of double protection: the protection of politics from particular religious influence, and of religion from political interference.

a society to protect the free exercise of religion it first has to know what “religion” is, which inevitably draws state actors and institutions into contentious, politicizing adjudications of the theological consistency and sincerity of conviction of everything from dietary and prayer practices to believing in flying spaghetti monsters, employers’ responsibilities for insuring contraception, decorating grave sites, and much more [Dowdy 2018; Johnson 2015; Lupu 2015; McCrary 2022; Sullivan 2005]. All kinds of different context-specific consequences result from different sorts of secular attempts to protect religion from political influence, but the politicization of religion is one of the more reliable, predictable consequences of such attempts. Similarly, protecting political institutions and discourse from particular religious influence and motive requires categorically distinguishing between “culture” and “religion” with respect to garments, symbols, words, projects, and associations [Asad 2006; Astor and Maryl 2020; Joppke 2013; Maclure and Taylor 2011; Sullivan 2005]. Particular liberal regimes draw these categorical lines between religion and culture in a variety of ways with a variety of consequences, but again always with the ironic consequence of animating relationships of enmity and alliance between political and religious actors and institutions. From the beginning, of both the organization and the liberal democratic regimes with which it has been associated, Freemasonry has sought to sidestep these inherent problems of liberal separation by disavowing the category of religion and laying positive claim to a series of related notions, such as moral self-improvement, ritual, and the sacred, and leaving unspecified the relationship of these things to their more conventionally religious counterparts.

*Liberal Separation and Contemporary Crises of Popular Faith: Religion*

Although this religion-defining dilemma is an inherent paradox of liberal separation, the problem is aggravated insofar as “religion” becomes a less taken-for-granted category of everyday life. And these days scholars are not the only ones reevaluating the religion–politics relationship. Growing numbers of people find themselves in religious no man’s land: the growth of the category of religious “nones”—people who are not affiliated with and do not participate in institutional religion but who have not necessarily renounced beliefs, pursuits, or quests of that sort—is the most significant religious demographic trend of the past 50 years on both sides of the North Atlantic [e.g. Ammerman 2013; Beyer 2012; Burge 2021; Gauthier 2020; Hervieu-Léger 1999; Wuthnow 1998]. As more people distance themselves from the conventional institutions of religion, more



popular organizations recognize the relative arbitrariness of the category of religion and begin to experiment with it, in the courts and in everyday life. Buddhist movements in the United States promote mindfulness techniques in secular spaces as a way of planting spiritual seeds that might one day transform into something fully Buddhist [Kucinskas 2014]. A Christian prisoner-reform organization claims a secular identity in order to access federal resources for teaching “universal principles,” which they find in the Bible but which, as they see it, are just as easily found in Dr. Seuss books or any other moral teachings [Sullivan 2009]. “Strategic secularism” is how Engelke [2013] describes a British biblical society’s attempts to rescue the Bible from its confinement in the private sphere, to expand its public character through publicity campaigns that explain the biblical messages that are buried inside daytime soap operas and prominent features of popular culture. In order to highlight the absurdity of the legal category, a group of atheist activists who claim belief in a supernatural entity called the “Flying Spaghetti Monster” have brought various legal cases in attempts to win the rights and protections of the “religion” classification for their church, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and their doctrine, Pastafarianism [Dowdy 2018]. Different as they are, these are all cases of organizations experimenting with an erstwhile taken-for-granted, given category of “religion” in an attempt to reconfigure relationships between engagements of conscience and affairs of citizenship.

*Liberal Separation and Contemporary Crises of Popular Faith: Democracy*

A separate literature documents the steady erosion of public confidence in the institutions of liberal democracy, which is expressed in the rise of various populist and authoritarian movements in Europe and North America alike [e.g. Brubaker 2017a; Hochschild 2016a; Joppke 2021; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Pappas 2019]. Little is known, however, about the effects of this erosion of public trust and of participation in liberal democracy on religious actors and their engagements. The few studies that do take up questions about the relationship between populism and religion show that religion has become a resource of xenophobia, another means of drawing us/them boundaries between a pure sovereign people and a dangerous, contaminating other. Brubaker [2017b] argues that recent populist movements of the North Atlantic have a “civilizationalist” character that entails a reclaiming of Judeo-Christian heritage as a way of drawing a sharp exclusionary moral boundary this side of Islam. For Roy [2016], too, contemporary European trends of populism and

religiosity converge around identity politics and the establishment of Christian/Muslim as a salient us/them moral boundary. And while evangelical movements have long been influential in American politics, several scholars suggest that erosion of trust in liberal democratic institutions and the infusion of populist sentiment into American evangelical movements has transformed them into more overt movements of religious nationalism [Gorski and Perry 2022; Martí 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020]. Scholars of the American evangelical-populist blend suggest that these movements have grown through the drawing of us/them moral boundary lines around a pure and sovereign people; indeed, in Gorski's estimation, the phenomenon is so entirely a product of tribalist identity politics that he wonders whether it belongs in the category of "religion" at all—"a reactionary and secularized version of white Christian nationalism" is his proposed alternative suggestion [2020: 112].

I do not contest the notion that religion is an important resource in xenophobic and nativist us/them moral-boundary drawing. This, however, is not the only kind of relationship between liberal democratic mistrust and popular religiosity. Waning trust in liberal democracy can also exacerbate, and render more visible, the inherent problems associated with the separation of public citizenship from private conscience. As liberal democracy's implicit ideological legitimizers—progressive economic development and democratic expansion—wane in credibility, the gap between private conscience and public citizenship becomes more explicit, more visible, more tempting to experiment with. Surely, nativist and xenophobic us/them moral boundaries can serve as a meaningful balm for feelings of cloistered conscience and hollowed citizenship, to which subjects of liberal separation are vulnerable. However, liberal subjects can also intervene directly in the separation itself, and engage in everyday experimentation with the categories and terms of the separation of private conscience from public citizenship. GNBB's disavowal of religion in particular is an everyday experiment of this sort. Good News brothers draw on declining faith in the institutions of conventional religion and liberal democracy to help fuel their attempts to cultivate meaningful conscience–citizenship connections.

### *Case Selection and Methods*

Freemasonry developed in 17th-century Scotland and England out of a guild of stonemasons whose most important and lucrative projects were

cathedral constructions. This original Masonic vocation, the material construction of houses of spirituality, remained an important representation of Freemasonry even as the calling to Masonic building became one of symbolic rather than material construction [Bousquet 2013; Dachez 2013]. How exactly this “operative” artisans’ guild for stonemasons transformed itself into “speculative” Freemasonry, a mystical pathway of spiritual self-exploration for men of any occupation, remains a hazy historical question with answers that are long on legend and short on reliable evidence. From the beginning, Freemasonry has had an ambiguous relationship to liberal separation, and while the terms and stakes of this relationship have shifted from the Enlightenment era to the contemporary one, the ambivalent, sometimes-paradoxical character of the Freemason engagement with liberal separation has remained constant. After hundreds of years of religious warfare, European powers negotiated neutrality in the Treaty of Westphalia, disentangling religious faith from political order, consigning religion to the private spheres, empowering a Hobbesian sovereign state to act as guarantor of civil order, and institutionalizing a citizenship that splits political obligation from moral conscience. Freemasons became successful and powerful in the years leading up to the French Revolution because the organization occupied the murky middle ground—in between the religious and the political, the public and the private—opened up by Europe’s liberal truce [Koselleck 1988]. Freemasons maintained neutrality with respect to religious doctrine and they distinguished their work and its aims from “politics”; and they did so in order to lay claim to an authority that gave public voice to moral conscience, to articulate a social will and a social good. “Not political” and yet an organizational protagonist in the French Revolution, “not religious” and yet explicitly oriented toward symbolic experience of a transcendental sacred; this bundle of contradictions was an important organizational vehicle for the transfer of the ideological foundations of sovereignty from divine to popular sources [Cochin 1924; Furet 1978; Halévi 1984; Koselleck 1988]. Freemasons continue to occupy this murky space in between conscience and citizenship, but no longer as mythical protagonists of the dawn of liberalism. These days Freemasons are busy wondering how to reconfigure their organization, and its characteristic secrecy-infused symbolic relationship to the sacred, in order to continue serving as a “laboratory for society” in times that are starting to look like liberalism’s dusk.

I spent six years, from 2017 to 2022, doing ethnographic fieldwork with a Masonic lodge in Switzerland. When I introduced myself to a member of an organization of Freemasons doing research on

Freemasonry and explained my project, he was interested but told me he thought it would be impossible for me to do it from the outside. He made this observation in a way that suggested an openness to my doing the project from the inside, and I was immediately drawn to the idea. Freemasonry's blend of Enlightenment philosophy and esoteric truth seeking, with all the contradictions that that entails, fits my own agnostic orientation to ultimate truth questions, and I was also interested in pursuing a project that was simultaneously personal and scientific, with all the difficulties this would entail [Mears 2011; Wacquant 2004]. An ethnographic investigation of a secret society is a difficult undertaking, so I had to come to some agreements with the brothers of my lodge: my research would focus principally on my own experience because of the oath we take to speak with discretion about the ritual happenings inside the lodge; and I would also do interviews with willing brothers (26 in total) in order to incorporate the experiences and opinions of others. It was impossible to take notes during Masonic meetings, so I wrote field notes immediately after they took place. I draw on excerpts of field notes and the interviews with brothers from my lodge as I describe the Masonic response to problems of liberal separation.

The Good News Businessmen's Brotherhood was originally an American organization and a prominent actor in the spreading of charismatic Christianity from Pentecostalism to other Christian denominations in the United States throughout the 1960s and 1970s. GNBB-Mexico, like its American counterpart, is a nondenominational lay organization that relies on testimony—the recounting of personal narratives of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the details of everyday life—as its members seek to spread invitations into personal relationship with God. And the invitations that they extend are extreme in their nondenominationality, in part because they span a Catholic-Protestant divide that remains particularly fraught in Mexico.<sup>5</sup> For Catholic participants, the brotherhood offers an opportunity to explore a personal relationship with God that is of a very Protestant sort but which does not require leaving the Catholic Church, an act which in Mexico can fracture families and communities. Members invite friends, family members, colleagues, and neighbors to attend businessmen's meetings, where they will dine for free

<sup>5</sup> GNBB discourages discussion of denominational affiliation, and so there is no record-keeping and even little open discussion of the actual proportions of Protestant vs. Catholic membership. Brothers make casual references to the proportions being about half and half; and on one occasion at a national conference a

curious American speaker asked for a show of hands, which did show about half Catholic and half Protestant hands. Thirty-two of my 72 interviewees were of some kind of Protestant affiliation, and the remaining 40 were Catholic.

and learn how the brotherhood has transformed the lives of its members. Without paid staff, the brotherhood runs on the donations of time and money of its estimated 5,000 members in some 150 local chapters around Mexico. GNBB is not a church, and brothers persistently remind their audiences—and one another—of why it is that their fellowship transcends conventional “religion”: GNBB is a lay organization that meets in hotels and restaurants and invites guests into potent personal relationships with God, which, as they describe it, exist independently of any particular religious affiliation or doctrine. They invite their guests to “businessmen’s meetings” in the hope of introducing them there to the idea that God is distinct from those things that they might associate with institutional religion, that they can cultivate a personal relationship with God independent of such things, a relationship with God that is in fact potent *because* it is developed and pursued outside of the confines of “religion.”

I spent 18 months, in 2011–2012, doing ethnographic fieldwork with GNBB. I openly introduced myself as an agnostic sociologist interested in doing participant observation for research purposes; and I did far more observing than participating—although I received frequent invitations, I never assumed an active role inside the organization. I attended weekly dinners and weekly planning/training meetings in two different chapters (four meetings a week) in Mexico City. I also attended three national conventions, five leadership training sessions, and a matrimonial retreat. I accompanied brothers on roughly 50 different visits to schools, small businesses, police stations, and government offices, where they went to deliver a particularly “secular” version of their message, an activity that they refer to in their PowerPoint language as “Eventos Xtrategicos.” I also went along on five different weeklong evangelizing excursions, or “Xtramuros,” in four different cities. During meetings I would jot down notes and then afterwards would fill these out into more extensive field notes in a journal; the following day I would write up syntheses on the computer. I refer to both the raw notes and the syntheses as I reconstruct the ethnography. I also conducted 72 in-depth semi-structured interviews with leaders and rank-and-file members of the organization.

*Freemasonry’s Symbolic Experimentations with Inherent Problems of Liberal Separation*

Different as they are, the practices of Freemasonry and the Good News Businessmen’s Brotherhood are their own kinds of everyday interventions in the category of religion and the conscience–citizenship

relationships that that category implies in liberal democratic contexts. Freemasons do not explicitly oppose themselves to religion, nor do they seek to collapse the separation of private conscience from public citizenship. Freemasons are liberals; they defend public/private distinctions. At the same time, however, they are aware of the problems that radical separation of the pursuit of the good from public engagements poses, problems that are inherent vulnerabilities of liberalism, and problems to which Freemasonry has offered itself as a solution since the origins of such modes of governance.

The only official Masonic reference to religion is in the founding document, Anderson's Constitutions (1735), where a passage obliges Masons to adhere to an enigmatic "religion in which all men agree." Which one is that? It is not possible of course to give a positive answer to this question. This is a concept of religion that has no definite categorical lines. The ambiguity is not a mistake; it is an intentional practice to refuse the impossible task of defining specifically what counts as "religion," with the hope of opening the terrain to different kinds of belief, practice, symbol, and tradition, including both those that fly the banner of "religion" and those that do not. The organization is not officially a religious one—it is never registered that way with public authorities—and I have never heard a Freemason describe their engagement or activities in religious terms. In fact, discussion of religion—and politics—is technically not permitted inside a Masonic lodge—these are subjects that divide. Yet most of Freemasonry officially requires its prospective initiates to adhere to the existence of the Grand Architect of the Universe,<sup>6</sup> or "GADLU" (le Grand Architect de l'Univers) in the affectionate terms of the French-speaking Masonic world. GADLU is the vaguest, broadest, emptiest of deistic notions that suggests some kind of suprarational higher power, the specific contents of which individual Masons are left to fill in, or not, at their own discretion.

"GADLU" is not God; it is a self-consciously explicit symbolic placeholder for that which can only be symbolically place-held. More generally, the sacred/profane distinction is a very important distinction for Freemasons, one that they often and insistently reiterate, though, rather unusually, they do so in precisely those terms. They make constant, explicit, self-conscious reference to their passages back and forth between the "sacred" time and space of ritual and the "profane" world—

<sup>6</sup> The Grand Orient de France (GODF) is a notable exception. "Freethinkers" and atheists have historically been more involved in that obedience, and already by the end of the 19th

century GODF had lifted the GADLU requirement, proudly proclaiming *absolute* freedom of conscience.

as though they were their own social-scientific analysts of the sacred/profane distinctions that they also simultaneously seek to experience. In making insistent explicit reference to the sacred, Freemasons are equally insistent on and self-consciously aware of their *symbolic* relationship to the sacred.<sup>7</sup> Like GNBB, then, Freemasons embark on the categorically confounding enterprise of disavowing religion while still cultivating (vaguely) theistic engagements and sacred practices. Freemasons have been disavowing religion in this way since the origins of the organization and of the liberal modes of governance with which it coincides.

For the occasion of our lodge's 150th anniversary, the lodge master asked me to interview some of my brothers and write a short reflection piece, and I draw on these interviews for this article's analysis. Over the course of these interviews I would always ask my interviewees about the future they saw and hoped for in Freemasonry and its place in the world. Several drew a contrast between what they saw as a vital Freemasonry in the francophone world and a stagnating one in the anglophone world. When I asked Jean, the unofficial historian of our lodge, how he saw the future of Freemasonry, he described two different tendencies, one that he associates with the francophone and the other with the anglophone Masonic world:

There are two types of Freemasonry, one which is going well and another which is not. The one that is not going well is Anglo-Saxon Freemasonry. It only initiates, one after the other [...] There's no intellectual reflection, they just have meals and do ceremonies. This kind of Freemasonry is not doing so well. And then there is the model which is doing much better, and that is the French, with lots of conferences, comic books, detective novels and things like that.

In the middle of my interviewing project the Masonic research group in which I participate invited a French public intellectual and Freemason, former Grand Master of the Grand Orient de France, to give a talk to the group about the particularities of French Freemasonry, and what explained its vitality relative to the anglophone Masonic world. He

<sup>7</sup> Masonic symbols are self-consciously symbolic of the sacred: they draw from the universe of the craft of stonemasonry, and they do, for many Masons, point or gesture indefinitely in sacred directions. Which specific direction that is, however, varies from one Mason to the next, and the square and compass in their actual material manifestations are just tools—explicitly, self-consciously, and with insistent reminder, they are only sacred insofar as they are symbolic. The gap between the sacred symbol and the sacredness that it symbolizes is infinite, and yet any attempts to

move in the direction of sacredness can only happen in these mundane, destination-doomed symbolic vehicles. While on the face of it, "God is not religion" is diametrically opposed to "GADLU," if, as Freemasons frequently remind each other, everything is symbol (*tout est symbole*), then the symbolic orientation to GADLU is potentially of the same order as the symbolic orientation to the bathroom down the hall, or the spoon one holds in one's hand to stir the sugar into the coffee. This, then, is also part of a technique for enchanting everyday life.

mentioned the comic books and detective novels along with a large number of different obediences<sup>8</sup> that offered a wide array of different flavors of Freemasonry. Most importantly, he said, French Freemasonry in general, and the Grand Orient de France in particular, was returning to the basic principles of Freemasonry, its original “double mission”: an initiation path and social civic engagement. This kind of civic engagement was more obviously political in previous eras; in 1940, he told us, 90% of French members of parliament were Freemasons, while only 10% are these days. Still, he argued, these are the two essential ingredients of Freemasonry and finding ways to continue their pursuit, with activities like public conferences and university visits, has kept French Freemasonry relatively vital, with stable membership numbers and a proliferation of different obediences.

Léo, another veteran member of the lodge, also holds French Freemasonry in high regard. When I asked him if he thought Freemasonry has a public vocation in the societies in which it exists, he responded, “It should. But it doesn’t. Except in France, except the Grand Orient de France. But we should do it, absolutely. I mean if we really want to defend what we claim to defend, that is human rights, we should be manifesting our support more.”

GH: You mean have a public presence?

Léo: Exactly, clearly say voilà these are our values.

GH: And why don’t we do that?

Léo: Because there are those who say we shouldn’t get involved, we have to stay discrete, keep the secret.

When I asked Robert, a brother who had recently moved to Paris, the same question, he also talked about the French model as the one to follow.

Robert: They [Freemasons] already are playing a role [in France]... In the “Committee of Republican Secularism (la Comité laïcité république)” there are a lot of Freemasons from the Grand Orient, I also participate in this movement. And in the Education Commission. Freemasons certainly have an influence. But when the Grand Master of le Grand Orient de France claims to have made Macron retreat [on his proposal to modify the French 1905 law establishing the terms of separation between church and state], that’s stupid. That is exactly what you should not do.

GH: What, make him retreat?

<sup>8</sup> “Obediences” are the independent organizational jurisdictions, into which Freemasonry is divided.



Robert: No, you should make him retreat, but without boasting publicly about it. And all the other [French Masonic] obediences criticized him for it. It was a very unfortunate step to take. Freemasons will always act, but they will act in secret, always in secret.

These various observations about the “French” model (vs. the anglo-phone) illustrate the rather nuanced way that Freemasons understand the relationship between their engagements of conscience, developed inside the lodge, and their public civic engagements. On the one hand, the engagements and activities of conscience should have some kind of public bearing and pertinence. Freemasons do their work inside the Masonic temple with the belief that their engagements and actions in the sacred space of ritual time have effects on the “temple of humanity,” the profane everyday world in which the temple exists. The French model, especially that of the Grand Orient de France, is less reticent about making public pronouncements and proclaiming positions on issues of the day, and this can help to reassure Freemasons about the public significance of their activities. At the same time this kind of publicity stands in tension with the infamous secrecy that defines Masonic engagements. Léo mentions this as the reason that some Freemasons are reticent about taking public positions, and Robert describes the Grand Orient Grand Master’s recounting of his influencing of French President Emmanuel Macron on a policy position as a violation of the secrecy with which such connections between Masonic and public engagements are supposed to take place.

This secrecy–publicity tension is central to how Freemasons experience the link between their engagements of conscience inside the temple and their civic engagements in the public sphere. Because Freemasons engage in their conscience work with the conviction that their ethical practices inside the temple radiate out into the everyday world in which they live, there is a temptation to render these temple–world connections more visible, to make official Masonic pronouncements in defense of human rights, as Léo proposes, or to engage in the public sphere more explicitly as Freemasons. These things, however, put at risk the secrecy of Masonic activity, which ensures the indirect, unknowable, enigmatic, and therefore eminently imaginable connection between conscience and citizenship. This is why, Robert says, the Grand Master of the Grand Orient is criticized for taking public credit for having influenced Macron’s decision-making; this makes the conscience–citizenship link direct, explicit. Keeping that relationship indirect, enigmatic, and unspoken gives all Freemasons’ social imaginary more room to roam

with respect to who, how, and how much private Masonic engagements might be influencing public affairs.

Francis told me that he had created a group of his own whose purpose is to strike this balance between publicity and secrecy; fuel the feeling that Freemasons are engaging in the public sphere while keeping the terms of that engagement indirect, implicit, so as to keep the precise nature of Masonic influence on public life open and ultimately unknowable. Francis created the group because he had the feeling that Freemasonry was a good model for managing ethical pluralism but that it wasn't being sufficiently *shared* with the world.

Francis: I started a group that did politics, without saying that we did politics with Masonic values. The group was called AProPo, which stands for Political Analyses and Propositions (*Analyses et Propositions Politiques*). This group, AProPo, there was a time when we had 200 members... With this group AProPo, we would work on offering propositions, well done, well documented propositions and then we would find politicians to defend them, but never a politician from one party, rather from several parties. We worked on the fusion of townships, professional training, euthanasia [...] And I think that on the question of secularism (*laïcité*) too, we have to engage in that debate because we have our own experience competence in this field. But we will not do it by saying "I am a Freemason and I am coming to explain it to you."

How much and how well this kind of Masonic secret-public engagement actually happens or works is at best an open question. Francis himself mentioned in his radio interview for the 150th anniversary that it was something that was far more vital in the 19th-century dawn of liberalism historical moments. Still, the eventual possibility of this kind of ambiguous secret-public civic connection remains an important part of the social imaginary of Freemasonry. Whether or how the Grand Master of the Grand Orient might have influenced Macron in his decision to retreat from proposed changes to the 1905 secularism law in France; whether or how much Freemasons' participation in Francis' AProPo group might have helped to construct public policy on professional training, euthanasia, secularism and more; these are open, unanswerable questions, but their eventual potentiality is an important part of keeping the indirect, enigmatic, ultimately unknowable link between Masonic and civic engagements alive with possibility in the social imagination of Freemasons. It is important, however, that these possible, eventual linkages between Masonic and civic engagements remain unspoken, indirect. That is why the Grand Master of the Grand Orient was admonished for claiming directly and explicitly to have influenced Macron; and that is why Francis says that while Freemasons

have a lot to contribute to public debates on secularism, it's important that they do not do so directly, explicitly, saying "I am a Freemason and I am coming to explain it to you."

Why is it important that these possible links between Masonic and civic engagements remain indirect, unspoken, *secret*? This is how Freemasonry has always operated, in an attempt to defend the lines of liberal separation of conscience from citizenship while also still providing some kind of enigmatic, subterranean channels of communication therebetween. And if secrecy surrounds the links between Masonic and civic engagements, then questions about if, how, and how much these links might or might not be active remain ultimately unanswerable and therefore limitlessly imaginable. This is also why, of course, Freemasonry is such an easy target for conspiracy theorists, who can therefore easily fantastically exaggerate the links. Still, the idea that Masonic engagements influence civic ones in indirect, ultimately unknowable ways is a defining feature of the organization.

Freemasons regard their lodges as laboratories of experimentation for society, and this is especially true with regard to the problems associated with liberal separation. From a Masonic point of view, theirs are models that can inspire other forms of social organization. Undoubtedly, some degree of this kind of inspiring can be seen in the "civil religions" that accompanied the revolutionary birth of the French and American national republics in the 18th century. Without exaggerating the Masonic influence in the construction of these two republics, one can note the coincidence between the construction of Masonic lodges and that of national civil religions in both cases. Civil religion proclaims the necessity of maintaining and cultivating a belief in a supreme being without specifying who that being might be, or how that belief should be practiced, and providing the private person with freedom of choice over such particularities. This formula, vaguely deist in its social content, but free, intimate, and discreet in its personal content, worked in the Masonic lodges 50 years before Rousseau proposed it theoretically, before inspiring the Constitution of the United States, and before Robespierre implemented it in the "cult of the Supreme Being." The experimentation work of Masonic lodges, in the in-between spaces of new divisions between conscience and citizenship, must have had a role to play, at least symbolically, at the level of the imaginary. However, the same secrecy that fuels the experimentation means that we will never know exactly how or how much this experimentation work inside Masonic lodges might have influenced Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, James Monroe, John Hancock, Danton, Marat, Mirabeau,

Lafayette, Voltaire, and many others with less famous names. The influence would have taken place in the ineffable Masonic conscience, a conscience surrounded by an enigmatic symbolic secrecy, which both protects it from public scrutiny and opens unknowable, and therefore eminently imaginable, possible connections to public citizenship.

In a Masonic book fair talk in Lyon a renowned French philosopher of secularism, offered a demonstration, an instruction of sorts about how secrecy of affiliation works to navigate the problems of liberal separation. The philosopher began by suggesting that, when it comes to secularism, Freemasonry is indeed a laboratory of experimentation for society, and he told us that his presentation would be aimed at clarifying the link between Freemasonry, as a “beautiful example of secularism,” and secularism in society in general. “I am happy to have been invited to speak here,” the philosopher began, “because between Freemasonry and me, there is a strong bond that allows me to consider myself a Freemason— with or without the apron,<sup>9</sup> I do not have to explain myself publicly.” Even here in this Masonic book fair, then, the philosopher decided to leave open the possibility of his belonging or not to the fraternal order, making use of the freedom of conscience that the Masonic secret offers him, perhaps with the intention of teaching us about the importance of its exercise. As he concluded his talk, the philosopher explained how this same conception of secrecy infuses his work as a university professor, in which he sees the secret as a republican duty, an everyday lesson in how navigating conscience–citizenship divides inside the lodge can inform engagements outside of the lodge.

I always thought that my students should not know if I believe in God or not. In fact, when they ask me, I always tell them the same thing: “I will not answer you, it is rare that I do not answer a question from a student, but I will not answer you. First because it’s my business, just as you have your private sphere, I have mine and I would never allow myself to ask who believes in God and who does not believe. Secondly, Marianne<sup>10</sup> gave me her children to be emancipated, to teach them to think and to learn, through meditated thought, to exercise their citizenship. And it makes me happy that you ask me,” and they ask me why and I say “because it means that nothing of my teaching allows you to know if I believe in God or not.”

This insistence on maintaining the Masonic secret is an illustrative example; indeed the philosopher seems to have intended his example to

<sup>9</sup> A “Freemason without the apron (un Franc-maçon sans le tablier)” is a way of referring to someone who is of Masonic spirit,

without having been initiated or belonging to the organization in any formal way.

<sup>10</sup> Symbolic national personification of the French Republic.

be illustrative. He explained to the audience the way the secret of Masonic affiliation, of which he is a serious practitioner, also informs his public engagements as a university professor. In the same way that he refuses to talk about his possible Masonic membership, he also refuses to talk about his beliefs of conscience with his students. Secrecy allows for indirect relationships between private conscience and public citizenship. Both inside and outside of the lodge, secrecy is a technique for navigating the conscience–citizenship split. In the lodge it facilitates conditions of intimacy and privacy of conscience; outside of the lodge it leaves entirely open, unspecified, eminently imaginable back-and-forth effects and influences of conscientious and public engagements.

Freemasons' pursuit of an explicitly, self-consciously symbolic relationship to the sacred, which they wrap in layers of unknowability-fueling secrecy, is an attempt to cultivate an experimental practice in the in-between space of the liberal separation of private conscience and public citizenship. It seeks to build subterranean, ineffable, symbolic channels of communication between engagements of conscience and citizenship, in an attempt to prevent the cloistering of the former and the hollowing out of the latter, while still preserving the basic public/private separation that is liberalism's basic recipe for governing ethically diverse communities. This has always been the primary domain in which Freemasonry has operated as a "laboratory for society," and its experimentations are as old as liberalism itself.

*Contemporary Crises of Popular Faith and Performative Evangelical Experimentations with Liberal Separation*

The tendencies toward the cloistering of conscience and the hollowing of citizenship are problems inherent to liberal modes of governance, problems to which Freemasons have been responding since the origins of their organization and the liberal regimes with which they have been entwined. At the same time, declining faith and declining participation in the institutions of religion and liberal democracy offer increasing opportunities and incentives to experiment with the terms of liberal separation. The Good News Businessmen's Brotherhood's more obvious, brazen circumventions of the category of religion, and the separation of private from public engagements that it implies, are a response to this double-sided crisis of popular faith.

GNBB members explicitly distinguish their invitations into a personal relationship with God from "religion." They invite their guests to "businessmen's meetings" in the hope of introducing them there to the

ideas that God is distinct from those things that they might associate with institutional religion, and that they can cultivate a personal relationship with God independent of such things, a relationship with God that is in fact potent *because* it is developed and pursued outside of the confines of “religion.” “God is not religion” is GNBB’s shorthand way of inviting potential new recruits into the idea that God does not know jurisdictional bounds of liberal separation; that God is just as present and pertinent in the most public moments and engagements of one’s life, in school, in government offices, in politics, and business meetings, as He is in the most private, intimate, solitary ones, there to talk with in the shower while getting ready for the day or passing the time while stuck in traffic. This is the message that “God is not religion” communicates: we have been taught that relationships with God are to be cultivated in certain doctrinally, ritually, officially cordoned-off spaces and times; we have learned that relationship with God is a private affair, an affair of the conscience, that is to be kept separate from public discourse, spaces, and engagements; and it is this learning of a cordoned-off, limited, restricted notion of relationship with God that restrains its efficacy, personally and publicly. “God is not religion” carries the promise that God could be otherwise. The promise of a God that could be otherwise animates desires of self-transformation; and it provokes reconsideration of, and experimentation with, the public bearing of this personal godly relationship.

First-time guests are invited to GNBB dinners and introduced to the idea that “God is not religion” at the same time that they are told, “as you step out of the doors of this restaurant, if you so choose, your life will never again be the same.” It is a double invitation and the two parts go together: it is an invitation to conceive of God as more intimately personal and publicly pertinent than the “religion” category tends to connote; and it is a suggestion that this realization might serve as the basis of a rather radical turning point, that it might become the before/after narrative fulcrum for a kind of “born-again” project of self-transformation. “God is not religion,” therefore, offers itself as a before/after mark of self-transformation that animates the subsequent suggestion that (having made this discovery), life could never again be the same. Good News brothers seek to realize this kind of radical before/after self-transformation in giving testimony, a narrative practice of self that works insofar as practitioners adopt a performative orientation to the words and stories that constitute testimonies. “The tongue has power,” Good News brothers remind each other, as a way of encouraging one another to deliver testimonies and to pay careful attention to the words that they craft as they do so. Good News brothers understand there to be a potent

and direct connection between stories about life and life itself; and the new life which, GNBB members suggest to their dinner guests, awaits them on the other side of the doors of their first meeting entails adopting this new, performative orientation to the relationship between narrating and living one's life.

The invitation into Good News brotherhood is, among other things, an invitation to begin cultivating a new kind of relationship to oneself. The suggestion that one's relationship to oneself could be otherwise is made more compelling, however, if it comes accompanied with the suggestion that one's relationship to the world is also otherwise from the one to which one has grown accustomed. This is the reason that the GNBB dinner invitation comes with a double suggestion: "God is not religion" and "as you step out of the doors of the restaurant this evening, your life will never again be the same." If you want to suggest to someone that the truth of the world that they inhabit is otherwise from that to which they have grown accustomed, the liberal separation of conscience from citizenship, private from public is a pretty good parameter to try to manipulate. What is more, the underlying problems of liberal separation—the inherent definitional problem that has the ironic tendency to politicize religion, and the hollowness of a publicless conscience or conscienceless citizenship—make it a relatively vulnerable target. And the two performative invitations coincide: if God is not religion, perhaps the "not-religious" everyday world is divine in a way to which I was hitherto blind; and if there is an untapped source of everyday divinity, of which I was hitherto unaware, perhaps my life *will* never again be the same? It is when that double-sided invitation truly lands and resonates with a dinner guest that a brother is born.

Thus, while the suggestion that "God is not religion" tends to resonate first of all for Good News brothers at the personal level of desires of self-transformation,<sup>11</sup> the proposition naturally leads the organization's members to question the relationship of their newfound conception of God to the lines of liberal separation, which divides public spaces and engagements of citizenship from private spaces and engagements of conscience. If it is "religion" that is confined to the realm of private conscience, cordoned off from public life, what about this newfound relationship with God that is insistently not "religion"?

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of the self-transformational dimensions, see HILL 2017, 2020.

That Good News brothers' experimentation with a God that is not religion would migrate from personal to public is natural, perhaps even inevitable, because it is the religion of liberal separation, from which they emphatically distinguish their relationship to God. A God that is confined to ritual prayer Sunday services, one that has no bearing or impact outside these cordoned-off conscience-designated spaces and times; this is the characterized account of "religion" that Good News brothers present in order to suggest that God could be otherwise. A God that is not religion is, therefore, potentially pertinent, potent, efficacious for the world as well as oneself, and so Good News brothers are naturally led to experiment with a God that is public as well as intimate. The same *powerful tongue* performative orientation to language that characterizes Good News brothers' narrative practice of testimonial self-transformation also animates their everyday experimentations with the lines of the liberal separation of private conscience from public citizenship. In both of these directions, "God is not religion" is deployed as a brash, brazen, performative declaration, laying insistent claim to the newfound personal relationship with God as a radical rupture in the unfolding of one's life and one that is applicable and pertinent to the public, politics, and local and national communities in heretofore-unimaginable ways.

GNBB has developed an organizational activity that is specifically aimed at collapsing the liberal separation of private conscience from public citizenship; brothers refer to these activities as "Eventos Xtrategicos (Strategy Events)." I first came to learn about Eventos Xtrategicos when I accompanied some Mexico City brothers to the training event in San Luis Potosí that I introduced in the opening section of the article. In general, Good News brothers insist that their activities are not religious: they consist of extending invitations into personal relationship with God, independent of any kind of institutional, doctrinal, ritual trappings, and messages of hope and the promise of self-transformation transmitted in the form of testimony. For the Evento Xtrategico, however, this basic essence of GNBB organizational vocation requires an additional layer of packaging, presentation, and pretext—hence the "strategic" character of the event. Eventos Xtrategicos are designed for places not just where there is likely to be some general resistance to, or preconceptions about, "religion," but where religion is explicitly forbidden. In Eventos Xtrategicos, brothers cannot rely simply on their bread-and-butter technique, giving testimony and extending invitations into personal relationship with God. Instead, they make appointments, in schools, businesses, police stations, and government offices, where they propose



to deliver a motivational talk on an agreed-upon theme, such as “Paradigms and Principles,” “Vision, Mission, and Goals,” “Teamwork,” “Dare to Be Different,” “Nine Habits of Highly Successful People.” They come with PowerPoint presentations and deliver these motivational talks, but still they look for every opportunity to infuse the talks with biblical principles and to make testimonial digressions, in which they recount before-and-after self-transformations, suggesting to the audience that things turned around for them with their participation in the Good News Businessmen’s Brotherhood.

One of the talks they propose, for example, is called “Nine Habits of Highly Successful People.” The presentation is a play on Stephen Covey’s popular self-help manual, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, but GNBB trade Covey’s seven self-empowering principles, like proactivity, visualizing success, cultivating a winning attitude, etc., for principles that are the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit, as they appear in Galatians [5: 22–23]: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Good News brothers do not mention anything about Galatians, the Bible, or the Holy Spirit as they convey to their audiences these “universal principles,” but having said a prayer in advance, they are confident that Holy Spiritual seeds will be planted in their listeners. And while brothers do not explicitly give testimony in these Xtrategicos presentations, they look for occasions to illustrate the principles by describing their own transformations in relationship to love, peace, joy, etc. since coming to know the Good News Businessmen’s Brotherhood. “It is true,” Roberto, Xtrategicos National Director, told us during the training session, “that we make these agreements to give these motivational talks and we have to deliver on these promises. Still, testimony remains our principle tool, this is what we know how to do, this is what we are good at, so we have to find ways to weave our testimonies into the presentations.”

For much of the rest of the daylong training session, Roberto invited other GNBB members with some Eventos Xtrategicos experience to share with us their observations and lessons learned. The message was optimistic. “Doors are opening, one after another, that have never been open to us before,” an Xtrategicos duo of women from a women’s chapter in the nearby city of San Luis Potosí told us. They had been targeting businesses in the area with talks such as “The Successful Woman (Mujer de Éxito),” although occasionally they would get phone calls from the people they were arranging appointments with who had done some internet browsing and seen some things on GNBB chapter

websites that raised religion alarms. The duo said they were always able to assuage the religion anxieties—“We’re not coming with Bibles, there is nothing religious in what we do...”—but the experiences, in their view, served as cautionary tales: make sure you and your chapters and everything you are presenting are not sending mixed signals, maintain the business profile, and do not fall into any kind of religiosity. Hector, Roberto’s brother and another Xtrategicos advocate, reiterated the “doors are opening” message, but with special emphasis on the erst-while barriers of liberal separation: “We are even beginning to enter government offices—police stations, governor’s offices, we even got an appointment with an office in Calderón’s administration.”<sup>12</sup> These kinds of places used to be difficult to access, they are ‘secular (*laico*),’ which supposedly means they have nothing to do with God. We know of course that you can be close to God and secular (*laico*).”<sup>13</sup>

Just a few weeks after returning from the San Luis Potosí training session, GNBB’s two Mexico City chapters hosted a week of intensive Eventos Xtrategicos. Brothers made 19 Xtrategicos appointments to deliver motivational talks at public schools, university campuses, the Secretary of Public Security (la Secretaria de Seguridad Publica), bank police stations (la Policía Bancaria), and a variety of different small businesses. According to the organizers’ Excel sheet tabulations, over the course of the week they delivered their message of hope and invitation into relationship with God, wrapped in particularly secular packaging, to 1030 people.

I was surprised by how little turbulence these words, that self-avowed secular motivational speakers were asking public-school students and public officials to repeat, tended to provoke. Sometimes I would see students exchange puzzled looks as they found themselves repeating these odd, cryptic, apparently prayerful words, and I heard stories about occasions where brothers had made an Xtrategicos appointment at a school and the teacher or director had angrily thrown them out once they realized that the cryptic salvation prayer and vague invitation into personal relationship with God were part of the presentation. Such stories, however, were the exception; they made for good dramatic stories for the brothers to recount, to remind one another of the stakes of their interventions and the importance of being very careful not to fall into

<sup>12</sup> This Xtrategicos training took place in March of 2012, during the last year of Calderón’s presidency.

<sup>13</sup> See HILL 2019 for further discussion of the different meanings that GNBB give to *laico*, the Spanish equivalent of secular, when they claim it for themselves.

“religiosity,” but they were the exceptions that proved an otherwise general rule of relative receptivity to, or at least passive tolerance of, GNBB’s attempts to make God public.<sup>14</sup>

Good News brothers’ Xtrategicos interventions were not always, however, without drama. To be sure they often were relatively uneventful—with mildly entertained audiences, semi-consciously repeating some words without seeming to give the whole thing a whole lot of consideration. Sometimes, however, their audiences seemed touched, moved by this band of peculiar businessmen, roaming around, volunteering their time and energy to distributing messages of hope in oftentimes rather bleak landscapes. Sometimes teachers, overwhelmed by classes they were having difficulty controlling and students with basic needs that stretched the school’s capacities, would express this kind of gratitude for the gesture, the attempt to contribute something to a situation that was indeed manifestly problematic. I regularly saw students visibly moved by the GNBB message, and on many occasions I saw students approach the stage at the talk’s conclusion and end up in tearful consultation with one of the Xtrategicos presenting Good News brothers there. Any kind of large-scale policy or legal enforcement effects on the liberal separation of private conscience from public citizenship in Mexico, in favor or against GNBB’s attempts to make God public, would be hard to find. The consequences that these kinds of interventions carry for the liberal separation of conscience from citizenship pertain above all to Good News brothers’ own experience of separation. In the context of a nation in crisis, the notion that personal relationship with God can be disconnected from “religion,” and thereby made publicly available and pertinent in a way that religion cannot, becomes a way of infusing meaning into ideas and engagements of public citizenship, and a sense of public import into affairs of the conscience, the intimate, personal relationships with God that brothers cultivate.

<sup>14</sup> This relatively unflustered openness to GNBB’s God-publicity efforts is most easily explained by the pervasiveness of some kind of cultural Christianity in Mexican everyday life. Eighty-three percent of the population are self-declared Catholics, 9.5% are evangelical or some other kind of Christian denomination, and less than 1% respectively are Jewish, Muslim, or any other kind of declared religion, while 6.5% are some kind of “religious none”

[2010 Mexican Census figures in DE LA TORRE and GUTIERIEZ 2014]. In such a pervasively Christian popular context, GNBB can issue invitations into personal relationship with God that transcend religious particulars, and de facto, this essentially means that they seek to transcend the particular differences, conflicts, divisions, doctrinal disaccords, and denominations in the broadly Christian universe.

*Conclusion*

Freemasons and GNBB are not alone in their experimentation with the category of religion. Recent years have seen a flourishing of different kinds of everyday experimentation with the category of religion throughout Europe and the Americas: the “spiritual but not religious” [Ammerman 2013; Fuller 2001]; “religious nones” [Beyer 2012; Burge 2021; Gauthier 2020]; “seekers” [Hervieu-Léger 1999; Wuthnow 1998]; “inner-self” believers [Bellah *et al.* 1985; Bender 2010]; “religionless” Christians [Bielo 2009; Hill 2019; Sullivan 2009]; “secular” purveyors of mindfulness practices [Kucinskas 2014]; atheistic religion activists [Dowdy 2018]; and “reactionary and secularized version(s) of white Christian nationalism” [Gorski 2020: 112]. Why is there such proliferation of everyday experimentation with—and often, of distancing from—the category of religion?

Over the course of this article, I have presented evidence from two cases of everyday experimentation with the category of religion to suggest that this kind of experimentation is partly a response to problems to which liberalism is susceptible. The founding principle of liberal modes of governance is the separation of private ethical engagements from public civic ones. While this is a good practical solution for governing ethically diverse communities, the solution comes with its own set of problems: it tends to leave subjects vulnerable to feelings that their ethical commitments have little public bearing and that their public engagements are divorced from their guiding moral principles. Because “religion” is the category of engagement that is typically kept separate from politics, disavowing the category allows organizations to experiment with otherwise impossible connections between conscience and citizenship. These problems, and the disavowal of religion as a means of experimenting with them, are as old as liberalism itself, as evidenced by Freemasonry, an organization that was born in the gap between the liberal separation of conscience from citizenship.

Some of the ongoing popular experimentation with the category of religion is, therefore, the product of the inevitable problems of liberal separation and the everyday negotiations that they inspire, negotiations that are usually not directly hostile to liberal separation. These are the everyday negotiations that seek not to upend or collapse the terms of liberal separation of conscience from citizenship, but seek rather to accommodate, even defend some of the lines of separation of conscience from citizenship, public from private, politics from religion, while still

seeking out indirect channels of communication therebetween. Freemasons have been doing this kind of indirect negotiation of the problems associated with liberal separation since their origin, but they are not alone in this. These days practitioners of yoga, mindfulness, reiki, and other types of self-proclaimed “spirituality” often disavow the category of religion in an attempt to keep the ethical parameters of participation wide open while still providing meaningful content to engagements of conscience and offering some kind of connection to engagements of citizenship [Ammerman 2013; Bender 2010; Fuller 2001; Kucinskas 2014].<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, a combination of contemporary trends renders the problems of ethical seclusion and civic emptiness more visible, increasing interests and opportunities for so-inclined actors to experiment with them. The general erosion of public trust in the institutions and promises of both religion and liberal democracy leaves the subjects of these communities vulnerable on both sides of the conscience/citizenship divide, doubly vulnerable in terms of subjective meaningful experience and in terms of objective legitimacy of governance. The ideological bases of liberalism, progressive economic development, and progressive democratic expansion, which give an implicit meaningful buttress to engagements of citizenship, are losing credibility. And “religion,” the category that liberal democracies have used to delimit the jurisdiction of matters of private conscience and separate them from matters of public politics, is less and less a given category of everyday experience or legal classification, such that determining what counts as “religion” so that it can be separated from politics is, ironically, an increasingly politicizing process. GNBB’s “God is not religion” disavowal of religion and their embrace of the category of the secular as a means of stepping around the lines separating church from state are a more contemporary means of everyday experimentation with the category of religion. They are a response to the double-sided crisis of popular faith, the decline in trust and participation in the institutions of religion and liberal democracy. Again, though, Good News brothers are not alone in these kinds of endeavors. GNBB’s “God is not religion” is part of a broader divine-personal-relationship-emphasizing, sometimes religion-disavowing evangelical landscape [Bielo 2009; Luhrmann 2012; Moore 2017]. Furthermore, GNBB’s

<sup>15</sup> Marianne Williamson’s two bids for the Democratic nomination of President are illustrative examples of how not-religious

“spirituality” can simultaneously defend the conscience/citizenship separation, while also offering means of indirect connection.

religion-disavowing and secularism-embracing tactics for accessing public spaces, audiences, and officials are akin to recent American Christian nationalist attempts to cross the wires of religion and politics [Gorski and Perry 2022; Hochschild 2016b; Whitehead and Perry 2020].

While GNBB and Christian nationalists are intervening in the same problem as Freemasons and yoga, mindfulness, and other practitioners of not-religious spirituality, all of them disavowing religion as a means of experimenting with conscience–citizenship configurations, the two kinds of experimentation are obviously very different. Freemasons—and probably most of their spiritual-but-not-religious kin—are liberals; they defend the separation of conscience from citizenship. But they also recognize the problems to which the separation is subject, and so they seek means—symbolism and secrecy in the case of Freemasonry—to offer some subterranean tunnels of communication between conscience and citizenship while still defending the basic terms of their separation. Good News brothers—and contemporary American Christian nationalists—do not seek to defend liberal separation as they experiment with it in this way. Their disavowal of the category of religion is a rejection of liberal separation, an attempt to collapse conscience and citizenship, public and private, politics and religion. In this article I have argued that Freemasons’—and their spiritual-but-not-religious kinfolk’s—disavowal of religion is a response to age-old inherent problems of cloistered conscience and hollow citizenship associated with liberal separation, while GNBB—and other kinds of Christian nationalism—are responding to a more contemporary crisis of popular faith in institutions of conventional religion and in liberal democracy that exacerbates these inherent problems. Insofar as this double-sided crisis of popular faith continues apace, a pressing question presents itself: can something of the Masonic sort, something that defends liberal separation while also intervening in the problems to which it is vulnerable—can something like this be mobilized in response to the growing popular mistrust in the institutions of conventional religion and liberal democracy? Or can only projects of the Christian nationalist sort, those that collapse the terms of liberal separation—conscience/citizenship, public/private, politics/religion—respond to feelings of cloistered conscience and hollow citizenship once these feelings are significantly exacerbated by declining faith and participation in the institutions of religion and liberal democracy?

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