

Religion and the Occupy Wall Street movement

2015, Vol. 3(2) 127–147

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DOI: 10.1177/2050303215593151

crr.sagepub.com**Emily B Campbell**

City University of New York, Graduate Center, USA

John Torpey

City University of New York, Graduate Center, USA

Bryan S Turner

City University of New York, Graduate Center, USA and Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

The Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 and its corollaries, Occupy Sandy and Occupy Debt, have been largely understood as secular movements. In spite of this, religious actors not only participated, but in some cases played an integral role within the movement, lending material support, organizing expertise, and public statements of support. We rely on interviews with faith leaders (N = 13) in New York and Oakland, and engage in an analysis of print and online media to explore the role of religious actors and groups in Occupy Wall Street. Religious participants were often long-time veterans of progressive political struggles and drew inspiration from their faith traditions. Nonetheless, religious commitments were secondary to political objectives shared by themselves and their secular counterparts. Religious leaders believed they offered symbolic authority to the movement and highlighted this in their engagement in the hope of giving it greater moral weight. Current discussions on postsecularism and public religions are considered.

Keywords

Occupy Wall Street, postsecular society, public religions, social movements

Introduction

At first glance, it may appear that the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movements are typical products of a secular protest culture. The initial demands of the movement, which had its

Corresponding author:

Emily B Campbell, City University of New York, Graduate Center, 365 5th Ave, Room 6112.04, New York, NY 10016, USA.

Email: ecampbell2@gradcenter.cuny.edu

origins in an occupation of New York's Zuccotti Park, concerned the recent and ongoing economic crisis, growing inequality, and the perceived unfairness of the American economic system. Other concerns soon emerged, and these had to do with a variety of preoccupations of the contemporary left: global warming, gender and racial equality, unprecedented rates of incarceration—especially for people of color, and the like. Mainly comprising white youth, the movement appeared to be another instance of the 1960s maxim that “freedom is an endless meeting.” There did not seem to be anything particularly religious about the movement, as compared, say, to the Catholic antiwar activists who once spattered blood on missiles to protest against nuclear arms or to the “Nuns on the Bus,” one of whom had an opportunity to address the Democratic National Convention that nominated Barack Obama to run for a second term as president.¹

Yet, from the very beginning, religious people, institutions, and concerns constituted a significant part of the Occupy movement. Churches provided food and shelter to those involved. Religiously motivated groups participated in protest demonstrations and other actions. Clergy people encouraged their congregations to get involved in the movement. Prayer circles sprang up in the heart of a seemingly secular protest subculture. Just as many others adopted the “Occupy” label, a group of religious people gathered under the rubric “Occupy Faith,” and activists affiliated with the Occupy movement took up a position within a number of different faith communities.

Occupy Faith and the religious actors of OWS raise broader questions regarding the relationship between religion and the left, and more broadly concerning the notions of postsecularism and civil religion. The place of religion in the American public sphere has been addressed in a number of important studies over a considerable period of time. Alexis de Tocqueville (2000: 280) argued nearly 200 years ago that religion is central to Americans' political lives and, indeed, constituted the “first of their political institutions.” Robert Bellah (1992: 179) identified a “civil religion” at the heart of American life and argued that “most of what is good and most of what is bad in our history is rooted in our public theology.” Against the then-reigning “secularization thesis” in sociology, Jose Casanova (1994) argued that religion had a major role in the American political order and was indeed far from disappearing elsewhere, even if the process of institutional differentiation between church and state had progressed rather widely. More recently, Putnam and Campbell (2010) have sought to demonstrate that religion continues to be central to our national life, although its political instrumentalization by the Religious Right has turned many young people off, leading to a significant rise in agnosticism and in the numbers of the so-called religious nones in recent years.

Against this background, what role has religion played in the Occupy movement in the United States? Given the frequently religious inspiration and self-understanding of reform movements in American history, where does this movement fit into that tradition? And what might the answers to these questions tell us about the broader place of religion in politics and social life in the contemporary United States? In order to address the place of religion in the Occupy movements, we draw on information gathered from print and online media sources and interviews with faith leaders as well as attendance at a number of Occupy Faith meetings.

We conducted a total of thirteen interviews with religious leaders during the summer of 2012. These faith leaders were all substantially involved in the protests in both New York and the San Francisco Bay Area. We contacted faith leaders mentioned in the press directly and then used a snowball sampling method to identify other interview partners in their networks. The sample was composed of eleven men and two women, eight persons in the

Protestant tradition—mainline, Baptist, and Methodist, two Unitarian Universalists, two reformed Jews, and one Franciscan Catholic. Our sample was majority white, with two African-American men, and one Asian-American woman. The semistructured interviews ranged between 45 minutes and 3 hours in duration, depending on the interviewee's availability. We sought to understand the extent of the contribution made by them, and their respective communities, and organizations to the Occupy movement, as well as their own personal reasons for involvement with the movement. The empirical section profiles the religious contributions to the life of the Occupy Wall Street movements in New York City and Oakland, drawing on information from our interviews as well as from press-based accounts.

Historical context

In order to understand the religious dimensions of OWS satisfactorily, we need to place the movement in the broader historical context of the involvement of religious groups in American social reform movements. Michael Young (2006) has argued that social movements in the United States originated specifically in the milieu, and in response to the moral demands, of early nineteenth-century evangelical Protestantism. First, in the antebellum period, sectarian Protestants played a critical role in opposition to slavery. Puritans acquiesced only hesitantly in the acceptance of slavery in the Constitution (Jordan, 1968: 300). Later, the abolitionist movement drew some of its most prominent representatives from among devout Protestant believers such as Salmon P. Chase, Theodore Weld, and William Lloyd Garrison (Foner, 1970: 78–79, 109–110). And, of course, Abraham Lincoln drew on a deep well of Biblical rhetoric when discussing slavery and the nation's fate.

Later, the movement to outlaw alcohol that ultimately became law after the First World War was spearheaded by the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League, both of which, to a large degree, were religiously inspired (Gusfield, 1986). These were "progressive" movements in their day, closely tied—through the association of drink and domestic violence—to the movement for women's suffrage (Keyssar, 2000: 194). Finally, as is well known, the black churches were the organizational backbone of the civil rights movement in the United States. Interracial coalitions with white religious activists were another crucial feature of the movement (Fredrickson, 1995: 261–262).

The abolitionist, temperance, and civil rights movements were driven disproportionately by adherents of Protestant denominations. But the demand for social and economic justice has been more prominent in the work of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, especially among migrant communities. Notwithstanding its "Progressive" characteristics, the heavily Protestant temperance movement was extensively directed against the supposedly licentious habits of many Catholic immigrant groups, especially the Irish and Italians, who were regarded as undesirable elements by the Protestant establishment of the day. Later, in the postwar period, with the large-scale entry into the country of Mexicans and other Latinos, Catholic churches came to the aid of communicants from a different part of the world than had previously been the case. Many of these in the 1960s were agricultural workers who would come to constitute the chief recruiting ground for the United Farmworkers of America (UFWA). The union's strongly Catholic orientation can be seen in UFWA founder Cesar Chavez's "Prayer of the Farm Workers' Struggle."² In keeping with this tradition of Catholic social teaching, a quarter of a century before the emergence of the OWS movements, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a "pastoral letter" on the American economy in the wake of what was then the most severe recession since the

Great Depression (unemployment peaked in late 1982 at 10.8%).³ In that document, *Economic Justice for All* (1986), the bishops reaffirmed the Church's "preferential option for the poor," emphasizing that "human dignity" is the yardstick by which to measure the performance of any economic system. The bishops' pastoral letter on the economy was the most significant recent statement about the American economy by a major faith organization, offering extensive proposals for creating a just economic system in the United States and around the world. Notwithstanding his conservative stance on a host of other issues facing the Catholic Church, Pope Benedict XVI (2012) reiterated its basic outlook in his 2012 Christmas message:

Christians fight poverty out of a recognition of the supreme dignity of every human being, created in God's image and destined for eternal life. They work for more equitable sharing of the earth's resources out of a belief that – as stewards of God's creation – we have a duty to care for the weakest and most vulnerable. . . . The belief in the transcendent destiny of every human being gives urgency to the task of promoting peace and justice for all.

Since the 1960s, the political center of gravity in the United States has shifted sharply to the right along with it the public face of religion. What Gary Wills (2007) called "The Great Religious Truce" of the 1940s and 1950s was shattered in the 1960s with the "rights revolution," when the churches were forced to take sides on or were divided by the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the loosening of sexual mores, the Vietnam War and, eventually, the question of gay rights. The growth of the Moral Majority was a counter-attack against the public embrace of these movements. Although much of the fervor on the religious right has been traced to the Supreme Court's striking down of school prayer in the early 1960s,⁴ the white evangelical churches also began to engage in political battles over legal changes to marriage and divorce, abortion, homosexuality, the teaching of evolutionism in schools, and the treatment of and response to the spread of HIV/AIDS (Putnam and Campbell, 2010: 114–120). Although Jimmy Carter publicly identified himself as a born-again Christian, the Religious Right became significantly involved in national politics only with the advent of the Reagan administration in 1980, and found at least rhetorical support more recently during the presidency of George W. Bush, a self-proclaimed born-again Christian.

The shift toward political conservatism since the late 1970s has caused a backlash against those religious groups that have been associated with it and against religion in the United States more generally. According to Putnam and Campbell (2010: 129–130), it has been the conservative politics of the Religious Right—and especially their opposition to homosexuality—that have strengthened the tendency of many younger people to declare themselves unaffiliated with any religious tradition. The notion that religion is once more a force in the public sphere is a common refrain within mainstream sociology of religion (Clarke, 2009: 6), and yet in the United States virtually all of the battles associated with the Moral Majority (abortion, homosexuality, or evolutionary theory in school curricula) are being lost. Perhaps the most dramatic example is the growing agreement between Democrats and Republicans to support same-sex marriage in the name of equal rights, despite widespread opposition from conservative Baptists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians. The churches appear to be increasingly irrelevant to these debates regarding the future of marriage. Indeed, the Republican Party after the presidential election defeat of 2012 has focused exclusively on taxation and not on religion or morals (Stevenson, 2013). The number of so-called religious nones has continued to grow, so that it has now come to characterize nearly one in five

Americans—a stunning increase in recent years, with white Protestant denominations, both “mainline” and evangelical, hemorrhaging the fastest. At the same time, religious people of a more liberal bent have made a stronger effort to claim the public sphere for themselves (see, e.g. Dionne, 2008).

Since the 1980s, the United States has seen increased partisanship in terms of religiosity—what Putnam and Campbell term the “God gap.” This is most true for the children of the Baby Boomers—whose religiosity is more likely to predict Republicanism than it would be for their parents (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). This is relatively predictable for the generation born during the Reagan era. With the “God gap” in mind, one would anticipate that the Occupy movement, in its core comprised millennials with radical and anarchist leanings, would have few if any, religious sympathies. Millennials are quicker to associate religion with conservatism than are prior generations, potentially stymieing explicitly religiously oriented political messages outside the conservative milieu.

In addition, given the comparatively limited public welfare state in the United States (Hacker, 2002), the churches have traditionally played a substantial part in the provision of social services. The United States, as Backström and Davie (2010: 194) have noted, emerged from “a revolution built through religion rather than against it,” and has thus “resisted rather than encouraged the development of a welfare state in the sense that this is understood in Europe.” As a result, religious institutions themselves provide extensive social services, sometimes publicly funded, and thus constitute a major part of the system of welfare as it actually operates in the country, even if the extent to which this is the case has varied over time. Despite the much-noted constitutional separation of church and state, American public life is suffused with religion in a manner that—as Max Weber noted a century ago—would be embarrassing to a Western European. The importance and effectiveness of church involvement in public life may have less to do with their specific beliefs and values, however, and more to do with their institutional capacity and readymade social solidarity they typically bring to public issues. Churches are by definition organized, whereas social movements, at least in their formation, are often relatively disorganized and fragmented. Against this background of extensive religious involvement in and support for social reform in the United States, what is the relationship between religion and the OWS movements?

Occupy Wall Street and progressive religious claims in the public sphere

We, the people of faith communities throughout New York and the United States, stand with Occupy Wall Street, for here we see the promise of democracy renewed.

Our spiritual traditions are clear: the impoverishment of the many for the benefit of the few destroys us all. The cries of our people are clear: the American dream is compromised; the moveable middle is slipping away; and in our politics, all fairness is lost. The Soul of this Great Nation is in danger, threatened by the false idols.

So together we affirm the golden rule: treat our neighbors as ourselves. We commit ourselves to the restoration of justice in our economy, and compassion in our politics; that together we might behold a revolution of values for all our people. We ask all Americans to join us in this prayer, that once again our country might be a hope, and a dream, and a promise for all who reach its shores.—Faith Leaders Statement in Support of OWS⁵

The OWS protests, which started on 17 September 2011 in New York’s Zuccotti Park, quickly spread across the country and to some extent around the world. OWS is considered

part of a range of broader international protest movements that emerged in 2011 with the Arab Spring and the Spanish *Indignados*' M-15 protests. The momentum of global unrest, notably demonstrated in the Global Day of Rage on 15 October 2011, saw protests in a total of 950 cities in 82 countries worldwide (Taylor, 2011).

Observers of the Occupy protests have pointed out that, aside from the protesters themselves, the media and the police were the most visible players in bolstering the movement (Calhoun, 2013)—a dynamic that inspired attention far beyond Zuccotti Park. Often, heavy-handed police forces inadvertently brought further sympathy to the pacifist protester-citizen and the movement as a whole. Because of this triadic public dance, the activists were engaged in a public theatre of sorts with social media attracting mainstream media attention as well. The tactic of occupation was central both to the movement's success and to its rapid demise, as evictions brought an end to the theatre and public dialog and in many ways marked the "death" of the original iteration of the protests (Calhoun, 2013; Gitlin, 2012). With the centrality of place and the tactic of occupation in mind, we have divided our analysis into three parts. We discuss first Zuccotti Park, in New York's financial district, which was the birthplace of the movement. We then examine Occupy Oakland, one of the most visibly radical sites of occupation in the fall of 2011. Lastly, we discuss symbolic actions by faith actors on and between both coasts.

Religious groups were present from the very beginning of the protests in New York City. During the physical occupation of the park, a "Sacred Space" emerged that hosted a diverse range of religious and spiritual symbols and functioned as an area for prayer and meditation related to the protest and its mission (Faith World, 2011). An Interfaith prayer service soon became a weekly tradition on Sundays as well. The daily needs of the occupation, especially food preparation and distribution, were often done off-site at various church locations. During our interviews, faith leaders explained that their congregations had years of experience with this kind of support, as aid to the homeless people of New York City is part of their ongoing ministry efforts.

Faith leaders, most dressed in clergy attire, and their supporters took part in the recurring action of the marching of a golden calf named "Greed," meant to mock the "Charging Bull" statue on Broadway near Wall Street (Fiedler, 2011; Kennedy, 2011; Richardson, 2011; Schaper, 2011). Shortly after this action, the interfaith dimension of the protests drew national press coverage (Conde, 2012; PBS, 2011). Chaplains from the liberal Protestant Union Theological Seminary were present in Zuccotti Park on a regular basis, joining in the protest actions as well as offering spiritual support to the protesters (Mahlberg, 2012). Public meditation, intended to bring a peaceful atmosphere to the protests, was organized at Occupy sites in New York City, Santa Fe, NM, Montpelier, VT, Oakland, Washington D.C., and Portland, OR (Wildmind, 2011).

In October 2011, a petition was created online for faith leaders and people of faith by the Episcopalian Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan, in collaboration with "Groundswell," a multifaith action network affiliated with Auburn Seminary of New York City. The petition gathered over 1400 signatures in support of Occupy Wall Street and was read publicly during an interfaith service on 7 December 2011 (Occupy Faith NYC, 2011). The text of the petition was later adopted as the official statement of Occupy Faith New York, the interfaith group within Occupy.

Religious holidays were observed and celebrated at Zuccotti Park. Jews celebrated the Kol Nidre prayer service, a tradition that is observed the evening before Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). On Yom Kippur, sister services were observed at Occupy sites in

Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and Chicago (Reisner, 2011); activist Jews sought to “Occupy Rosh Hashanah” (OccupyJudaism, 2012; Waskow, 2012a); and there were shared Passover and Easter celebrations in New York, Oakland, and Quebec (JCCET, 2012; KolotChayeyinu, 2012).

In addition to interfaith collaboration concerning issues of economic justice, religiously motivated Occupiers addressed more specialized topics as well. For example, a Muslim Friday prayer service in New York City was followed by a march in protest of NYPD’s spying on the Muslim community (Barnard, 2011; Finchannel.com, 2011). By the time the protesters were evicted from Zuccotti Park on 15 November 2011, local churches were so involved that they opened their doors to the protesters and provided shelter to movement activists for extended periods. Among them were Judson Memorial Church, affiliate of both American Baptist Churches and United Church of Christ, Middle Collegiate Church, an ecumenical church affiliated with the Reformed Church in America, Park Slope United Methodist Church, the interdenominational Riverside Church, and St. Paul and St. Andrew United Methodist Church. In some instances, church members welcomed protesters into their own homes as well (Kuhn, 2011; News12, 2012; Otterman, 2011; Zimmy and Liddy, 2011).

Despite the apparent multifaceted involvement of religious actors in Occupy Wall Street New York, religiously motivated support was not universal or without controversy. The most noteworthy conflict played out between (Episcopalian) Trinity Church of lower Manhattan and the movement itself. Trinity Church, just a few blocks from the New York Stock Exchange, initially offered their support to the burgeoning OWS movement during its two-month encampment. This assistance included offering pastoral services, meeting spaces, bathrooms, and blankets. However, after the eviction from Zuccotti Park, organizers approached the church requesting use of an empty lot on their property, Duarte Square, to relocate the occupation. Church officials denied their request, citing health concerns, a rhetoric that echoed Mayor Bloomberg’s justification for the clearing of Zuccotti Park (Flegenheimer, 2011). The standoff came to a head when on 17 December 2011, a group of hundreds of protesters attempted to occupy the space. Retired Bishop George Packard, who previously had served as an Army chaplain in Iraq, was arrested for trespassing along with 49 other activists (Deluca and Moore, 2011; Stebner, 2011). The action led to the trial and conviction of eight activists, including Packard, and the sentencing of one man, Mark Adams, to a 45-day jail sentence in June 2012 (Pinto, 2012). Some members of Occupy Faith, such as Rev. John Merz of Church of the Ascension in Greenpoint, Brooklyn and Rev. Michael Ellick of the liberal Judson Memorial Church, an “Open and Affirming” member of the United Church of Christ, publicly condemned Trinity’s stance. The controversy drew so much attention that even South Africa’s Archbishop Desmond Tutu weighed in, supporting the Occupiers. Nonetheless, other members of Occupy Faith mentioned in our interviews that they felt Trinity was the wrong target and that the whole episode served to distract from the larger goal of drawing attention to economic inequality.⁶ Trinity Church is the wealthiest church in New York City—one of the largest landowners in Manhattan—and this may have affected its stance on the occupation.

On 15 November 2012, Occupy Faith NYC launched the fund-raising effort “Rolling Jubilee” as part of Strike Debt, an Occupy campaign calling on people to buy their own neighbors out of debt (Kaminer, 2012). This is a nationally coordinated effort to buy debt for pennies on the dollar, just as debt collectors might do, but instead of collecting, the buyers simply relinquish the debt. Before the public launch, Rev. Michael Ellick (2012) explained that the goal was to turn debt and economics into a moral issue. Both Strike

Debt and the Rolling Jubilee have been extraordinarily successful. As of 13 February 2015, Rolling Jubilee had raised \$701,317 and abolished over 14.7 million dollars of debt. The campaign makes explicit links to Jubilee's roots in the Abrahamic religions.⁷ They have also published the "Debt Resisters Operations Manual," which explains debt in lay-person's terms as well as debt's place in national and global politics.⁸

Oakland: Faith in a radical space

Turning our attention to the West Coast, faith communities in the Bay Area were much involved in the Occupy movement (Arlyck, 2012; Beaudoin, 2012). The presence of the Interfaith Tent at Oakland (IFTO) at the encampment of protesters was a prominent force and had a sustained daily presence for the duration of both parts of the occupation at Frank Ogawa Plaza, renamed Oscar Grant Plaza by the protesters in honor of a young, unarmed African American man who was fatally shot in the back at point blank range by a BART transit police officer in Oakland in the early morning hours of New Year's Day 2009 (Grady, 2011; Occupy Faith Oakland, 2012; Park, 2011). True to its name, the Interfaith Tent counts among its members Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Hindus, Buddhists, and self-described pagans (Blanton, 2011). The Occupy Faith National meeting held in Berkeley, CA, in March 2012 drew faith leaders from across the country for a discussion of future directions for the religious groups participating in OWS.

Interfaith activists were a noted part of the OWS community in Oakland and in their daily activities and sustenance while living on the plaza. Speaking to the diversity of contributions, the *Tikkun* blog noted that

meditation, counseling, nonviolence training, singing, dancing, sharing food and clothing with those who needed them, creating posters – "Remember MLK, radical nonviolence . . ." "Peace creates kindness creates peace," "Occupy the Present," and "Occupy Your Own Heart with Love and Compassion" – were all Occupy Faith activities (Kurth, 2012).

They also worked behind the scenes with the Mayor of Oakland to ensure that homeless persons had a place to stay after eviction from the encampment. In the spring, IFTO held a "Worship Service on the Plaza," which served as a "safe space" for people who had previously been arrested and given "stay-away" orders.

One of the most visible faith leaders of IFTO has been Rev. Rita Nakashima-Brock of the Disciples of Christ. An activist since becoming involved with the "Free Speech" movement in 1963 as an undergraduate at Berkeley, Brock is a feminist and liberation theologian, and cofounder of "Faith Voices for the Common Good." Speaking to the group's mentality, she explained,

we had not tried to push anything religious, but rather be the spiritual piece that held the moral part of the movement for justice. We don't see ourselves as 100% meshed with Occupy Oakland, but rather serving the movement in a particular way (Brock, 2012a).

Another veteran activist who lent support is Father Louis Vitale, a Franciscan monk who turned to faith and pacifism after a traumatic experience as a fighter pilot in the Korean War. He has been involved in protest activities since the late 1960s and has served multiple jail sentences for his involvement in the antinuclear movement. Explaining his personal convictions, Vitale (2012) remarked, "we are all followers of Gandhi and King. Even Gandhi said that the greatest pacifist message ever written was the Sermon on the Mount."

Occupy Oakland was the only Occupy movement that did not explicitly adopt a non-violent stance and as such had an ongoing discussion regarding “diversity of tactics.” This led to conflict among the faith leaders, causing some to choose to leave the group because of it. Those who stayed saw the radical element as a feature of the Oakland sociopolitical landscape that was not likely to change and preferred to offer their solidarity and bolster support for the use of nonviolent protest tactics. IFTO hosted a press conference on Veterans Day 2011 about nonviolence and also led several nonviolence-training workshops. The near fatal injury of Iraq veteran Scott Olsen during a protest on 25 October 2011 was a galvanizing point for the IFTO, at which time they began to organize around the issue of police brutality (Kurth, 2012). The IFTO participated in the public hearing of “The Police Review Board” and presented a 1 h presentation demonstrating the persistent violation of predetermined conduct agreements on crowd control on the part of the police. The presentation was eventually given at City Hall as well. Further, during “Speak-out times” at the General Assembly (the meeting of all involved in Occupy activities), the IFTO provided a chaplain to offer counsel to those suffering from posttrauma related to police abuse and brutality. Reverend Kurt Kuhwald (2012) asserted his belief that the IFTO had a mitigating effect on some of the violent elements through its support of a nonviolent position.

Long-time leftist activist Rabbi Michael Lerner had a divergent opinion on the matter that eventually caused him to leave the group. *Tikkun* magazine, the progressive faith periodical of Berkeley, CA, founded by Lerner, quickly became involved through endorsement of the General Strike and set up a *Tikkun* tent on the Plaza, along with the Network of Spiritual Progressives, also created by Lerner. He and others in the Network saw Occupy as an opportunity to shift the discourse and come together with people in order to reimagine society. However, Lerner’s unwavering commitment to nonviolence was a stumbling block. He explained that Occupy’s adherence to a “diversity of tactics” allowed the entrée of a violent element into the movement and permitted provocateurs to embolden the most radical elements of Occupy. Violence in the movement, according to Lerner, shifted the discussion away from the problems of economic inequality and the 1% and toward a public discourse concerning the destruction of public and private property (e.g. window smashing at Whole Foods) and the use of taxpayer money to police the crowd, among other things. This issue was so prominent that it led the Jewish Occupy Oakland to change its name to Occupy Bay Area Jewish Contingent, distancing itself from Oakland and the violence taking place there (Lerner, 2012).

The IFTO gained growing attention after many of its members were arrested during a police-led eviction of the camp (Bates Deakin, 2011; Loftis, 2011; Rose, 2011). During the eviction, members of the IFTO built a circle of candles with all persons facing inward, refused to move, and were then arrested. The arrests led to further recognition of the IFTO’s contributions by the protesters. Rev. Kurt Kuhwald, a minister in the reliably liberal Unitarian Universalist church, explained, “after that we had a lot of street cred” (Kuhwald, 2012). Echoing this sentiment, Rev. Rita Nakashima Brock revealed, “the greatest compliment these people can pay anyone is to say, ‘They are f’ing awesome’; we got three of those” (Brock, 2012a).

The Interfaith Tent continued to work, postencampment, most visibly on the Alan Blueford case (Brock, 2012a; OccupyAdmin, 2012). Alan Blueford, a seventeen-year-old African American man, was shot fatally in the back by Oakland Police on 6 May 2012. The details surrounding the shooting have been shrouded in confusion, leading to public outcry and comparisons to the Oscar Grant and Trayvon Martin cases.⁹ The Blueford family

approached members of the IFTO for support. Emboldened to help, faith leaders have called for a full investigation into the shooting, and the IFTO has been involved in organizing public marches and a letter-writing campaign in the hope of turning it into a national *cause célèbre* against police brutality and violence.

Engaging the national stage: Public statements and stirring dialog

Just as religious elements were present in the Occupiers' actions and words, their ideas, in turn, echoed in the religious communities from which they came. Members of faith communities stimulated liturgy and dialog concerning the economic issues raised by Occupy. Engaging in a national dialog, various faith-based publications linked the spirit of the protests to their own religious traditions, adopting labels such as "Not So Secular, Jews OWS" (Philp, 2011), "On Jewish Faith and Action" (Waskow, 2012b), "OWS Islam Stands for Social Justice" (Gabbay, 2011), and "Muhammad is the 99%" (Danios, 2012). One of Occupy Catholicism's most vocal participants, Father Paul Mayer, wrote in *The Huffington Post* in support of the protests and further actions that had resulted in arrests (Mayer, 2011). Citing the long-standing tradition of religiously motivated political dissent, Mayer wrote,

[T]here is a tradition of nonviolent direct action reaching back to the Boston Tea Party, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and even Jesus. This tradition continues today with people – especially our youth – willing to break a human law as a way of obeying a higher law of "justice for all" or the sanctity of the earth.

Tikkun published an entire special issue on Occupy and Faith that included an exhortation to "Occupy Passover Seders and Easter Gatherings" by long-time liberal activist Rabbi Michael Lerner, linking relevant stories from the Abrahamic traditions to present financial inequality (Lerner, 2012). Individual denominations also made public statements concerning the Occupy movement. For example, the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church passed a resolution in support of "peaceful protests in public spaces in the United States and throughout the world in resistance to the exploitation of people for profit or power." The liberal United Church of Christ's Collegium of Officers also declared the Occupy Movement "a reminder that thoughtful, faithful, and committed people can make a difference when voices are united for the common good" (Gryboski, 2011).

A national group, the National Council of Elders,¹⁰ self-described veterans of a variety of late twentieth-century social justice movements, were involved in actions on the ground at a variety of Occupy sites, as well as through press release statements. On the ground, a national day of solidarity was declared by the Council on 20 November 2011. The action involved a litany and singing and was held simultaneously in New York, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., San Francisco, and Oakland. Recalling the day in Oakland, a veteran of the Civil Rights movement and current Interfaith Director of the East Bay Housing Organization, Reverend Phillip Lawson, described the experience as wholly uplifting and very positive, noting the warm reception the group received from the Occupiers (Lawson, 2012).

The Council released a statement of solidarity with OWS as well as the Greensborough Declaration, a broader statement of their views that resonated with the demands of OWS in the summer of 2012 (Council of Elders, 2012; Meeks, 2012). The Declaration states: "we are grateful for the newly emerging movements of young people. We applaud, support, and join

them in our mutual struggle for justice and human rights.” A dozen bullet points follow, highlighting concrete cases of political, economic, and social concern such as the “Citizens United” Supreme Court decision, the current gridlock in Congress, student debt, burgeoning unemployment, the seeming impunity of bankers, and the financial system, and the prison-industrial complex’s staggering rates of incarceration of people of color.

Posteviction, forums and publications within and outside faith communities sought to keep momentum of the now displaced movement. For example, the venerable icon of liberal Protestantism, Riverside Church on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, in January 2012 hosted a panel titled “Occupy the Mind: A Progressive Moral Agenda for the 21st Century” (Riverside, 2012). Occupy Faith New York released multiple statements, in print as well as in video on Youtube, publicizing their views on Occupy-related issues. For example, the Youtube video, “Faith Leaders Demand a Moral Budget for New York,” published on 6 June 2012 was released in tandem with protest and letter-writing activities. Occupy Faith New York has had a continuous presence on various local issues (Oder, 2012). For example, the group had a notable presence during the May Day protests (Arlyck, 2012; Hallowell, 2012a; Sheridan, 2012b). They were also involved in the “S-17” (i.e. September 17) protest events marking a year since the original occupation of Zuccotti Park (Bellafante, 2012; Hallowell, 2012b; Packard, 2012).

The nature of the religious contribution

In summary, the Occupy Faith communities in New York and Oakland made varied and sustained contributions to their respective movements. During the initial encampment and after eviction from Zuccotti Park, Occupy Faith New York contributed to OWS through food distribution trainings for activists, participation in marches, public statements, and the pivotal provision of shelter to activists posteviction. They helped to draw outside attention and support, notably through efforts with the Council of Elders and later with Strike Debt and the Rolling Jubilee. During the occupations of Oscar Grant Plaza in Oakland, the IFTO was a constant presence and always had at least one member present. They participated in the daily life of the encampment and in concurrent protest actions, which culminated in their arrests during the second eviction as an act of civil disobedience. They also offered leadership through nonviolent trainings and by coordinating with public officials in response to charges of police brutality. They continue to do grassroots organizing posteviction, focused especially on the Alan Blueford case. In our interviews with faith leaders, all offered systemic critiques of capitalism and expressed a desire to reframe economic inequality as a moral issue. In keeping with this common sentiment, Reverend Michael Ellick (2012) commented, “marching is meaningless unless we change the public conversation.”

For veterans of social movements, as the majority of our interviewees were, many understood that the movement of the day may come and go, but their commitment to social justice causes remained resolute with or without the numbers and press coverage. For example, Judson Memorial Church had been working on economic justice since long before the current recession. As Rev. Schaper (2012) explained,

when it looked like people wanted to do something about the issues of the 99%, who can’t afford to live after working not to mention the genuinely poor who can’t even get a job and are dependent on the welfare state. We knew the hardship of our own community, and we said,

“oh great! You guys want to put a megaphone on this, we’re with you.” So, we almost felt like they were joining us rather than we joining them (Schaper, 2012).

Rev. Lawson (2012) of the IFTO also explained his involvement with Occupy in some sense as opportunistic. If another group were to be stepping up to the plate on these issues, he would as readily be behind them as well, he related.

A second trait that characterized the contributions of these leaders was the often unique, symbolic and sometimes distant role they played. This has both to do with the physical demands of Occupy protest activity as well as the many commitments and roles these faith leaders already play in various institutional settings. For example, Occupy Faith, though an open group that anyone could join was mainly composed of religious leaders whose vision was bent more toward offering a spiritual leadership role to the movement (Coleman, 2012). Public statements, publications, and using one’s clout to draw support to the movement are evident in statements made by the Council of Elders as well as Occupy Faith New York (Brock, 2012a, 2012b; Council of Elders, 2012; Schaper, 2012).

Schaper (2012) explained, “we did not support any organization or particular point of view in the movement. We supported the spirit, and demands for economic justice in a very broad way and saw them as very consistent with our faith traditions.” Blanchette (2012) also explained in reference to the age disparity between Occupy Faith New York and the Occupy Wall Street movement that Occupy Faith sought “to feed off the energy of the youth - they want to support them and be the moral guide of Occupy.”

Social and religious dimensions of OWS

The OWS protests have almost invariably been portrayed as a movement of white youth. This has been corroborated by the most reliable measure of the protest’s composition to date, a survey put together by Cordero-Guzman (2011) and displayed on the occupywallstreet.org Web site since early on in the protests.¹¹ In our interviews members described Occupy Faith New York as predominantly white, middle class, middle-aged, and Protestant. IFTO had a similar bent in age and class, though it was observed to be more diverse racially and in faith tradition.

In terms of denomination and religious affiliation, the majority of participants in Occupy Faith on both coasts came from, what Roof and McKinney (1987) would classify within the progressive stream of American mainline religion: liberal Protestants, moderate Protestants, some northern Baptists, Catholics, and Reform and Reconstructionist Jews.

The tensions between OWS and other groups along the lines of race, age, and religious motivation and class presented challenges to the broader success of the movement. In New York, Dr Raymond Rufen-Blanchette (2012), an African-American Protestant minister and member of Occupy Faith, spoke to the racial dynamics of the movement. He argued that the smaller numbers of people of color from poor and working-class backgrounds were due to their long suffering from the issues Occupy raised, rather than seeing economic inequality as a recent phenomenon. What is different today is that white, middle class, educated people are suffering from these problems too. “Now you have people who really get it, and who can understand that the issue is not black, white, yellow or red. The issue is green!” Blanchette (2012) exclaimed.¹² He also argued that black churches tend to be more politically conservative than many of their white counterparts, although this is generally the case with regard to social rather than economic issues. Rev. Kuhwald explained that Occupy was seen as too

radical by the Black churches in Oakland. Kuhwald (2012) has been very involved in “Occupy the Hood,” later renamed “The Roots” (Reclaiming Oakland Organizing Through Solidarity), as a white ally. He and an indigenous woman are the only two faith leaders in the group. “Occupy the Hood” was formed for people of color and their white allies with the goal of recruiting more people of color into the movement, and linking the issues raised by Occupy to specific community concerns (Sands, 2011). By the fall of 2012, they had chapters in over twenty American cities.

In spite of religious actors’ engagement in the movement, overall enthusiasm on the part of OWS participants for religiously motivated action was limited in many cases. Rabbi Michael Lerner identified a chasm he sensed between the faith leaders and the protesters at Occupy Oakland. During our interview, he argued that the religio-phobia held by the great majority of progressives and the left in general—typically regarded as a legacy of the anti-clericalism of the French Revolution—was evident among the protesters. Lerner (2012) described a general attitude of superiority in the protesters’ way of perceiving faith-motivated leaders. He did not feel they were embraced nor their presence welcomed. The only exception was the so-called rent-a-clergy phenomenon that leaders also described in New York, where protesters saw the presence of attired clergy as opportunistic in protecting from excessive police violence.

In this respect, we can compare OWS to other religiously motivated activism for economic and social justice. Those previously engaged in social justice efforts such as the Living Wage Campaign in New York and elsewhere sometimes found that, while they were sympathetic to the aims of OWS, they were not necessarily going to go out of their way to be involved in what they perceived as a relative flash in the pan. More generally, in response to the OWS movement, scholar of religion and politics Heidi Swarts (2012) has called attention to the often unheralded but important work of faith-based community organizations (FBCOs) in American life. “Unlike flashy movements such as Occupy Wall Street,” she writes,

little of their work involves mass demonstrations of rakish and colorful protesters. Yet few or no single other progressive religious activism involves so many congregations, and their achievements—billions of dollars in redistributive policy gains, significant roles in national coalitions, the political education of thousands and mobilization of millions of ordinary Americans—are not well-enough known. Furthermore, FBCOs have accomplished what every American progressive SMOs claims [sic] to want but typically fails to achieve: robust race and class diversity. FBCO is likely the most cross-race, cross-class, and religiously diverse movement in American religion—and possibly in American progressive activism.

The ongoing work of faith-based organizations, which intersects with many of the issues raised by OWS, might be mutually reinforcing, but seems not to have this consequence under current circumstances. The emergence of Occupy Sandy in response to the devastating effects of Hurricane Sandy on the Mid-Atlantic and beyond in late October 2012 revealed the extensive organizational capacity of the activists and collaborating allies.¹³ These grassroots collaborative efforts, often organized completely online, used churches as organizational bases and sites for the collection of needed goods.

Concluding remarks: Religion and public life

What might these findings concerning the religious aspects of the OWS movements in the United States tell us about the place of religion in contemporary American public life? The publication in 1994 of Casanova’s *Public Religions in the Modern World* signaled a

changed mood and a changing perspective in the sociological analysis of religion. His argument was relatively simple. Notwithstanding the expectations of legions of secular social scientists since the Enlightenment, religion did not decline into a marginal, privatized pastime; its significance has waxed and waned at various points in history and in different places. Instead, in many parts of the world it was playing a vital role in political and social change and was a major presence in the public domain. His examples included Liberation Theology in Latin American social movements, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Solidarity Movement in Poland, and the rise of the Moral Majority in the United States. These movements were taken as evidence of a significant “deprivatization” of religion (as Berger (1999) would later call it), which in turn suggested that the separation of church and state widely thought to be characteristic of modern society was becoming more blurred.

This focus on the public role of religion has recently been further reinforced by the entry of Habermas (2003) and Habermas et al. (2010) into the debate about the public functions of religion. He has explored the idea of a “postsecular” society in a number of publications. The importance of Habermas’s intervention was graphically underlined in his debate with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, where Habermas averred that religion remained a repository of utopian hopes, and later described religion as cultivating “an awareness of what is missing” (Habermas et al., 2010; Habermas and Ratzinger, 2006). In Habermas’s reinterpretation of secular society, the notion of the postsecular refers not so much to the revival of religion but more specifically to the idea that in a democratic society it is necessary to take religion seriously as an important aspect of the public arena. The notion that we live in a postsecular society has come in for substantial criticism on empirical, historical, and other grounds (Gorski et al., 2012) and sits awkwardly aside Charles Taylor’s (2007) extended recent argument that we live in a “secular age” in which human life tends to be judged in terms of an “immanent frame” according to which human flourishing in this life is the measure of all things. On the other hand, one might say that both Habermas and Taylor are concerned that contemporary Western society has become overly secular, and therefore without the transcendental perspectives that might offer more exalted horizons for human life.

In view of our findings concerning the OWS movements, we suggest that the organizational and solidaristic advantages provided by religious groups become especially relevant and important when societies face crises such as a natural catastrophe or a social and economic disaster. The financial crisis of March 2008 in the United States and beyond was a major economic and social crisis. Craig Calhoun (2011: 9) was not alone in noting that “the rich countries of the twentieth century have been plunged into the worst recession since the Great Depression.” He went on to list the basic elements of this crisis: the failure of major banks; the threat of bankruptcy of sovereign states in Europe; the uncertain recovery despite massive infusions of taxpayers’ money; and the political and economic crises in Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Cyprus.

Given the depth of the crisis, it is pertinent to ask whether religious institutions in the United States acted as “public religions” and whether they played an important role in public debate about the nature of the crisis. Both the Council of Elders and Occupy Faith released public statements about the aims of the OWS movement. Nonetheless, since the nascent OWS organizations lie outside the bounds of a single denomination or more established faith tradition, they may represent and reach fewer people. Religious institutions have been less central to the OWS movements than they were, say, in the civil rights movement. The churches have done more following rather than leading, often offering solidarity over initiative.

Religious progressives in recent history, as understood by scholars, have continuously failed to engage a large public with their concerns. Putnam and Campbell note, “religion has neither slowed nor hastened the women’s revolution and the rise of class inequality” (2010: 35)—in other words, they have been a relatively weak force in the face of some aspects of recent social change. Speaking to the climate leading up to the Occupy movement, Gitlin (2013: 8) writes,

the churches were inert, speaking of Jesus but quietly; the line about the rich man and the eye of the needle was written in invisible ink. So there arrived an Occupy movement that in its soul wished to amount to a new Awakening to join the line of religious and moral Awakenings that have shaped American history since the seventeenth century.

That movement was not led by the churches, however, even if many of them supported it in various concrete ways.

Pluralism is one of the strongest, most enduring characteristics of the American religious landscape, and religious actors, though not necessarily leading the charge politically, are found throughout American civic life. Putnam and Campbell highlight that most Americans see religion as a positive part of American civic life, which they attribute to the high level of inter-religious mixing in both private and public settings. The largest fault line they see is between the most secular and the “true believers.” Looking to OWS, Occupy Faith is an interfaith collaboration inside a secular movement and would probably not be considered “true believers” in the more dogmatic sense that Putnam and Campbell caution against. They are religious actors with strong political commitments to mutual cooperation. As such, individual religious commitments were regularly subordinated to common political goals, both within the Occupy Faith group and in their interactions and contributions to the OWS movement. Their work represents an important articulation—counter to the highly publicized fundamentalisms of the day—of religion working alongside and within a secular movement.

We might then see the weak relationship between religious organizations and OWS in generational terms. A growing number of Americans report that they regard themselves as having no religion: the so-called “religious nones.” At the same time, the prevalence of those regarding themselves as “spiritual but not religious”—practitioners of a sort of “do-it-yourself” religion—appears to have grown. It is not clear that religiosity of this sort can provide the foundation of a critical perspective on society. There is a related phenomenon, famously described by Davie (1994) as “believing without belonging,” in which people retain some sense of identity with religion without committing themselves to any particular church. The relative youthfulness of OWS and its weak connections with organized religion are consistent with these findings; while younger, nonreligious people tend to lean to the left politically, they lack the institutional supports offered by organized religion in times of crisis. These trends may help explain why the churches and OWS have tended to regard one another at arm’s length.

With this in mind, we believe this may be symptomatic of the declining role of religion in American society, especially along generational lines. Our suspicion is reinforced by Putnam and Campbell (2010: 3), who observe:

a growing number of Americans, especially young people, have come to disavow religion. For many, their aversion to religion is rooted in unease with the association between religion and conservative politics. If religion equals Republican, then they have decided that religion is not for them.

Putnam and Campbell also note that there is a historical trend showing that church attendance has declined steadily among young people since 1965.

OWS failed to connect strongly to religious institutions and actors, and this may reflect a decline in religiosity and “political religion” in the United States in general. It also surely reflects the difficulties any grassroots movement confronts in the face of more established institutions with long-term perspectives and interests that may be at odds with those of an inchoate social movement, demonstrated most readily in the showdown with Trinity Church in New York. As Calhoun and Gitlin both agree, Occupy was more “moment than movement.” Churches and religiously motivated people assisted in shepherding that moment, but they did not play a dominant part in it; it may be that that sort of role is unlikely to come again for the time being, at least.

In response to the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, religious support for OWS has been relatively cautious and limited. One aspect of this restraint is that historically the American Protestant churches have tended to criticize the moral standards of individual bankers rather than the capitalist system itself or its recent “financialization.” More broadly, we might argue that religious critiques of life in the United States have typically focused on individual sins such as adultery, alcohol, and avarice, rather than on the injustices of the economic system per se. Still, and perhaps as a result of its historic status as a minority religion in the United States, the Roman Catholic Church has maintained a different approach to social justice issues, and many religiously motivated participants in OWS have been keen to advance a sharper critique of the economic system more akin to the Catholic tradition. In light of this, it seems religious progressives continue to fight an uphill battle in achieving widespread political influence, in contrast to their highly visible conservative counterparts. The success of the Rolling Jubilee is a counter-trend in this regard.

Notes

1. See www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/17/nuns-on-the-bus-tea-party-protests-ohio_n_1973766.html.
2. See www.chavezfoundation.org/uploads/Prayer_of_the_Farm_Workers.pdf.
3. It may be worth noting that the employment ratio, possibly a better measure of the proportion of the population that is working than the unemployment rate, fell dramatically after 2008, but remains slightly above the 1982 level, which itself was slightly higher than in 1975. See <http://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet> for further information.
4. Greeley and Hout (2006: 57) note that “many of the accounts of the rise of the Christian right date its political relevance” to the June 1962 Supreme Court decision in *Engel v. Vitale* banning school prayer.
5. <http://occupyfaithnyc.com/faith-leaders-statement-supporting-ows/>
6. A similar controversy occurred at the Occupy London site, which was held on the steps of Saint Paul’s Cathedral (see Tremlett, 2012). In Tremlett’s article, “Occupied Territory at the Interstices of the Sacred: Between Capital and Community,” an examination of the Occupy London case concludes that the moral imaginary or the essence of the movement did not come from the long list of religious contributions, albeit present. The groups he does mention as present, the Catholic Workers, Ekklesia, the Friends Meeting House, Jesus Army, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), and are not out of step with Occupy Faith New York.
7. In the “Frequently Asked Questions” section of their Web site they explain,

Jubilee comes from many faith traditions including Judaism, Christianity and Islam. A jubilee is an event in which all debts are cancelled and all those in bondage are set free. It worked in Biblical times and it can still work today. For example, a kind of jubilee happened in Iceland after the 2008 economic crisis: instead of bailing out their banks, Iceland cancelled a percentage of mortgage debt. What these examples show is that debts are just a promise

which can - and should - be renegotiated or cancelled when the circumstances warrant. Strike Debt believes that now is the time for a jubilee for the 99%.

See <http://rollingjubilee.org/>

8. See <http://strikedebt.org/>
9. In June 2014, the Blueford family received a settlement of \$110,000 approved by the City Council. The District Attorney's Office concluded there would be no criminal investigation into his Blueford's death. "J.A.B." or "Justice for Allan Blueford" continues to do community work for healing and change around issues of police brutality and violence. See: <http://justice4alanblueford.org/>
10. See www.nationalcouncilofelders.net/
11. The survey, which was completed by 5006 persons from 21 to 22 October, revealed respondents' racial makeup as 81.2% white, 6.8% Hispanic, 2.8% Asian, 1.6% Black, and 7.6% "other." It also found only 9.9% to have a high school degree or less. In terms of age, 23.5% were under the age of 24, 44.5% were between the ages of 25 and 44, and 32% were over 45 years old (Cordero-Guzman, 2011). To our knowledge, data on the religious affiliations of the protesters are not available (Milkman, Lewis and Luce, 2013).
12. Blanchette continues to be involved with Occupy Faith New York as well as leading his own organization, the Clergy Campaign for Social and Economic Justice.
13. As noted by *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, Occupy Sandy stepped in to do work that the Red Cross and FEMA had not addressed—such as the sorting and distribution of key goods like batteries, water, hot food, and clothing and staying in devastated areas to help during inclement weather (Feuer, 2012; MacFarquhar, 2012).

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Author biographies

Emily B Campbell is a doctoral student in Sociology at the Graduate Center, City University of New York and research assistant to the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies. Her research interests include politics, religion, race and ethnicity, education and human rights.

John Torpey is Professor of Sociology and History and Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His books include *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State* (Cambridge University Press 2000); *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe: Transatlantic Relations after the Iraq War* (edited with Daniel Levy and Max Pensky; Verso 2005), *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: On Reparations Politics* (Harvard University Press 2006), and, with *Christian Joppke, Legal Integration of Islam: A Transatlantic Comparison* (Harvard University Press, 2013). He is also an editor of and contributor to *The Post-Secular in Question* (New York University Press 2012).

Bryan S Turner is the Presidential Professor of Sociology and Director of the Mellon Committee for the Study of Religion, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York and Professorial Fellow at the Australian Catholic University (Melbourne). He was the Alona Evans Distinguished Visiting Professor at Wellesley College (2009–10). His most recent publication was *The Religious and the Political* (Cambridge 2013).