

The Sanctuaries: A Diverse Community of Faith and Empowerment through the Arts

On November 21, 2015, I attended an event called “Soul Slam,” organized by The Sanctuaries, a community organization established in the past couple of years in Washington, DC. The organization, which defines itself on its website as “a diverse arts community with soul,” was founded by a young Unitarian minister, Rev. Erik Martínez Resly, nicknamed “Rev” by those around him. It advocates no doctrine but names as its three core principles: 1) “creativity,” defined as occurring through expression with sincerity; 2) “spirituality,” as “what matters most”; and 3) “justice,” as the ultimate form of inclusion. The Soul Slam is a recurring event, where members of its “performance team” gather together to produce music, spoken word, paintings, photography, and more. This particular event also served as the launch of the performance team’s first official album of music and spoken word, called *Mixtape*. Sanctuaries can be understood as a form of nonofficial religion, presenting a voluntary association that is quasi-religious but not entirely. It does not offer a new doctrine or theology, but has core values and a cohesive community which appears religious in its social construction.

The event is located in the Festival Center, a building owned by another faith-based organization in DC. It has a large multipurpose room with a high ceiling that tends to host a number of community events. The area itself is transitional – one block away there is a community café and bookstore, and two blocks away there is a rehabilitation services center. The surrounding blocks are predominantly residential, from public housing to upscale homes. The Festival Center is not the only location where Sanctuaries meets. This particular time, the large room is packed beyond its capacity, with approximately 200 people. The entrance leads one to the front corner of the room, which has instruments, microphones, and speakers. A DJ is in front toward the side and is playing music as people arrive. She appears to be an African American

woman in her 20s. There are several long rows of chairs but soon many people are sitting on the floor in front of the chairs and standing in the back behind them as well, even before all the chairs are filled. While it's clear the space does not belong to The Sanctuaries, they have made it their own for the evening.

The first Soul Slam I attended was utterly astounding to me because of its incredible diversity, and this event was no exception. It is strikingly dissimilar to almost every sphere in Washington, DC - men and women of all races/ethnicities are not only in a room together but have clearly established relationships with one another. Furthermore, they seem diverse in religion, age, and other features which might indicate a diversity in gender or sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and/or philosophy/ideology. (One finds, for example, men who are clean-shaven or are scruffy with dreadlocks; people who have nose rings or no piercings at all; those wearing hipster clothing or button-down shirts; etc.) I thought regarding the friend who invited me: "Where did she meet all these people?" The performance team presents pieces that are equally diverse. Sometimes this seems intentional. The first performance offered is a short blessing from individuals from three different religious traditions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Other times, it seems organic; a person's background might not be named, but their music might sound like an Indian ghazal, American folk song, or R&B song, often interweaving multiple genres. Not every piece mentions God, but those that do might use a female pronoun for God or the Arabic word "Allah." A sense of each person's background comes through but generally feels less relevant than the message they are trying to convey.

The Soul Slam is perhaps the most regular and defining Sanctuaries event. It simultaneously cultivates what The Sanctuaries is and points to what it wants to be. To kick off this event, a young Indian man in his 30s, looking fashionable and somewhat solemn, DJ'ed a

ghazal fused with electronica, singing and dancing behind his keyboard, to the side of the room. This was immediately followed by a short informal introduction by Rev. Rev is also in his 30s, white, slim, with a large beard and hipster clothes, including a cap. He spoke into the mic and said the goal of the event was to “slam some souls,” that is, to have an impact on the core of each person in the room. He specifically noted that Sanctuaries “values spirituality in its many forms,” and that some people in the room have a commitment to specific religion and those who find meaning and purpose. He also noted that it is a space which “values creativity,” noting that some people in the room would be performing for the first time and suggesting that we “crowd-source wisdom and thoughtfulness” by putting our own ideas on Post-its and putting them on a wall just outside the space. The terms Rev uses are not always universal but can be grasped by a larger audience, a trait typical of a community that “emphasizes being part of the culture rather than set apart” (Ammerman et al, 81). Through each explicit expression of The Sanctuaries’ values, he simultaneously introduces new participants to them and strengthens the commitment of current members to the shared ethos (McGuire, 198). In an interview I later conducted with Rev, he laid out his vision for the kind of “story” the community would “tell,” and in so doing reiterated these values in a different way: one of *personal intimacy* rather than suspicion; one of *mutual empowerment* rather than oppression; one of *creative collaboration* rather than competition; one of *civic responsibility* rather than apathy; one of *spiritual growth* rather than indulgence; one where *difference is welcomed, honored, and celebrated*” (emphasis added).

The fact that music is the central element of its expression is not itself unique; Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley and McKinney (1998) note that “ritual music is a deeply sensual experience that often touches people in ways words cannot” (85). In fact, The Sanctuaries performances seem to generate the experiential meaning-making process that makes Sanctuaries

a religious endeavor. Rev stated after the event: “The creative arts provide intimate and immediate access to those mysterious forces that animate ministry in the first place.” It creates a sense of vulnerability that opens people up to an experience of transcendence. Another performer, Osa, is in his 30s, tall, African American, with a goatee that is in two braids. He told me he has been rapping his whole life and this is the “only spiritual outlet” where he has ever fit in. The Sanctuaries website states one of its objectives is to help others claim their “spiritual voice.” Ritual music is clearly one way of doing this.

It also allows for the expression of that meaning-making to others, generating empathy from listeners and healing to build community relationships as a result. Noreen, a petite 26 year old South Asian woman wearing a headscarf, felt she had discovered “the wealth and depth” of others’ experiences. For her, it powerfully resulted in empathy, transforming how she felt toward others around her. During the Soul Slam, Osa offered an interlude from the Mixtape performances to tell a story about a young intern in his office who was also African American and did not have the confidence to interact with anyone at a holiday party at work because he felt like an outsider. Osa’s concluding message, which he posed as a challenge to the rest of the audience and repeated over and over, was: “What is stopping you from expressing yourself?” These public performances are an opportunity to achieve this goal and celebrate this expression simultaneously.

McGuire writes about the increasing importance of individuals’ attachments to local communities rather than denominations. They are the locus of an individual’s support network and social connections: “The growth of a mass society makes such personal connections all the more important; religion, in its local manifestation, becomes increasingly socially important” (McGuire, 291). In other words, “religious belonging” occurs at a local level, not a

denominational one. Rev described DC as a fragmented community and cried at the end of the Soul Slam when he reflected on the outcome of their “holy hustle” and what they were building together. Osa reflected on having “seen lives change including my own” through their interaction with the organization. He added: “The Sanctuaries been a space where I can be me. Where I can share my story and not feel judged. Somewhere that I can learn about others and their experiences.” Noreen felt that the expression she was able to have through performances at Sanctuaries was something she previously considered “unattainable,” but the community fostered that for her. Sanctuaries would be classified as a “Pillar church” according to Ammerman et al’s categories: It is “anchored in its geographic community, for which it feels uniquely responsible” (98).

The community was founded and made possible by its leader Rev and the leaders he empowered to join him. Although Rev only offered the introductory and concluding remarks for the Soul Slam, his visionary leadership is evident behind the scenes. After explaining why and how he thought of creating The Sanctuaries, he described his approach: “Trained as a community organizer, I also valued a grassroots approach – so I gave myself almost 6 months just to talk with people, listen to their stories, hear their needs and dreams.” Osa was one of the people Rev met. Osa “responded to an ad on Craigslist for a unique spiritual music group. Rev seemed cool so I came to a couple meet ups.... He must have listened to me talk for 2 hours...that was pleasantly awkward. I usually feel like people don't listen to me (though I talk a lot) so it was refreshing.” His young children were at the event, where he was the emcee and rapped or performed spoken word in several pieces presented that night. Except for Rev’s remarks, in fact, Osa seemed to be in charge. He carries the title “Organizer,” has a Sanctuaries email address, and co-leads the performance team. As Rev explains: “I have always drawn great meaning from

Paul's invocation to 'equip the saints for the ministry.' As a religious leader, it means that my role is that of empowering others, not merely entertaining them." Once Osa got involved, he was hooked, and "eventually became part of the core team.... We made plans for various community events, a podcast, open mics and most notably the performance team. The overarching goal was always planning for how can we do more for our community."

Ammerman et al explain, "Informal or personal authority... is earned by the pastor or lay person on the basis of his or her personal qualities," as "a competent, authentic, and trustworthy person" (Ammerman et al, 172). This is the kind of authority which Rev holds in his community. Even the title of "Rev" points to the informal and personal nature of his leadership. In addition to the incredible crowds of people in relationship with one another which he developed, those who know him personally seem to have deep admiration and respect for him. When I asked Osa about how he dealt with conflict in the community, he answered in part, "Rev Erik's leadership has taught me a lot personally about interacting with people and my hope is that I can continue to grow in relationship building." Rev's listening period and the way in which Osa and others seem to be at an almost equal leadership level demonstrates his strategy of leadership through empowerment. In a religious community, this experience of empowerment may in fact foster part of the religious experience itself. McGuire states: "Religion is not only the experience of power but often also results in the sense of being empowered" (255). This sense of empowerment, in a community which might experience marginalization in a variety of ways, adds to what The Sanctuaries provides its members and participants.

There are many types of religious communities, and Ammerman et al explain that one type has a "sanctuary orientation," seeing themselves as "providing sacred space that is a safe haven from this world." Others have an "activist orientation," seeking to "change the structures

of the world that cause suffering and injustice” (100). The Sanctuaries seems like a combination of these two, perhaps offering a sanctuary from these injustices and also speaking directly to those injustices to call for social change and foster a greater sense of inclusion. Rev said: “I knew that in order to create a "sanctuary" that truly reflected and served the city, we would need to get real intentional about fostering diversity – ethnically, racially, religiously, socio-economically, etc.”

According to McGuire, non-official religion is “an assortment of unorganized, inconsistent, heterogeneous, and changeable sets of beliefs and customs” (McGuire, 113) and this characterization seems to suit The Sanctuaries well. The group does not affiliate with a specific tradition nor advocate for any particular doctrine. The organizers rather highlight the expressions they expect of their members and use the word “soul,” appearing to imply that these expressions come out of the depths of who people are. This makes it a religious endeavor in some way, though one participant with whom I chatted said she had no religious affiliation and did not attend the event for any reason she would identify as religious or spiritual. It may be argued that even something which is not religious for some may still be religion because it is “a contested boundary” and “the sacred is experienced in everyday life as it is embedded in human social practices” (McGuire, 114). When I asked Rev if he modeled The Sanctuaries off of any other existing groups, he said he wished there were models, but he was inspired by different groups including Alcoholics Anonymous. That group has a reputation of being a form of non-official religion. Sanctuaries also appears to fill a need for those who have not found a place in official religion for their spiritual inclinations. In a rap that concludes the Mixtape and appears to be a regular ritual at Sanctuaries, Osa says:

*They say the Lord lives in the sky
I beg to differ, I see her in you and I*

*When I'm not worthy of his presence
I can't look you in the eye*

*Tried to find her in my image as I look at my reflection
How do I find him in me if I'm subject to your discretion
Been told so many times that I might not make it into heaven
Gave up my place in line so I could find my own connection*

McGuire states, “in the modern context, individual believers are and believe they should be free to choose all significant components of their religious belief and practice” (106). When these variances in belief and practice come together under one religious community as part of that community’s self-definition, it can be described as having a cultic orientation (184). Here, the word “cult” is not used in its colloquial and often derogatory sense but to describe a particular orientation of official religions. Like Sanctuaries, other cultic religious groups “do not claim to have *the* truth, and they are tolerant of other religious groups” (McGuire, 157). Furthermore, they allow individuals to find a sense of religious belonging without expecting homogeneity in their participation in the broader society (184). Official religion can be cultic and The Sanctuaries parallels a cultic version of an “emerging church” model of official religion. Emerging church is seen as a fluid practice of religion that takes place outside of the confines of a specific building and often outside of a particular holy day in the week. Because Sanctuaries has a membership structure with dues, it can look like a more typical religious community in some ways.

Within The Sanctuaries community, there are a variety of religious expressions, from those like Osa who decided “perhaps religion isn’t for me” but invested extensively in this community, to those like Noreen with clear religious affiliations outside of Sanctuaries. However, although the community is cultic in its diversity and fluidity, it is only cultic insofar as it can be religion. Since many involved in Sanctuaries would likely not describe it as religious

but rather a secular artistic community, it seems less like an official religion. Furthermore, official religion generally expects some conformity to an official set of beliefs, ethics, and practices and also “usually uses specialized religious measures for the regulation and control of conduct so that misconduct can be noted and punished” (100). This suggests Sanctuaries would be better classified as a non-official religion, since it has no such regulation and it would be hard to codify its expectations. This is not to say that some in the group would not see it as their official religion. As McGuire also explains, an individual orientation can significantly differ from the collective to which that individual belongs (154).

One common trait among Sanctuaries members, in fact, appears to be their dissatisfaction with official religion. When Rev was in divinity school, he explains, he invited friends to a church service so they could hear his sermon as a guest preacher. When he asked for feedback, “the unanimous response was that they really connected with what I had to say, that they didn’t have many opportunities to reflect on the deeper things in life, but that there was no way in hell that they’d suffer through those old hymns and archaic rituals week after week.” As a result, Rev sought to “help create a spiritual community for younger people who otherwise might not seek out a more traditional religious congregation, either because they’d been burned by them or because they were bored in them.” This was the goal behind Sanctuaries. Interestingly, while the majority of the Sanctuaries performance team and participants are in their 20s and 30s, its appeal also appears to extend to a significant minority of older adults. Osa and Noreen clearly fit into Rev’s target category of beneficiaries. As Osa’s rap indicates, he had such negative experiences in different official religious groups, until he realized religion wasn’t for him and he needed to seek out his own divine connection. Noreen also describes a practice of finding her own religious identity within her official tradition of Islam:

So much of my understanding of religion seemed to have been taught on the basis of punishment or what I might be doing wrong, rather than on mercy, forgiveness and guidance.... I took it upon myself to practice my faith how it made most sense to me – still engaging in the practices and rituals that felt familiar and brought a source of comfort to me, and that I saw as a duty to my Lord, but also taking the pressure of constantly questioning what I was doing wrong off of myself.

Rev hesitated to put labels on the perspectives of Sanctuaries members, given the diversity of the community and the expectation that it will remain diverse. However, he offered these categories as loose suggestions:

(1) Our members are spiritually curious. They're genuinely interested in witnessing and learning about different ways of navigating the world. (2) Our members value individuality. They're willing to take the time to find their own place in the traditions, beliefs, and rituals that they've inherited and/or encountered. (3) Our members insist on relevance. They look to their spiritual lives to make sense of everyday questions and decisions.

Noreen got involved after attending a retreat organized by Sanctuaries. “Just in one day,” she said, “there was meaningful conversation on topics of tradition, family history, spirituality, artwork and dance breaks – all things I value immensely.” Sanctuaries offered a spiritual outlet for parts of her identity others often labeled secular at best and meaningless at worst. “Don’t waste your time with silly games, they told me,” she recites in her spoken word piece, “Coming Home.” The piece is featured as the opening track of *Mixtape*.

Noreen’s story is that of being the daughter of immigrant parents who fought hard to make a living and raise her for a world of opportunity. Her struggle comes from having an artistic “fervor” that seems to take her away from their expectations for her and her sense of honoring their hard work. Noreen presents this story in a way that is respectful of her parents yet seems indicative of a common aspect of nonofficial religion, which “sometimes represents one form of counter assertion (albeit often incoherent and fragmented) of power and self-worth by those excluded from power in official religion” (McGuire, 147). In fact, official religion, in its

affiliation with the establishment, has often “excluded religious expressions characteristic of the poor, the women, various minorities, indigenous peoples in colonized lands, and other powerless groups” (115). At the end of her piece, Noreen declares that she is “exhaling 26 years of held breath.” Her statement is indicative of the freeing power for religious and artistic expression that Sanctuaries provides her, and thus makes sense as the opening piece for the group’s album. McGuire explains that new religious collectivities often emerge in circumstances where socioeconomic and other forms of marginalization in society lead to “the creation and mobilization of dissent” (171). While the complex motivations of each individual and community cannot be reduced to this single motivating factor (172), it can often provide the spark that ignites the movement to action.

The Sanctuaries is thus also a movement for social change. Although it is not political in an official sense, the pursuit of justice is one of its main three areas of concern, as previously mentioned. This focus on social change is a form of simultaneous individual and collective meaning making consistent with its other forms of expression. Many pieces reflect on things like marginalization and empowerment (“Show Your Beauty” and “Child of the Sky”), a call for social change (“Resistance”), and also in and of themselves reflect a vision for diversity. A South Asian woman and a white woman sing in Hindi and English as an East Asian woman plays the violin, in the song “Human.” Soul Slam occurred shortly after the tragic attacks in Paris and San Bernardino and subsequent backlash on Muslims in the West, and Rev stated briefly yet unequivocally at the end of Soul Slam that “the fearmongers are wrong.” He did not explicitly state what that was in reference to, nor did he need to say much more; because he said it at the end of the event, I as a Muslim understood exactly what he meant and it felt powerful. When I asked Rev if he had goals for Sanctuaries beyond DC, he said he saw the organization as “a

training ground and a launching pad” to help people “find creative solutions to the problems of an increasingly diverse world.... Our community empowers everyday people to harness the power of their creative and spiritual lives to promote social change.” The sense of solidarity through social change which Sanctuaries provides its participants may in fact be the reason why such a diverse community is possible. Whereas many communities come together around demographic similarities, this cohesion can also be found among “groups lacking a voice in their cities, denominations, and nation” (McGuire, 201).

This shared sentiment of inclusion and diversity as a form of justice seem critical to the group’s success. There are shared experiences of marginalization, whether in religious communities, broader American society, or both. Yet experiences are not assumed to be the same. As Rev explains: “We don’t let demographics tell the whole story. In other words, we never make assumptions about who someone is, what they value, or how they express themselves, based on their racial or religious identity.” At least with Osa and Noreen, this vision appears to have come to fruition. Noreen reflected:

Even within a place like The Sanctuaries, there might be assumptions made that can erase or misconstrue a person’s narrative. The difference, though, is that people who are a part of this group recognize that there is learning to be done, and are seeking to deeper understand others, which makes me feel more invested in offering my time and understanding to my community.

She was grateful for what she called an “intentionally diverse” community where, for once, she didn’t feel like the “token different person” because conversations centered around what it means to be human. Osa was also extremely grateful not only for the community’s diversity, but for how much others appeared to appreciate that diversity too. He said he did experience diversity in other circles in which he operates, but “The Sanctuaries is the only COMMUNITY in which I experience such diversity.” The organization’s vision statement echoes this by declaring that the

city is “diverse yet segregated” and Sanctuaries is about building “a community, not just another crowd.” Rev explained that there are two tendencies which often prevent deep relationships from forming among diverse individuals – focusing on similarities and keeping things superficial. Through musical expression, meaning making, and avoiding judgment, these tendencies are more readily avoided and Sanctuaries has thrived.

Sanctuaries is indeed an exciting organization because it offers a model for a diverse, local, spiritual community, when diversity in religious and geographic communities is often difficult to foster. It also provides an easily accessible space for creative and spiritual expression, providing a means for empowerment and social change through arts and culture. As The Sanctuaries is now institutionalized, it will need to be vigilant to maintain the dynamism and enthusiasm that it has had in its early stages. As Thomas O’Dea writes according to McGuire, a charismatic leader or singular cause can unite a community, but institutionalization can entrench it in a certain pattern that offers little room for continued flexibility and change. Furthermore, there can be a constant tendency to try and maintain the exciting feel of the community’s earliest period, despite new times and realities that demand a different way of thinking and operating (McGuire, 174). While there is certainly no cause for immediate concern, in particular a non-official or cultic religious group such as The Sanctuaries necessitates a level of constant dynamism in order to remain in existence. As long as it maintains a spirit of willingness to try new things and accommodate and empower new people, The Sanctuaries may continue to provide this sacred safe space in DC for years to come.

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