

ARTICLE

Interfaith Transposed: Interfaithlessness in the Age of Religious Exit

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Abstract

This article examines so-called interfaithless initiatives in the United States, in which exes from different high-demand religious groups participate together as they navigate the difficult process of religious exit. Sustained attention is focused on an Interfaithless Beach Party held regularly between 2014 and 2022. I argue that associating interfaithlessness with interfaith becomes legible by thinking of interfaithlessness not as peripheral to but rather as a transposition of interfaith. Indeed, these are examples of interfaith encounter at its best, showing not just proximity between exes from different religions, but meaningful interreligious exchange that complicates assumptions about the growing nonreligious population in the United States.

Keywords

interreligious, interfaith, high-demand religions, nonreligion, religious nones, religious exit, religious identity

Introduction

Every fall, in a peaceful rural setting, people from different religious backgrounds gather for fellowship over a weekend known as the Fall Excursion. Attendees take in lectures by scholars and practitioners, play games of religious trivia, and share food and music from different religious

traditions. They participate in small-group breakout sessions focused on topics such as how to talk about religious beliefs across difference, comparative religious views on sexuality, strategies for community building, and more. All these activities could have been taken directly from the Interreligious Dialogue playbook. Versions of all of them, in fact, have been hosted during the last year by the Tuohy Center for Interreligious Understanding at the university where I teach. But the plot twist comes at the beginning of this story: The gathering described above is not an interreligious/interfaith event. Rather, it is a retreat designed to help people who have exited a religion deal with their ensuing trauma.¹

Part therapy, part education, and part recreation, the Fall Excursion, which has been organized annually since 2019 by the nonprofit organization Recovering from Religion, is not the only such endeavor in this era of religious exit. From online discussion forums to organized in-person activities of many different sorts, numerous initiatives now exist to meet the therapeutic and social needs of religious exiters, whose number in the United States has grown exponentially over the last three decades. Some are meant for exiters from a single religious group, such as the Ex Jehovah's Witnesses United Facebook group, or local Off the Derech Meetups for former Orthodox Jews. Some, like the Fall Excursion, welcome exiters from different groups, while others have been designed purposefully to bring together exiters from different groups, either out of numerical practicality or for philosophical reasons. At a time when actors in the interreligious space are sometimes at a loss for ways to meaningfully include the nonreligious, religious exiters—an ever more significant subset of the nonreligious—increasingly are doing an uncanny kind of interreligion all on their own.²

In his epilogue to a 2020 volume applying social movement theory to interfaith activities, Paul Numrich refers to a terrain “along the edges” of what many scholars have begun to identify as an interfaith movement.³

1 The description is compiled from the programs of the Recovering from Religions Fall Excursions from 2019–2024, available online at recoveringfromreligion.org.

2 On inclusion of non-religious within interfaith contexts, see Terry Shoemaker and James Edmonds, “The Limits of Interfaith? Interfaith Identities, Emerging Potentialities, and Exclusivity,” *Culture and Religion* 17, no. 2 (2016): 200–12. On the “uncanny” as I am using it here, not in Freud’s psychoanalytical sense but rather in Jentsch’s sense of an intellectual unease with an apparent miscategorization, see Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906).” Translated by Roy Sellars. *Angelaki* 2, no. 1 (1997): 7–16.

3 There is disagreement amongst scholars in interreligious studies over whether there is a coherent interfaith movement; even those arguing that there is often emphasize how diffuse and perhaps unintentional it is, but hold that common aims

There, he locates projects or episodes that, in his analysis, contribute to the interfaith movement's "core goal of...improving relations amongst religious traditions" unintentionally, incidentally, or even while actively opposing that goal.⁴ For example, in a space-sharing arrangement in which different congregations make use of an interfaith center, the center's normative interfaith goals are largely unknown or irrelevant to many who use the space, for whom the arrangement is purely practical. Some even espouse teachings that actively oppose those goals, but still demonstrate respect and care for the needs of the other religious groups who use the space. For Numrich, such situations "both contribute to the interfaith goal of improved interreligious relations and exemplify just how decentralized, disparate, fluid and fragmented this social movement is."⁵

At first glance it may seem that if my subjects in this article and their activities belong anywhere in the vicinity of interfaith, it is here, along the fragmented edges. It may also seem, both from a scholarly point of view and from the perspectives of participants in interfaith or in the initiatives I discuss here, that to place them there might well render those edges not just fragmented, but so disjointed as to be meaningless and functionless as edges. At the very least, to consider initiatives for people who have actively rejected religious institutions and identifications, who often feel negative if not openly antagonistic toward their former religion, as of a piece with interfaith surely requires a greater suspension of disbelief even than the examples Numrich considers. But in what follows, I would like to suggest that associating what I am calling "interfaithlessness" with interfaith is indeed legible, by thinking of interfaithlessness not as peripheral to but rather as a transposition of interfaith.

Transposition has a variety of meanings and usages. I am using it here in its musical sense, as a compositional technique whereby a piece of music is moved entirely to a different key. The resulting tune usually but not always sounds all-but-identical to the original, unspooling the same melody from a different starting point. Depending on the interval between the original and the new starting pitch, the transposition might go undetected by anyone without perfect pitch—that is, by the vast majority of people. It might be detected but not registered as anything unusual, as happens every time a

are enough to unite its disparate elements. I hold no stake in this argument but find Numrich's attempt to broaden to category of interfaith a useful springboard for the present analysis.

4 Paul D. Numrich, "Epilogue: Understanding a Decentralised Social Movement," in *The Interfaith Movement: Mobilising Religious Diversity in the 21st Century*, ed. John Fahy and Jan-Jonathan Bock (Routledge, 2020), 219–27.

5 Numrich, "Epilogue," 226.

group settles together into the same key for a rendition of Happy Birthday after a flurry of different starting pitches. A transposition might sound just the slightest bit uncanny for reasons a listener can't quite identify, or it might be entirely unsubtle, as when a piece is transposed from a major to a minor key. A transposition of a well-known or much-loved song probably will sound wrong at first. It might grow on the listener, or it might never stop sounding wrong. Like, for example, Happy Birthday sung in a minor key, some transpositions require a certain suspension of disbelief. In all these cases, subtle or overt, that there is a relationship to the prior melody is perceptible, and usually easily so, even if the specifics of that relationship may take some parsing, and even though whether or not the transposition succeeds equally—or at all—as pleasant to listen to remains in the ear of the listener. I argue that a similar relationship obtains between interfaith and interfaithlessness. Even if an initial suspension of disbelief is required, these brief sketches of some representative examples of interfaithless initiatives, followed by a more sustained examination of one idiosyncratic but instructive example, an Interfaithless Beach Party held once or twice a year from 2014 until 2022, show interfaith encounter at its best. Moreover, these initiatives, especially the Beach Party, show not just proximity between exes from different religions, but meaningful interreligious exchange that complicates assumptions about the growing nonreligious population in the United States.

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this article, I use the term interfaithless not only to describe the Interfaithless Beach Party, but more widely to refer to any initiative in which exites from multiple religious groups participate together. As this is neither a widely-used term nor one of my own invention, a few words about my choice to apply it as I do are in order. Prior to its adoption in the context I am describing here, the term interfaithless was most closely associated with American Judaism. Appearing in Alan Dershowitz's 1997 book *The Vanishing American Jew*, it describes the marriage between Dershowitz' son, for whom Judaism is a heritage more than a faith, and a woman whose Catholicism is similarly cultural more than religious. Since neither one has a sense of religiosity, their marriage will be, as his son explains and Dershowitz laments, an "interfaithless" one, a version of the interfaith marriages that had become so common—and in some circles, so threatening—in American

Judaism, and which Dershowitz sees as even more problematic.⁶ Following Dershowitz, the term appears primarily in discussions of Jewish intermarriage, sometimes as a neutral descriptor but often reiterating his alarm over the ramifications of such unions on the survival and flourishing of Judaism in the United States.

It is perhaps not a surprise, then, that one of the initiatives that has used the term to describe its own activities is the Jewish nonprofit organization Footsteps. Through counseling services, career and legal assistance, education, outreach, and more, Footsteps, founded in 2003, supports individuals leaving ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, whether they wish to separate entirely from Judaism or maintain some form of Jewish identity and/or practice apart from ultra-Orthodoxy. In 2021, however, Footsteps introduced a monthly, virtual Interfaithless Meetup, held over Zoom. Advertised across social media platforms and on the Footsteps website's FAQ page (addressing whether Footsteps' services were only available to Jews), the Interfaithless Meetup would welcome "folks who left *all* kinds of insular religious communities (including ex-Orthodox Jewish, ex-LDS, ex-Muslim, exvangelical, and others!)"⁷ Glossing the meetup as "a peer support group available for those navigating life outside of their communities of origin," Footsteps used the term interfaithless not in alarm, but rather to signify the aim of coalition and shared healing.⁸

The second initiative that uses the term is the Interfaithless Beach Party (IBP), discussed at length below. This event's organizer chose the word interfaithless as an echo, both self-evident and a bit cheeky, of "interfaith." As he told me, "I remember that when I was in college, there were always groups on campus...that would have some kind of common interest and they would group together and call themselves like an interfaith kind of thing...And then I just kind of thought, well, we're all people who left our faith and we're from a bunch of different backgrounds. So this is just interfaith-less."⁹ In speaking with people who attended the IBP, I encountered one interviewee who, more than once, used the term interfaith

6 Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Vanishing American Jew: In Search of Jewish Identity for the Next Century* (Little, Brown, 1997).

7 "Interfaithless Meetup," Meetup Page for Footsteps, <https://www.meetup.com/interfaithless-meetup/>.

8 "Frequently Asked Questions," Footsteps website, <https://www.footstepsorg.org/>. The Footsteps Interfaithless Meetup ceased in early 2024. Unfortunately, my attempts to gain access to both participants and Footsteps staff to find out more about this brief experiment were unsuccessful. It is fascinating to consider the why and how of an interfaithless initiative in this context, and hard not to wonder about the reasons for its demise.

9 Morris Bird, telephone conversation, March 19, 2025.

instead of interfaithless when describing the party. He corrected himself immediately, but his repeated slip of the tongue indicated to me that, like the organizer, at least some attendees understood the beach party as a short step away from—perhaps not even entirely distinct from—interfaith engagement, now so culturally ubiquitous as to be known even by those ensconced in insular religions that have not been common participants in such endeavors.¹⁰

Both Footsteps' and the IBP's usage of the term interfaithless is a creative re-use of the known language of interfaith (or, in Footsteps' case, perhaps a secondary re-use of Dershowitz' prior re-use). Such re-use shows simultaneous attachment to and distance from the interfaith phenomenon, and indeed to faith itself.¹¹ That doubleness also informs my application of the term to a wide range of fairly disparate endeavors, though I use it advisedly. To find terminology for nonreligion, and specifically for religious exit and exiters, that does not implicitly privilege religion and religiousness is difficult. What Ryan Cragun and Joseph Hammer call "pro-religious hegemony" is evident in widely-used terms like *apostate* and *defector*, which clearly assign a negative valence to religious exit. Even terms that are not overtly pejorative, like *deconvert* or *unchurched*, connote religion as the normative state. In all these examples, religious exit and nonreligion are deviant relative to religion and religiousness.¹² Shira Schwartz, in one resonant example, explores the linguistic implications of "off the derech [OTD]," the phrase commonly used to refer to people who have left Orthodox Judaism, noting, "[T]o be OTD is primarily to be 'off,' as in, *she's a little off, that's a real turn-off, or off with his head!*"¹³ The term "interfaithless" poses the same issue of an implied negative, even when the intent is to use it as a neutral descriptor. The "less" suffix is unambiguous about signifying a lack, a not-ness, which reflects an assumption of the non-lacking state—which, in this case, could be "interfaith" or "faith" or both—as normative.

10 On the cultural ubiquity of interfaith, see Thomas Albert Howard, *The Faiths of Others: A History of Interreligious Dialogue* (Yale University Press, 2021).

11 Here and elsewhere I am using "faith" in its broad sense, as it is colloquially used in the interfaith space, to refer to religious traditions or communities and individuals' attachments to them (as in, "people of different faiths"), rather than its more narrow sense of belief or conviction, though I understand the broader meaning as often (but by no means always) including the narrower one to some degree.

12 Ryan T. Cragun and Joseph H. Hammer, "One Person's Apostate is Another Person's Convert: What Terminology Tells Us about Pro-Religious Hegemony in the Sociology of Religion," *Humanity & Society* 35, no. 1–2 (2011): 149–175.

13 Shira Schwartz, "In Terms of OTD," in *Off the Derech: Leaving Orthodox Judaism*, ed. Ezra Cappel and Jessica Lang (State University of New York Press, 2020), 249–74.

Pro-religious hegemony is hard to get around with such a blatant suffix of deficiency.

While some, especially in the interfaith space, may take no issue with pro-religious hegemony, I agree with Cragun and Hammer that such a stance, and terminology reflecting it, does harm within the academic study of religion. In this context, however, the very not-ness of the term interfaithless is fitting. For the religious exiters who seek out support resources, religion indeed has always been the normative state; being without it, for most of these subjects, does not yet feel normal, and perhaps never will. I submit, then, that in this case the markedly pro-religious term “interfaithless” is apt precisely because it connotes a state of not-ness, and with it, an ongoing attachment to the religious group that has been left. It is a somewhat wistful term for an often-wistful state.¹⁴ It is in this spirit that I use the term even for groups that do not themselves use it: with consideration, and to signal a simultaneous modification of and adjacency to both faith and interfaith. Like so much of the terminology used to talk about religious exit and nonreligion, it is a fraught term and should not be used without caution and intention, but in this context its fraughtness matches its subject matter.

Relatedly, I have chosen to use the descriptor “ex,” another term with a potentially negative valence, to refer to religious exiters. I do so in the spirit of Helen Rose Ebaugh’s seminal *Becoming an Ex*, still considered a definitive study of role exit almost forty years after its publication. Identifying patterns in the leaving process shared by exes including ex-alcoholics, ex-convicts, ex-nuns, divorced people, and more, Ebaugh demonstrates that being an ex is fundamentally different than never having been the thing in question. Ex-ness consists not simply in the not-being, but rather, in the interplay between not-being and, crucially, *having been*.¹⁵ Ex-ness is not merely a lack; both analytically and experientially, it has its own presence and its own rich generative potential.¹⁶

14 This is evident also in the emic terms exes generate for themselves. Someone who identifies as an “exvangelical,” for example, is linguistically tethered back to the evangelical tradition and community. Calling oneself simply “a Christian” or “not religious anymore” would not perform this same function.

15 Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh, *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit* (The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

16 See, for example, Shira Schwartz, “X Marks Our Spot: Religion and Gender in Transition,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 40, no. 1 (2024): 117–45.

Religious Exit and the Initiatives Supporting It

Though recent data indicates that the trend may be reversing or at least slowing, the last three decades have seen a tectonic shift on the American religious landscape with regard to religious affiliation and disaffiliation. Since the mid-1990s, data from the General Social Survey (GSS) and several Pew Research Forum surveys have shown an exponential rise in respondents who no longer identify with the religion of their upbringing. People who self-identify as not religious—the “nones,” as they were called first with alarm but now as a matter of course—now make up twenty-nine percent of the American population. While the growth of this demographic is less steep in the most recent survey than in earlier years, when the percentage rose in only two decades from five percent to thirty percent, clearly the most recent figure still represents a critical mass of people.¹⁷ Increasingly the number includes people who have been raised without religion, but they are outnumbered, and have been since at least 1972, when the GSS first began to ask Americans about religious affiliation, by those who have exited a religion. Cragun and Jesse Smith effectively capture the trend in their recent book *Goodbye Religion*: “In the 1970s, exiters were a relatively small group, though still larger than Mormons and Jews combined. But today, exiters are not a small group. As of 2023, there were more religious exiters in the US than Southern Baptists and almost as many exiters as Catholics.”¹⁸ Data on religious exit primarily has shown the drift, first a trickle and then a flood, away from mainline Protestantism and Catholicism—an unsurprising reflection of religious demographics in the United States. But in recent years, the increasing availability of exit as a cultural model has led to a swell of exit from smaller and more insular groups as well.

While leaving a religion can feel inconsequential, especially from a group in which drifting away is common and not highly stigmatized, many who leave what the people who study such groups and the people who leave them often call high-demand or high-control religious groups experience exit as a profound rupture, given how thoroughly their daily lives and relationships have been circumscribed by religion.¹⁹ Exit from such a

17 Gregory A. Smith and Alan Cooperman, “Has the Rise of the Religious Nones Come to an End?” *Pew Research Center*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>.

18 Ryan T. Cragun and Jesse M. Smith, *Goodbye Religion: The Causes and Consequences of Secularization* (New York University Press, 2024), 35.

19 To find a suitable umbrella term for groups as disparate as ultra-Orthodox Judaism, Scientology, and Mormonism, to name only a few of the groups mentioned in this article, is an ongoing struggle for anyone who studies such

religious groups commonly results in extreme isolation from one's former community—in many cases, the whole of an individual's social world—in the form of excommunication, disfellowshipping, shunning, or other forms of extreme ostracizing. For many such exiters, the experience of punishing isolation upon exit together with the fallout from wounding experiences while still in the group produce what many psychologists and religious exiters now call religious trauma.²⁰ While not every person exiting a high-demand religion would characterize their experiences or their mental/emotional state in this way, the prevalence of those who do has created a need, or an opportunity, for groups whose mission centers around trauma recovery; I discuss two representative examples below. Even exiters who do not feel burdened with religious trauma may simply feel lonely at the loss of their community and seek out new social connections, and many initiatives for exes prioritize this need.

Just as religious pluralism was the precondition that birthed interreligious dialogue, the increasing pluralism of the no-longer-religious cohort has birthed interfaithlessness.²¹ Initially, the Internet created the necessary (virtual) proximity. For example, the Reddit board r/IAmA began in 2009 as a forum where people could share “something uncommon that plays a central role in your life.”²² While not specifically geared toward religion, posts from ex-Scientists, ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, and ex-Mormons were among the earliest to be shared. Here, interfaithlessness manifested (and still manifests) as curiosity about other religions. Many of the commenters asking follow-up questions and sharing their own experiences come from other high-demand religious groups, remarking on a perceived similarity between their and the original poster's religions. Also prevalent are

groups, not least because they have little more in common than the way *some not all* members experience them. I am utilizing “high-demand religions” because it seems to me to be more value-neutral than terms like “cult” (which is, in fact, how almost all of the exes I spoke to referred to their former religion). But I want to stress that this is language of convenience, not fact. Though some religions may tend more toward a high-demand model, the totalizing or maximalist nature implied by “high-demand” or “high-control” is a strain within any religion rather than something inherent to particular religions. Free-rider Scientists exist just as surely as do thoroughly inculcated ones; maximalist Catholics exist just as surely as do cafeteria Catholics.

- 20 Psychologist Marlene Winnell formalized the term in “Religious Trauma Syndrome” (Series of 3 articles), *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Today* 39, nos. 2, 3, and 4 (May, September, and November 2011). The idea that religion could inflict trauma, however, had already been in currency for decades.
- 21 Interreligious dialogue, writes Thomas Albert Howard, depends on proximity, and is triggered when “alterity moves in next door” (Howard, *The Faiths of Others*, 14).
- 22 “IAmA,” Reddit, created May 27, 2009, [reddit.com/r/IamA/about/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IamA/about/).

comments both seeking and offering support resources for those wanting to leave, or in the process of leaving, a high-demand religion. Virtual channels like this one helped in-person initiatives for religious exiters to gain traction. As these in-person initiatives began to emerge, most operated, and still do, primarily in an idiom of trauma recovery. Brief descriptions of two representative examples will provide context for the sustained examination of the Interfaithless Beach Party that follows.

Recovering From Religion (RfR), the nonprofit organization whose Fall Excursion is described above, was established in 2009 to assist people leaving what it calls high-control religious groups. RfR offers a variety of services in addition to the Fall Excursion. These include the well-known Clergy Project, an online support community for current and former religious professionals who no longer believe; The Secular Therapy Project, a clearinghouse of nonreligious therapists; and a twenty-four-hour telephone hotline staffed by trained, volunteer peer supporters. RfR hosts online forums, in-person support groups in several cities, a blog, a podcast, and weekly Zoom sessions in which a guest presentation or interview is followed by a live moderated chat amongst attendees. Its various projects are roundly endorsed by many religious exiters across social media, with many calling RfR a lifeline in a time of crisis and key to easing their exit process. Another group, The Liberati, also foregrounds trauma, stating on its webpage, “Awakening from a lifetime of religious indoctrination and manipulation is painful. Please know that you are not alone. There is help and there is hope! Thousands of your fellow survivors of religious trauma are now thriving and living their best lives. Below are several resources that can help you on the journey from religious fear and control to freedom and self-determination.”²³ Like RfR, they host discussion groups and provide information about mental health topics. The Liberati also hosts more recreationally-coded events, like museum tours and neighborhood walks around New York City, including a “Holy Hipsters” walking tour of Williamsburg on which participants observe the culture of Hasidic Judaism. For both The Liberati and RfR, the needs of religious exiters are specific, profound, and primarily have to do with religious trauma. The Interfaithless Beach Party, to which I turn next, moves away from the trauma idiom and reveals other possibilities both for meeting the needs of exes and for analyzing their experiences. Without explicitly emphasizing trauma, the beach party still provided a healing context for exes, and also a robust opportunity for attendees to engage religion meaningfully across difference.²⁴

23 “You are Not Alone,” *The Liberati*, <https://theliberati.org/helpful-resources>.

24 Though all are explicitly welcoming to exes from all groups, RfR was started by ex-evangelicals, The Liberati by ex-Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Interfaithless

The Interfaithless Beach Party

The Interfaithless Beach Party (IBP), held in Southern California once or twice a year from 2014 to 2022, stands out as a rather idiosyncratic example of interfaithlessness. I conducted a survey with IBP attendees ($n = 29$, or roughly thirty-three percent of total attendance at the event's peak) and semi-structured interviews with six attendees in addition to the event's organizer. Such a small sample size will not support many generalizations, but it was plain from survey responses and interviews that the IBP was operating in a markedly different idiom than many other initiatives for exes. Rather than foregrounding trauma and recovery, the IBP, a beach barbecue that welcomed exes from any religious group for fellowship and recreation, foregrounded fun. Morris Bird, an ex-Mormon living in Los Angeles, started the event as an extension of informal dinners for ex-Mormons he had been organizing at local restaurants. After a harrowing past in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as the Mormon Church) and a drawn-out, difficult exit process, feeling alone and "crazy" in Los Angeles, Bird began to seek out other ex-Mormons on online message boards. He arranged and announced an in-person meetup at a local Chinese restaurant for anyone who was interested. It went well and he continued to arrange the dinners a couple of times a year. As he found more and more ex-Mormons interested in socializing, the size of the group became too unwieldy to gather comfortably around a restaurant table. The beach would both accommodate a larger group and communicate Bird's desire to "make it, like, the un-church," as he told me, where people could come and go as they pleased, without walls and without expectations or obligations. The first beach party, in 2013, was an ex-Mormon event like the dinners had been, but expanding the reach the following year to include exes from other groups was, Bird told me, a natural result of the curiosity the ex-Mormon group had often expressed about the experiences of people leaving other groups:

Once I did the first [beach party] I thought, well, hey, shoot, it's all sorts of room with the beach. And then I started to think...we would always inevitably talk about Jehovah's Witnesses or other kind of similar churches. And I thought, well, I'd like to meet those people who left those churches because, you know, that would be interesting to hear their experiences and how it compares to being Mormon and leaving Mormonism. And so then I found other

Beach Party by ex-Mormons. While it is beyond the scope of this article, further study on how these different backgrounds infect each initiative and shape its participants would be worthwhile.

message boards, people that left Jehovah's Witnesses or people that left Scientology or ex-Orthodox Jewish people or whatever...And it became so gratifying to hear people from all those other backgrounds share their experience.²⁵

Word of the Beach Party spread through preexisting ex communities, especially on Reddit and through Meetup.com. According to Bird, at its peak the event attracted about one hundred people, and most people I interviewed and surveyed attended multiple times, even driving back for the party from out of state if they had moved away from the area.

Numerically, the IBP was always predominantly ex-Mormon. One attendee I interviewed, himself an ex-Mormon, told me that he never really stopped thinking of it as an ex-Mormon event, another that he went several times before he noticed that it wasn't. But the vast majority of attendees I surveyed and interviewed reported that they came to appreciate deeply the interfaithless aspect of the IBP, even if for many, that aspect may have been incidental to their first attendance. On the other hand, several attendees told me that they were initially drawn to the event precisely because it was interfaithless. Renee, an ex-Mormon, said that when she first heard of the event, its interfaithlessness was "a huge draw. Absolutely a huge draw...Growing up in the religion that I did, we were really discouraged from connecting with people of other faith backgrounds...So [I loved] the idea of meeting all these people and finding out how similar or dissimilar our lives were." For Bird, that kind of exchange gave the event its meaning and purpose, and he worked continually to reach new prospective attendees. He told me he always hoped attendance would diversify even further to include, for example, more ex-Muslims (as far as he remembered, only one ex-Muslim had attended, though she did come back more than once). In other words, interfaithlessness was the point of the event for its founder and central for many attendees, though they perceived, experienced, and made sense of interfaithlessness in varied ways.

Organizational overwhelm led Bird to stop putting the event on after 2022.²⁶ Every attendee I spoke to was disappointed, if not devastated, that

25 Quotations in this section come from semi-structured telephone interviews I conducted with IBP attendees. They are lightly edited for grammar and clarity. With the exception of Morris Bird, a known figure, pseudonyms are used.

26 Though the timing of the event's demise coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic, a momentous period that had a profound and in many cases chilling effect on religious life and social life worldwide, COVID apparently was not responsible for the founder's decision to halt the beach parties. As he told me, the IBP did go on hiatus during the peak of the pandemic, but resumed with high participation when the worst was believed to be over.

the event had ceased, and expressed that they certainly would attend if it were to resume.²⁷ The value they placed on the event, their experiences there, and the friendships they made came through palpably and emotionally in our conversations. Attendees were at different stages of the exit process, from days to decades out of their former religious group, and in some cases with one foot still in the group. For some it was the first ex-related activity they had participated in, while for others it was one of several they had attended or were attending at the same time. And while many of my subjects spoke about how much they appreciated that, unlike many of the other events and groups they had attended or were attending at the same time, trauma was not overdetermined at the party, they also, without exception, spoke of how powerfully their distress was eased by attending. The IBP was the birthplace of profound friendships and a much-needed outlet for attendees' complicated feelings about religion and religious exit. Additionally, it was the site of a great deal of curiosity about, sharing of, and respect for religious difference, as I hope to show in what follows.

The IBP stood apart from many other interfaithless initiatives not only in that it did not foreground religious trauma, but also in that it was almost entirely unstructured. Its one fixed element was a striking one, considering the context: Every year, Bird would barbecue an enormous batch of pork ribs. It is not impossible—but also, I think, not likely—that Bird, having grown up surrounded by other Mormons, didn't realize pork would be a provocative choice. Perhaps he (incorrectly) assumed that, like himself, other attendees had no lingering attachments to the dictates of the religious groups they had left. Perhaps he wanted to cook and eat ribs and trusted other attendees to make their own food choices. But the pork ribs, reportedly an inescapable olfactory presence even if one did not choose to eat them, came up again and again in survey responses and my conversations with attendees as a symbolically loaded food and an important locus for post-religious identity work. Bird himself told me about an ex-Orthodox Jew who initially was “revolted” by the smell of the ribs and “couldn't even be downwind of them” for the first couple of years he attended. But, Bird said, “[H]e had a great time in spite of that, and he came time after time, and fast forward a couple of years and he just loved the ribs...He told me that the ribs were what helped him feel like he was moving on, that it was a way for him to just

27 Interestingly, one of my interview subjects told me that she had wanted to take over the work of organizing when Bird stepped back, but he had not wanted to hand over his contact lists to her. Bird told a different story, and I didn't press him on the issue. This article is not the space to speculate about this succession debate, but it is an interesting wrinkle in the story that certainly does bear further examination.

feel normal.” One survey respondent reported that the presence of the ribs initially created an awkward atmosphere and contributed to a feeling of not quite belonging, though this respondent also attended more than once and began to feel better about the situation in later years, upon realizing that one was not socially required to eat every food that was offered—politely refusing them year after year, as this respondent continued to do, was acceptable. For this respondent, learning to express food preferences was an important part of learning a new culture apart from Orthodox Judaism, even as those lasting preferences indicated an ongoing attachment to at least one of its norms.

Another story about the ribs came from interview subject Yael. Yael was a young mother of six when she stepped away from Orthodox Judaism “sort of in one fell swoop,” feeling terrified that she might lose her husband, who did not support her decision at the time, and her children. Her marriage survived (shakily at first, but more easily after a few years as her husband too began to move away from Orthodoxy), but she did lose all her friends and her entire support system. She took part in some of the virtual groups for ex-Orthodox Jews that Footsteps (discussed above) was offering during COVID, but told me, “A lot of people get stuck in that arena where they don’t ever feel fully comfortable to integrate. And I didn’t want that to be my community, these people that were sort of in the middle. I wanted to try to get to the other side of that, so I didn’t get stuck in that middle place.” “That middle place,” for Yael, would have been a new life largely circumscribed by ex-Orthodox people and norms in the same way that her old life was circumscribed by Orthodox culture; the interfaithlessness of the beach party provided a much more desirable alternative for her, one that felt more truly like moving forward. Driving to the IBP was Yael’s first time driving on Shabbat, and she recalled thinking “I will for sure get in an accident and I will die and no one will know...I will just have no one to call because I don’t have anyone that’s going to answer their phone [on Shabbat].” But she was exhilarated to drive away from the community, and upon arriving, though she was one of only four or five Jewish people in attendance, felt overjoyed to see families with children there. She thought, “It’s not hopeless for me...[T]heir kids are coming and they still are living their lives. It didn’t end just because they have kids and they’re stuck...in all of that.” When presented with the pork ribs, Yael told me she was shocked for a moment but then didn’t hesitate:

There were pork spareribs...I had my first pork at that meeting...I was just like, everyone’s doing it. It’s fine. They’re like, nothing’s going to happen. You’re going to be alright. I felt more supported

and cheered on...It felt like an inauguration of some sort, like, you're part of this. You have the strength to do this. Someone said, oh, do you still keep kosher? Do you want the ribs? They're really good, but you don't have to, you know, and they were very respectful of where I was at. And then...[an] Israeli man, he was like, "Oh my God, you know those are pork!" I know, the first meeting you're eating pork! Like, well, why not? You really jumped in with both feet, huh? I'm out, I'm driving here, I'm coming here, I'm going to eat whatever you have. Yeah, I'm just doing it.

A couple of observations emerge from Yael's story. First, like the other Orthodox Jews I mentioned above who either did or did not choose to eat the ribs, Yael used food choices to both (literally) internalize and demonstrate a new sense of self and way of being, in keeping with research on leaving religion as a highly embodied process.²⁸ Had this been an event only for ex-Orthodox Jews, one imagines that pork probably would not have been on the menu and Yael would not have had such an opportunity. The interfaithlessness of the event, then, facilitated her negotiation of Jewishness and ex-Jewishness, echoing how interfaith engagement requires its participants to continually refine and assert identity boundaries. Second, the group's response is a striking mix of respect and support for her religious background and any attachment to it she might retain, and encouragement to cast off those attachments. The collective acknowledgement of the ribs' significance for a Jewish person, ex-ness notwithstanding, demonstrates recognition of and respect for religious difference, even for different religious ontologies.

Other foods at the IBP were significant as well. Renee told me about the themed snacks people brought to share, foods parodying or poking fun at attendees' religious backgrounds, which created opportunities for engagement in a playful mode:

There are inside joke snacks from different groups that you don't know about until you encounter other groups. Like people bring Mormon desserts as a joke with Jell-O, a lot of Jell-O salad, cupcakes with funny sayings on them...One time [an ex-Mormon] decorated cupcakes with fake Prozac, [because Utah County has]

28 See, for example, Lynn Davidman, "The transformation of bodily practices among religious defectors." *Embodied resistance: Challenging the norms, breaking the rules*, ed. Chris Bobel and Samantha Kwan (Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), 209–19; and Maria Vliek, "(Re)Negotiating embodiment when moving out of Islam: An empirical inquiry into 'A Secular Body,'" In *Transforming Bodies and Religions*, ed. Mariecke van den Berg et al. (Taylor and Francis, 2020).

the highest rate of antidepressant use in the country...[To ex-Mormons] it's funny because it's a way of coping, and then also the Scientologists could joke about it because they're not allowed to have psychiatric medication, so it's like, oh, don't eat the Prozac cupcakes! You'll get in trouble! Just jokes like that, goofing on things.

Parody foods nicely evoke ex-ness as characterized by Ebaugh (above), revolving around the having-been-the-thing, the both-once-and-no-more. They reveal both the knowledge of the insider and nostalgia for the past attachment, but the "goofing" element loudly communicates a different, removed positionality vis-à-vis the former community. The foods don't signal "I'm not that thing," but rather, "I'm not that thing, *but I was*."

Humor and lighthearted fun, from joking about cupcakes to having bonfire singalongs, were big parts of the IBP, and several attendees told me the event's levity was exactly what they appreciated about it. For many that levity provided a much-needed counterpoint to more overtly therapeutic activities they were participating in or had participated in as part of their exit process, whether that was actual therapy or meetups that foregrounded trauma. As Julie told me, "I've had some events personally where I invited a therapist to be there to sit and talk with us, and it was a much more intensive experience. Not everyone wants that or is comfortable with that. Nice to have just simple fun." Renee called it "the summer camp version of therapy." But the IBP wasn't all levity. As Julie and others reported, and as the generalized survey results confirmed, though the conversations were more casual than in a more overtly therapeutic setting, most of the conversations were about attendees' shared experiences in a high-demand religion. Many of those experiences were highly distressing, and the conversations that proceeded from them weighty. For example, the beach setting compelled serious conversations about bathing attire, modesty, and body image, conversations that often dredged up difficult pasts (which, in many cases, were not so very long past) but that, as Renee told me, "people could just feel safe to have." Here was an opportunity to talk with one another about experiences, especially difficult ones, that they didn't feel they could share with anyone else. As Rob told me,

I remember going and just number one being so excited as it was coming up and then going to it and then after leaving just feeling very full and, like, yes, I can do this and my people are out there and...I would just have so many passionate conversations and people understood me and my story because they had been through

almost the exact same thing and it was like, you just felt like that was my tribe, and it was very significant, feelings of just happiness and warmth, because these people knew exactly what I had been through because they had been through almost the same thing... That was my new tribe, people who had been all in and then were all out. Because those are the only people that truly understand my story, and where I've been.

They were, he said, “going on a journey together” as they negotiated the upheaval of religious exit. Rob, for example, had not spoken to his family for thirty years when he and I talked; estrangement from family and friends, usually continuing into the present, came up in every conversation I had. For many, the connections made at the IBP came to occupy at least a portion of that void.

Another ex-Mormon, Ammon, who had been in the military, described the feeling of familiarity at the IBP as “just a little vibe or something,” and compared it to meeting someone else with a military background. Without any outward signs or words exchanged, there would be a sense of recognition between former military, and that’s what he felt at the IBP, “but deeper, much, much deeper.” Outside of the IBP, Ammon had only told a handful of people—probably fewer than five, he thought—about his Mormon background because it was “just very hard to explain to people.” But at the IBP, no explanation was necessary. His differences with the church, and his motivation for leaving, had been largely intellectual and he still, decades after his departure, felt silly for once having believed LDS teachings. “[T]he word crazy doesn’t begin to explain what you are saturated with [as a Mormon]. And so therefore seeking out people who had that same shared experience was somehow comforting for me...and I haven’t had that since they stopped the beach parties.” Though the commonality was most immediate with other ex-Mormons, he said he “definitely” felt it with attendees who had exited religions other than Mormonism. Bird shared the same sentiment:

[I]t was therapeutic to realize that not only was I not alone within Mormonism or being an ex-Mormon, but I was in many ways part of a broader human experience of people who left high-demand religions... [Those] communities are very tight knit. You’re kind of inside your own little community very strongly. And once you leave, you leave by yourself and then larger communities are gone and your friends are gone and your parents might be hostile towards you... And it was just kind of gratifying to meet people from other

backgrounds and swap notes and realize that you weren't so unusual. Or your experience wasn't so unusual.

The commonality attendees found with one another, and the feeling of being deeply understood in a way that they couldn't be in any other setting, were defining aspects of the beach party for every survey respondent and interviewee, without exception.

More than simply finding commonality with one another, attendees insisted on commonality—that the experience of walking away from a certain type of religious group rendered them profoundly like one another, even in the face of acknowledged differences. Renee described how different religious groups “cultivate different skill sets and different personalities”:

We would always joke [about] where you could find everybody. It'd be like, okay, I'm at the park. All the Scientologists are talking really loudly at the table over here and all the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are helping set up all the desserts...Of course the ex-Mormons are going around to see if anyone needs seconds, of course the Jehovah's Witnesses are diligently already taking out the trash, of course the Scientologists are arguing about where the cornhole should be set up because they're asserting their leadership over the situation.

Julie also spoke of traits that inhered within certain groups: “[T]here were some really fun moments [because of it], like the Mormon crowd, they were artsy and liked to sing and dance and stuff. I feel like that's part of their upbringing. And so a lot of us ended up going to karaoke and...I found out there were a lot of people that I connected with on other aspects.” Different religious upbringings bestowed various qualities or interests that, in post-religious life, became the basis for connections and ultimately friendships.

Difference was perceived in more serious ways, too. Several of my interviewees voiced the sentiment that exes from other groups were worse off than they themselves were, that others were more vulnerable or threatened or simply faced a more difficult time transitioning out of their religious community. Julie, for example, was especially sensitive to how extreme shunning was for ex-Orthodox Jews, who often retained perceptible markers of difference that she, as an ex-Scientologist, did not have. This sensitivity to others' special vulnerability emerged in a concrete episode that a number of interviewees mentioned. At one of the parties, attendees were unnerved by the presence of a man no one could quite put a finger on; he turned out to be a representative from the Church of Scientology. Precisely to guard

against such incidents, Bird did not make the exact location of the IBP widely public, but somehow the “Scientology spy,” as my interviewees described him, had found the spot. The group banded together to protect the ex-Scientologists and oust the infiltrator on their behalf. Renee, who was not an ex-Scientologist, told me that episode “made the group feel really powerful and healing for me...It almost makes me tear up because it feels so wonderful and full circle.” The opportunity to protect a fellow attendee in a threatening situation seemed important to several interviewees, a way to demonstrate their newfound opposition to religious control and to confront religious authority, even if it wasn’t their own.

Some attendees were surprised to find dynamics of similarity and difference playing out otherwise than they had expected. Renee, an ex-Mormon, spoke of finding more commonality with women from other religious groups than with ex-Mormon men. As she said, “I was really surprised by how similar the experience of growing up in Mormonism as a girl and growing up in Jehovah’s Witnesses as a girl [were]...the pressure you’re under in a certain way that I was like, wow, I never realized that we were having the exact same challenges.” With ex-Mormon men, however, Renee noticed that they usually left the church because of intellectual disagreements, whereas women left because of repression and patriarchy.²⁹ That difference was difficult for her to overcome:

It is very telling how...in the ex-Mormon diaspora, the women have these stories about, like, I left college to have a bunch of kids and I never got to live my dreams, and then if their partner or man leaves he’ll be like, “Yeah, I know. When I was a Boy Scout we used to do all the fun stuff at church, but now I have a wife who complains all the time.” It’s like, my guy. Your problems are not the same. There’s not always an acknowledgement that there’s this element of physical and emotional labor the women have held for them. And [men] tend to be like, “I left because it wasn’t true.”

Ex-Mormon men, she felt, couldn’t understand the experiences of ex-Mormon women. But ex-Jehovah’s Witness women, ex-Orthodox Jewish women, could and did, in ways that made her feel seen and heard.

29 I observed the same gendered variance in interviews and survey results, and it bears further exploration. It is important to note, however, that while such a variance no doubt reflects, at least in part, the actual experiences of the subjects relating them, it also reflects the different norms according to which women and men are taught to interpret and articulate their experiences and feelings.

IBP attendees differed too in their relationship to religion. They maintained varying degrees of attachment to their former religion's cultures, practices, and beliefs, and identified with or without or against religion in almost as many different ways as there were respondents. Bird spoke to this difference when he told me about some attendees' desire to burn religious items, specifically the Book of Mormon. Renee had already told me this was something that happened at the party; she found it cathartic, as did many others. Bird viewed it differently: "[T]here were always people that were at some stage along their transition, right? Some people were halfway in, halfway out...[S]ome people were just curious, and I didn't want anybody who still had any measure of faith to feel like they were being attacked...I just wanted people to feel comfortable, even if they had some measure of belief inside them towards God or whatever else." Thus, while one may be tempted to observe that attendees got along so easily simply because they had no stake in the truth claims of their various religions and thus no insurmountable ideological differences, that was not the case. They had all left their religious groups, but they had detached from their respective truth claims to widely varying degrees. They retained profoundly different notions of ontology and of community, of what being an ex meant vis-à-vis the group they had left. Exes retain cosmologies tied to the community they left; one imagines that, for example, an ex-Scientologist's and an ex-Orthodox Jew's cosmologies are fairly dissimilar.³⁰ In everyone's telling, however, such differences were of lesser weight than the perceived, *insisted upon* commonality of their shared experience. In short, rather than entirely eliding the differences, both superficial and quite meaningful, that still obtained between them, IBP attendees emphasized their experience-based commonality. As Julie (an ex-Scientologist, thus always in a minority at the party) observed about the interplay between similarity and difference: "I think that's actually one of the things that made it so it was a much less triggering experience for a lot of people, because of the fact that you could recognize yourself in someone else, but not like looking in a freaking mirror."

Interfaith Transposed

Interfaithless initiatives echo interfaith ones when they host and foster curiosity about different religions, and when they connect people across (ex)religious difference to confront the shared challenges that attend to religious exit. The IBP renders that echo particularly robust, as exes

30 Schwartz, "In Terms of OTD."

demonstrate their respect for other religions and form intense, lasting connections with people from other religious backgrounds. Is interfaithlessness, then, interfaith? As I mentioned above, subjects had very different relationships to their former religious communities, practices, and beliefs, but most told me that they did not think of themselves as religious anymore. Does characterizing interfaithlessness as interfaith, even as somehow related to it, thus fall prey to the error that Wayne Proudfoot identified as “descriptive reductionism,” whereby we “ascribe to [someone] concepts he would not recognize or beliefs he would not acknowledge”?³¹ To describe religious exes as still somehow “really” religious certainly would run this risk, and in many if not all cases would, I believe, fall prey to this error. But as Kevin Schilbrack observes, to *re-describe* something as religious, even if religion is a non-native term to the population in question, can be not only acceptable but useful. To do so is not to say that the population is latently religious, but simply that patterns derived from the study of religion can be applied legitimately and fruitfully elsewhere.³²

Placing interfaithlessness “along the edges” of interfaith does not, to my mind, achieve this redescription. The spatiality of the metaphor is literally marginalizing, suggesting that there is a central way to do both faith and interfaith, and then there are peripheral, lesser, not-quite-right ways. Even bracketing the value judgments this model imposes, it does not reflect the reality of the American religious landscape, which is characterized by the instability of its centers and margins. In fact Numrich is arguing quite the opposite about his examples of unintentional interfaith—that those examples *are interfaith too*—but in considering interfaithlessness, the metaphor does not best serve the argument, not least because in some ways, interfaithlessness is *more* like interfaith than Numrich’s examples, in which religion may be entirely incidental.³³ In the interfaithless initiatives I have described, religion is anything but incidental; rather, “religious residue” is, by the acknowledgement of all present, the order of the day.³⁴ As Cragun and Smith observe, echoing Ebaugh on ex-ness, the formerly-religious, though in many cases not themselves religious any longer, still are “related to religion

31 Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (University of California Press, 1985), 193.

32 Kevin Schilbrack, “Religions: Are There Any?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010): 1112–38.

33 Paul D. Numrich, “How Important Is Religion in Interreligious Relationships? Interreligious Space-Sharing as a Case Study,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 26 (2019): 42–57.

34 Nadia Beider, “Religious residue: The impact of childhood religious socialization on the religiosity of nones in France, Germany, Great Britain, and Sweden,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 74, no. 1 (2023): 50–69.

in some way, be it discursively, descriptively, or practically[.]” They continue:

[E]ven though to be nonreligious is to not have religion, it is also some kind of positive differentiation from religion, not just a ‘lack’ of it. Put differently, whether a person consciously decides to leave religion with great fanfare, or slowly drifts away from it without noticing, the process nevertheless involves changes in beliefs, behaviors, and identities that stand *in relation* to previously held religious beliefs, behaviors, and identities.³⁵

What I am suggesting we see in these interfaithlessness initiatives, especially the Interfaithless Beach Party, is not a marginal or lesser kind of interfaith engagement, but rather a fully legitimate, vigorous example of interfaith engagement that simply has a different source—that of ex-ness rather than religious identification. It is in this sense that I employ the metaphor of transposition, not in the spatial sense that clearly resides within both its literal meaning and many of its usages, but rather in its musical sense of an all-but-identical melody originating from a different starting point.³⁶

There is a further aspect of musical transposition that seems to me to be especially apt here. A musical transposition usually is meant to solve a compositional problem. When a piece of music is out of range for a particular voice or instrument, for example, the transposition nudges it higher or lower on the scale, rendering accessible what was formerly unlikely or impossible (or at least unpleasant to listen to). Exes from high-demand religious groups acutely need support in their world-building endeavors, and as they told me, they need the worlds they are working to build to include religious diversity, both as a reflection of the milieus they are tentatively entering for the first time, and as a corrective to their insular pasts. Traditional interfaith spaces, for as much as they increasingly succeed at efforts to include the nonreligious, may not feel inviting or suitable to people struggling with the effects of complicated religious pasts and presents. Interfaithless spaces, however, can render accessible the benefits of religious diversity—benefits for which my subjects poignantly articulated a real need—for those who no longer feel able or willing to think of themselves as religious.

35 Cragun and Smith, *Goodbye Religion*, 18.

36 Indeed, historian of American religion Martin Marty used the term in its spatial sense, to talk about movements from centers to margins, in “Transpositions: American religion in the 1980s,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 480, no. 1 (1985): 11–23.

In their book *Goodbye Religion*, Cragun and Smith analyze whether several worried predictions about what a less religious society might look like have come true in the years since the rise of the nones. Will a greater proportion of nonreligious people mean a decrease in civic engagement, kindness, or charitable giving? Do nonreligious people have fewer children or worse general health? Do they find less meaning in life? Across the board, Cragun and Smith find that the “pillars of American society” have not been much changed by the decline in religiosity, and do not manifest in particularly different ways for nonreligious versus religious people. Analyzing Pew and GSS data, they find that nonreligious people are as kind, if not more so, than religious people, if views on immigration or attitudes toward members of other religious groups are taken as measures of kindness. Data does not indicate measurable differences in health outcomes between religious and nonreligious people. Nonreligious people are no more likely to violate universally accepted moral codes than religious people. In other words, anxiety about a decline in religiosity leading to a damaged society is, they argue, unfounded.³⁷ The examples of interfaithlessness I have discussed here, especially the Interfaithless Beach Party, allow for a further conclusion: Even those who have, by their own characterization, been deeply wounded by religion do not necessarily hate religion or long for secularization. They may regret their own experiences, but they still have the capacity—and the desire—to engage on the basis of religion, even across difference, and to respect the ways that their fellow exes may remain attached to it.

Thus, any expectation that an increasing proportion of exes in society will lead automatically to antipathy toward religion either at the societal level or the individual level—an expectation that, as Cragun and Smith observe, may be a fearsome one to some—seems unfounded and must be rethought in light of cases like the IBP. Certainly, and in many cases justifiably, exes from high-demand religions tend to be antipathetic toward their own religion, and toward high-demand religions in general, but IBP attendees were not categorically opposed to religion, with some subjects joining a different one after their exit. Often, they did not even hate or reject everything about the one they had left (Yael gave her daughter a bat mitzvah, albeit a nontraditional one; Ammon supported his daughter in attending Brigham Young University). Instead, they were thoughtful about religion, their own and others’. They engaged with one another on the basis of religion; they found and celebrated their similarities and defended one another’s perspectives and experiences. Such engagement is especially striking given that most of these subjects had little to no experience with the

37 Cragun and Smith, “How is this Affecting Society?”, in *Goodbye Religion*, 207–49.

kind of inclusivity required for the community-building project they were undertaking. On the contrary, most had come out of radically exclusivist contexts; many were reacting against precisely that exclusivism when they left. And despite, in many cases, a lack of experience with anything like that kind of community, it seemed to be working. As Yael told me:

I was very mistrustful [at first]...I was just really afraid of even being at the beach at night alone...And I was so happy driving home. I just felt so free and so much strength from it that I just came home so happy. My husband was so mad when I opened the door and I just thought, Oh my gosh, this is like I'm on cloud nine. No one could take away my joy today...I felt so not alone. And that's really what I needed.

IBP attendees were profoundly affirmed and enriched by their fellowship with one another, just as they were occasionally challenged.

I did not ask my subjects whether they understood what they were doing at the Beach Party as interfaith, and I do not expect they all would have answered that question the same way. But it seems to me that, for IBP attendees and for others participating in interfaithless initiatives, the metaphor of interfaith transposed would not seem farfetched. It is true that, throughout our conversation, Bird repeatedly referred to his desire to make the IBP “like the inverse of a church,” and that the vast majority of interviewees and survey subjects reported that they were not religious anymore. But recall the interviewee I mentioned earlier who more than once referred to the Interfaith—not Interfaithless—Beach Party; recall Renee who, in joking about where everyone could be found at the party, toggled back and forth between calling people exes and calling them simply Mormons or Scientologists or Jehovah’s Witnesses, without the “ex.” The line between religion and ex-religion is a blurry one for many of these subjects, as they acknowledged often. They recognized the ongoing effects of religious attachments and experiences in their lives, not in opposition to but by way of ex-ness—*because of* the decision to leave, not in spite of it. Nostalgia for aspects of their former lives often floats like a ghostly melody through current lives lived in a state of ex-ness. For many of my subjects, interfaithless initiatives helped to shift that melody from a sad-sounding minor key into a cheerier major one. The current age of religious exit thus may bring about not less but more opportunity for meaningful exchange, appreciation, and connection across (ex)religious differences, as exes fashion their new lives in concert with one another.

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