

# **The Mason Jar Mentality: Conservative Protestantism & Interfaith Cooperation in the American South**

**By Terry Shoemaker with Research Assistants James Marcus Hughes, Farrin Marlow, Megan Maddern, and Emily Potter**

In the summer of 2013, one of the researchers on this project, Terry Shoemaker, worked with Harvard's Pluralism Project to document religious pluralism and interfaith activities in the city of Bowling Green, Kentucky. By the end of the research project, a unique level (for the South Central Kentucky region) of religious diversity was apparent including Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim faith communities. In a region dominated by myriad versions of Christianity, the city has been diversifying religiously since the 1990s. The diversification is fueled by the resettlement of refugees into the area including Bosnian, Burmese, Burundi, and Iraqi immigrants. Yet, even with the presence of religious diversity, very little, if any, formal interfaith dialogue and cooperation was discovered. In fact, in the final analysis regarding the lack of interfaith cooperation, it was concluded that the refugee religious communities were "in early phases of establishing themselves in the region, thus it is likely that much of the energy and focus of these communities is directed internally."<sup>1</sup> Or as one of our interlocutors in this project explained, "I don't really have much interfaith contact. I don't really know why that is. I guess I have just been focused on moving here and getting settled."

Upon further review, the final analysis of the previously mentioned Harvard Pluralism Project report was limited by placing the onus of interfaith responsibility upon the non-dominant religious communities, namely the non-Christian communities. Upon this realization, a more comprehensive, collaborative investigation was conducted to analyze religious attitudes, perspectives, and practices that inhibit interfaith and intrafaith cooperation in the Bowling Green, Kentucky community. Thus, within this paper, the product of the more comprehensive investigation, we introduce the "mason jar mentality" concept, briefly describe the broad implications of this mentality, and offer an analysis of the impacts of this mentality on current and future interfaith possibilities.

Conservative Protestantism in the American South has been an analytical focal point of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and those in religious studies particularly since the emergence of the Moral Majority in the 1970s and '80s. Many of these research projects have indicated low-levels of tolerance toward out-groups by conservative Protestants including measurements detailing conservative Protestants' attitudes toward homosexuals, Muslims, and atheists, as well as others;<sup>2</sup> and attempted to offer an explanation regarding the causes of such religious and political intolerance such as social capital limitations, biblical hermeneutics, or church attendance.<sup>3</sup> While scholars, like Christian Smith, have attempted to offer a more nuanced position of conservative Protestantism by conducting qualitative interviews, the majority of these research projects fail to offer an analysis of conservative Protestants specifically in the American South regarding their attitudes and perceptions of other faith traditions within their local context, which is the methodological objective of the current research project.<sup>4</sup>

## **Research Context**

Bowling Green, Kentucky, a city located along Interstate 65 in South Central Kentucky, houses a high level of Christian churches and religious affiliation. Bowling Green's official city website enumerates approximately 150 religious institutions within the Bowling Green/Warren

County community.<sup>5</sup> Of the 150 religious communities, the majority can be classified as conservative Protestant (Baptist, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, etc), and only three listed were not specifically Christian (Jewish, Muslim, and Unitarian Universalist were listed, while the website failed to list an additional Islamic center and two Buddhist monasteries). Further, data indicate 52% of the population of Bowling Green is religiously affiliated, just slightly above the national average.<sup>6</sup> Most of the religious diversity in Bowling Green is correlated with the city's refugee relocation settlement status since the late 1970s making the city unique in the South Central Kentucky region. Moreover, the research's interviewees of Bowling Green provide a small city/rural perspective on an increasing religious pluralism.

Data for this project consisted of over forty-five qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with religious adherents in the Bowling Green, Kentucky area including adherents who identified as Buddhist, Muslim, Taoist, no religious affiliation, and Christian (conservative Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, and Mainline Protestants). Approximately half of the interviewees identified as conservative Protestant. Questions were developed in five main categories: self-identification, cultural traditions, perceptions of the particular religious community, perceptions of local immigrant and refugee populations, and political leanings. Each particular faith group was selected in order to create as accurate of a sketch of the region's religious landscape as possible. All interviews were recorded and analyzed for reoccurring themes.

### **The Mason Jar Mentality**

Reflecting on conservative Protestants in the American South, Charles Reagan Wilson posited, "Evangelicals had come to see themselves as the moral custodians of their culture and now they were becoming its public defenders against outside attack."<sup>7</sup> Situated into a defensive mode due to the self-proclaimed status of moral custodian and public defender, conservative Protestants perceive themselves to be under attack by an increasingly diversifying landscape and the loss of social and political power. The response has been to utilize their religious institutions to preserve their particular subculture, which includes religious, political, and cultural resources.

To be sure, cultural preservationism within religious communities exists outside of conservative Protestantism. Within our research, a majority of interviewees, of all religious affiliations, noted some aspect of cultural preservation within their religious communities. For instance, one mainline Protestant respondent provided the following reflection regarding the attraction of his particular church:

It seems that for people [at this particular church], it's the history. So the people that are here, its because "my family has been here so many generations," or "we've been going to this church since the beginning," or "one of my ancestors was a founder." So [the church members] are very proud of the heritage.

And cultural preservationism has particularly been identified within immigrant religious communities who have settled in the United States.<sup>8</sup> But what makes conservative Protestantism in the American South unique is the central emphasis on cultural preservation and their majority status. The defensive mode in a region marked by historical and contemporary dominance, motivates conservative Protestants to work diligently to maintain, strengthen, increase, and protect their heritage and political power. This hyper focus on preservation as a response to a perceived threat from external forces is what we refer to as the "mason jar mentality."

In the American South, it is not uncommon to open kitchen cabinets and discover rows of mason jars containing carefully canned vegetables or fruits. Through the canning process, Southerners preserve the quality of the food for years to come. Similarly, the same survivalist, mason jar mentality that compels canning and storage process of foods works to encourage conservative Protestants to focus attention and energy to the socio-religious preservationist processes. Members must actively preserve their beliefs and practices via isolationism and active proselytism while emphasizing the education of the members. The work of preservation requires sincere commitment, and conservative Protestants perceive even the process of preservation as under attack. One conservative Protestant interviewee expressed her perception that her freedom to exercise her faith is limited: “At the end of the chapter of Matthew, [Christians] are supposed to go out to other countries, expose the Word to them and baptize them, go to all different nations. Yet, I feel like we can’t step on anyone’s toes here in our country.” And although data confirm that a majority of citizens in the United States still identify as Christian, every conservative Protestant interviewee stated otherwise.

The mason jar mentality functions similarly to Peter Berger’s theory of religious functionality in *The Sacred Canopy*. Within the work, Berger posits that religion provides interpretive meaning against anomie for devotees. Therefore religion is necessary to explain the unexplainable. Similarly, the mason jar mentality provides assurance for devotees by affirming a constructed teleology and theology. However, the major difference between the sacred canopy and the mason jar mentality is the source of fear. Berger suggested, “there are events affecting entire societies or social groups that provide massive threats to the reality previously taken for granted.”<sup>9</sup> For previous generations, the massive threats were largely unknown, but for those with the mason jar mentality in the American South, the source of fear is the awareness that “during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a series of profound social, demographic, and intellectual transformations began to challenge evangelical Protestantism’s security, influence, and relevance.”<sup>10</sup> And this insecurity creates fear that future generations will not care to maintain their beliefs and resources for “the greatest fear that haunts evangelical parents is that their children will not follow in their footsteps.”<sup>11</sup> The response to this fear is the impetus for the mason jar mentality and leads adherents to cluster into larger institutions like megachurches (Bowling Green, a city with a population of approximately 60,000 citizens, houses four conservative Protestant megachurches).

Religious institutions in the American South serve as the mason jars. For it is the religious institution, which facilitates the difficult work of careful preservation including identity constructions (including gender roles), rhetoric, food cultures, hermeneutical practices, political positions, and Southern culture. The connections to Robert Bellah’s theory of civil religion, albeit on a regional scale, obviously apply to these practices.<sup>12</sup> To ensure the shelf life of the final product, religious institutions in the American South emphasize proselytizing as a means to exponentially increase preservers. One interviewee explained, “Based on what we believe (God and the Bible), we believe that we should be an example to other people so that they can maybe take on our beliefs.” Once converted, the devotee must adhere and advocate for the entire inherited cultural norms. And there tends to be very little room for deviation from these norms. Yet, we are not suggesting here that conservative Protestants maintain prejudicial, racist, or discriminatory practices. As a matter of fact a common response to our questioning was similar to the following comment: “regardless of people’s faults or negative actions they have done, we are to love all people, any color, or type.” Rather we are suggesting the maintenance of a level of exclusivity based on religious identification is the foundation for the conservative Protestant community in the American South and the preserving of this exclusivity forms boundaries. As the previous respondent continued, “once they become a part of the Christian faith, *then* they become our brothers and sisters in Christ.”

Furthermore the mason jar mentality extends beyond the religious world of the adherents into the political and civic realm. Due to the preservationist tendencies institutionalized by conservative Protestants, advancements in public policy, science, and diversification are all viewed with suspicion. The First Amendment is perceived as the sacred, political foundation for the institutionalized mason jar lens. Educational arguments against teaching evolution, unwillingness to extend basic civil liberties to minority groups, and the noncompliance with federal mandates like the Affordable Healthcare Act are all contemporary examples of civil disputes formulated through religious freedom justifications. In all of these instances, conservative Protestants lead the public conflicts due to an attempt to preserve previously held positions.

To be sure, the mason jar mentality does not simply exclude non-Christian groups, but extends to limit intrafaith cooperation within the region. An interviewee explained, “our church participates with other denominations *as long as* they believe in Christ.” Of interest is that the interviewee qualified the participation to only those Christian churches that “believe in Christ.” Thus other Christian communities must pass through a litmus test before participation can be finalized. As a matter of fact, within the large megachurches with multiple worship services, interviewees mentioned that those that attended outside of their particular service “were mere babes in Christ lacking real spiritual foundations.” These subcultures of religious identification create clearly defined limits for their adherents. Responding to a question regarding relationships with non-Christians, one female devotee quipped, “people who do not believe in God and the Bible are not bad people. Its just people who do believe in the Bible have a different criteria of living, different *boundaries* that we aren’t suppose to cross.”

In sum, conservative Protestant churches supply agential spaces of religiosity and politics offering affirmation and opportunity for adherents to find justification and confirmation of their subculture. Collectively, conservative Protestants continue to unite with thousands of like-minded individuals throughout their weekly schedules to cultivate an amalgamation of common rhetoric, Southern culture, faith, religious texts, and political positions. The conservative Protestant devotees receive continual encouragement to work towards establishing a local and national agreed upon ideal. And the mason jar mentality as described here appears to preclude formalized interfaith or intrafaith dialogue for outsider groups are viewed as antagonistic by preserving their own cultures. Therefore, conservative Protestants with the mason jar mentality perceive all other religious institutions as religious and political competition. This animosity demonstrates itself within the clustering tendencies of the majority of religious communities within the South Central Kentucky area.

## **Conclusion**

While *diversity* is certainly increasing in south central Kentucky, *pluralism* remains lacking. As outlined by the Harvard Pluralism Project, pluralism is not simply the presence of diversity, but is defined by four critical characteristics: “energetic engagement with diversity,” “the active seeking of understanding across differences,” “the encounter of commitments,” and is “based on dialogue.”<sup>13</sup> The Harvard Pluralism Project has identified cities around the U.S. that exhibit the characteristics of religious pluralism. Bowling Green is not one of them. The research suggests that religious organizations *are* providing stable community and a sense of identity to their participants. However, that is only a part of the responsibilities of a healthy faith community. To survive as relevant and useful institutions, religious communities must take an active role in community engagement.

The desire to preserve traditions is a natural expression for any kind of community, including religious communities. Mark Mullins proposes three stages of development are found in immigrant religious communities, the first and second of which include efforts to preserve cultural traditions as well as beliefs.<sup>14</sup> As the research here suggests, this tendency is found in dominant religious groups as well. The challenge arises when these preservationist tendencies become primary and inhibit constructive dialogue and cooperation. In a special report evaluating interfaith dialogue, The United States Institute of Peace defines mutual tolerance as “a process that begins with the ability to interact without fear or aggression, and progresses, through empathy and understanding, to mutual respect.”<sup>15</sup> The report identifies mutual tolerance as a method for conflict prevention and resolution. Efforts to initiate interfaith dialogue and cooperation among diverse religious communities help to foster understanding among people of different faiths while highlighting similar goals.<sup>16</sup> However, creating space for dialogue is not easy. The Interfaith Youth Core—an organization that encourages young people to engage in and foster religious pluralism across the United States—identifies the key elements of healthy interfaith attitudes:

Effective interfaith programs facilitate positive meaningful relationships between people from different backgrounds and increase appreciative knowledge of other traditions. Social science data tells us that knowledge and relationships are the primary drivers of positive attitudes. And people with positive attitudes toward religious diversity will seek more appreciative knowledge and meaningful relationship.<sup>17</sup>

Many examples exist of Kentucky cities and organizations that are making progress toward effective religious pluralism. For instance, Louisville, Kentucky is a diverse city and incorporates a variety of interfaith initiatives. One promising example is the Festival of Faiths, which is organized by the Center for Interfaith Relations (CIR) and hosted in Louisville each year. The festival is organized around a different theme each year—this year’s theme is “Sacred Earth, Sacred Self”—and includes a series of relevant speakers that bring attention to critical issues around the world, like environmentalism, compassion, and cooperation. The event is intended as a celebration of the diversity of the Louisville area and as a unifying call to action for members of all faith groups. Festival of Faiths is marketed well and has a presence on the web and social media. The website even includes an in-depth digital booklet (“Export Festival of Faiths”) that outlines the process and preparation necessary for building a similar festival in another city.<sup>18</sup> As illustrated by this example, successful interfaith initiatives tend to have several factors in common: (1) a specified goal, (2) a broadly targeted appeal, (3) and ties to the local community. While the first goal of interfaith communities is, of course, interfaith dialogue, effective interfaith initiatives are usually organized around another common goal, for instance, developing sustainable energy practices or housing the homeless. Smaller cities like Bowling Green could benefit from the examples set by larger metropolitan areas like this.

But just as formalized religious institutions seem to exclude any type of interfaith collaboration, possibilities seem more plausible in one-to-one relational aspects. Indeed as our respondents moved beyond institutionalized faith exclusions to their own subjective religiosity the boundaries expanded. One Baptist respondent described himself as “very open-minded” while still maintaining Christian values. Further, he admitted that Islam had opened his eyes due to the fact that he has a couple of Muslim friends that have “rubbed off” on him. He agreed, “it is interesting to see what other people believe,” and made room for personal relationships not based on religious adherence or preservation. Another interviewee claimed, “its good to be diverse. I think its positive in that it makes you think. It expands your worldview. It’s good to realize that people are just like us. They go to work. They go to the café. They’re just like us.”

The realization that outside of religious identification, others “are just like us” might take time in the American South, like many predominantly homogenous areas within rural United States, but the formation of relationships by individual devotees could eventually break through the mason jar mentality.

As noted in the final report of the previously mentioned Harvard Pluralism Project, as South Central Kentucky becomes more diverse, the religious landscape has the possibility to develop in one of two directions: on one hand, religious communities could turn increasingly inward, becoming more isolated and defensive over time cultivating their own mason jars. However, through education, exposure, and interfaith relationships, the community may be able to create an environment of cooperation and pluralism. In light of increasing diversity, civic and religious organizations must cooperate to work toward pluralism. We maintain that the work of tolerance exists at a relational level, not at a formalized institutional level. During one of our interview sessions, a conservative Protestant mulled over the idea of interfaith cooperation (possibly for the first time): “What would happen if we could find a common ground? We would start there and then see how far we could go.”

---

<sup>1</sup>Terry Shoemaker, “Bowling Green, KY and The Nascent Stages of Religious Diversity,” Harvard Pluralism Project, 2013. Accessed at <http://www.pluralism.org/reports/view/628>.

<sup>2</sup> See James Davison Hunter, “Religion and Political Civility: The Coming Generation of American Evangelicals,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23 (1984): 364-380 or Clyde Wilcox and Ted Jelen, “Evangelicals and Political Tolerance,” *American Politics Quarterly* 18:1 (1990): 25-46. Jeremy Rhodes, “The Ties that Divide: Bonding Social Capital, Religious Friendship Networks, and Political Tolerance Among Evangelicals,” *Sociological Inquiry* 82:2 (2012): 163-186 or Amy Burdette, Christopher Ellison, and Terrence Hill, “Conservative Protestantism and Tolerance Toward Homosexuals: An Examination of Potential Mechanisms,” *Sociological Inquiry* 75:2 (2005): 177-196.

<sup>3</sup> See Wilcox and Jensen, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Smith, *Christian America?: What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Official Municipal Website of Bowling Green, Kentucky, “Local Worship Opportunities,” [www.bgky.org/religiousorganizational.php](http://www.bgky.org/religiousorganizational.php). Accessed on May 22, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Dale E. Jones, Sherry Doty, Clifford Grammich, James E. Horsch, Richard Houseal, Mac Lynn, John P. Marcum, Kenneth M. Sanchagrin and Richard H. Taylor. 2002. *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000: An Enumeration by Region, State and County Based on Data Reported for 149 Religious Bodies*. Nashville, TN: Glenmary Research Center.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “Preachin’, Prayin, and Singin’ on the Public Square,” *Religion & Public Life in the South: In the Evangelical Mode* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 12.

<sup>8</sup> See R. Stephen Warner, “Religion and New (Post -1965) Immigrants: Some Principles Drawn From Field Research,” *American Studies* 41, no. 2/3 (2000): 267-286; Fenggang Yang and Helen Rose Ebaugh, “Transformations in New Immigrant Religions and Their Global Implications,” *American Sociological Review* 66 (2001): 269-288.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 44.

<sup>10</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 93.

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Vol. 96, No. 1 (1967): 1-21.

<sup>13</sup> Pluralism Project, Harvard University, <http://pluralism.org/>.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Mullins, "The Life-Cycle of Ethnic Churches in Sociological Perspective," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 14, no. 4 (1987): 321-334.

<sup>15</sup> Garfinkel, Renee. "What works?: evaluating interfaith dialogue programs." DIANE Publishing, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Patel, Eboo, Meyer, Cassie "Civic relevance of Interfaith Cooperation for Colleges and Universities," *Journal of College and Character*. Volume 12, Issue 1, ISSN (Online) 1940-1639, DOI: [10.2202/1940-1639.1764](https://doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1764), February 2011.

<sup>17</sup> "The Science of Interfaith," *Interfaith Youth Core*, [http://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/u4/Interfaith%20Triangle%20Poster\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/u4/Interfaith%20Triangle%20Poster_Final.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Festival of Faiths, *Center for Interfaith Relations*, <http://www.centerforinterfaithrelations.org/festival-of-faiths/>.

---

*Terry Shoemaker has served as the Program Coordinator of the Institute for Citizenship & Social Responsibility since the spring of 2010 when the ICSR completed renovation of the current location at Western Kentucky University. He has been the creator of innovative student programming like the Wii™ the People bowling league; served as a community liaison for student community-based research projects; and most recently as an adjunct faculty member within the ICSR. He completed his Masters of Arts degree in Religious Studies at Western Kentucky University in the spring of 2013. Civically, he emphasizes the essentiality of religious institutions as locations for community organizing, the necessity of interfaith cooperation for civic vitality, and the need for academic research focusing on interaction between religious organizations and their broader community.*