Article

On Religion: Photography in Collaboration

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A multidisciplinary storytelling initiative

As scholars in the field will attest, religion is a complex phenomenon. Because religion is difficult to define and continually in flux, understanding it deeply often requires collaboration and creativity. This is why the Magnum Foundation launched its pilot initiative On Religion: Photography in Collaboration in 2016.

Mateusz Butkiewicz via Unsplash

On Religion (2016)

Several scholars and organizations came together to produce the On Religion initiative. These included the Magnum Foundation, the Luce Foundation, the Center for Religion and Media at New York University (NYU), *The Revealer,* and the Brown Institute for Media Innovation. Their goal in this collaboration was to bring together diverse photographers, scholars, and other creatives to paint the richest possible portraits of religious life and concepts.

The following panel of religious experts selected each creative team:

- Diana Taylor: Professor of Performance Studies and Spanish at NYU and former director

of the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics.

- Marta Moreno Vega: Educator, visual artist, Yoruba priestess, and founder of the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute. She has served as a professor at CUNY Baruch College, CUNY Hunter College, the InterAmerican University of Puerto Rico, and NYU.
- Jeff Sharlet: Professor at Dartmouth College, author, literary journalist, and cocreator of *The Revealer*.

Mapping the Spirit

- Kameelah Rasheed (photographer/artist)
- Corey Tegeler (creative technologist)



Source: Kameelah Rasheed via press release by the Magnum Foundation.

This project combines photography, text, and audio recordings to represent little-explored Black faith communities, including the Moorish Science Temple of America, Black Hasidic communities, and Black Buddhist networks. In addition to visual storytelling elements, this project incorporates interviews and archival works to paint a diverse portrait of Black spirituality in America. In many ways, this exploration of Black faith traditions began with Rasheed's curiosity about her father's spiritual journey. She writes,

> ***Before my father converted to Sunni Islam under the leadership of Warith Deen Muhammad, he had grown up***

> ***in a Protestant Christian home where he attended church until, at the age of twelve, he swapped out Sunday sermons for rounds of pool at the local Boys & Girls club. Throughout college, he explored Black Nationalist groups, was interested in Rastafarianism, and spoke to several members of the Nation of Islam. But, it was a specific community on 47th and Bond in Oakland, California where he and my mother decided to take their shahadah.***

From that foundation, Rasheed embarked on her own journey to document Black faith. In the process, she found that, “archives that hold official texts, building deeds, and organizational history provide contextual background, but, I found, they do not provide much in the way of interiority.” Rasheed’s artistic partner Corey Tegeler helped her project to transcend the limitations of archival sources.

The Crescent, the Star, the Cross, the Void

- Oscar B. Castillo photographer)
- Karim Baouz (writer)



Source: Oscar Castillo via press release by the Magnum Foundation.

This interactive project incorporates data and audiovisual materials to highlight the tensions between Islamic life and anti-Muslim hostility in contemporary French society. In his interview with Kandi Handelman of *The Revealer,* Oscar Castillo described his motivations for the project:

> ***I have a special interest in how society deals with youth from underprivileged communities, mostly because they are immigrants. The marginalization they sometimes endure feeds into all kinds of social ruptures that may result in internal and external conflicts that are not always religious, but that have, as in the French case, an important religious aspect.***

He elaborated, “Colonialism, immigration, race, and religion has created a French society with many sharp edges. Social acceptance is now like a scale, and being a Muslim in France will weigh heavily on the possibilities for integration.” Along with his cocreator Karim Baouz, Castillo sought to create a project that captured the “mix of factors” that shape and define Muslim life in France.

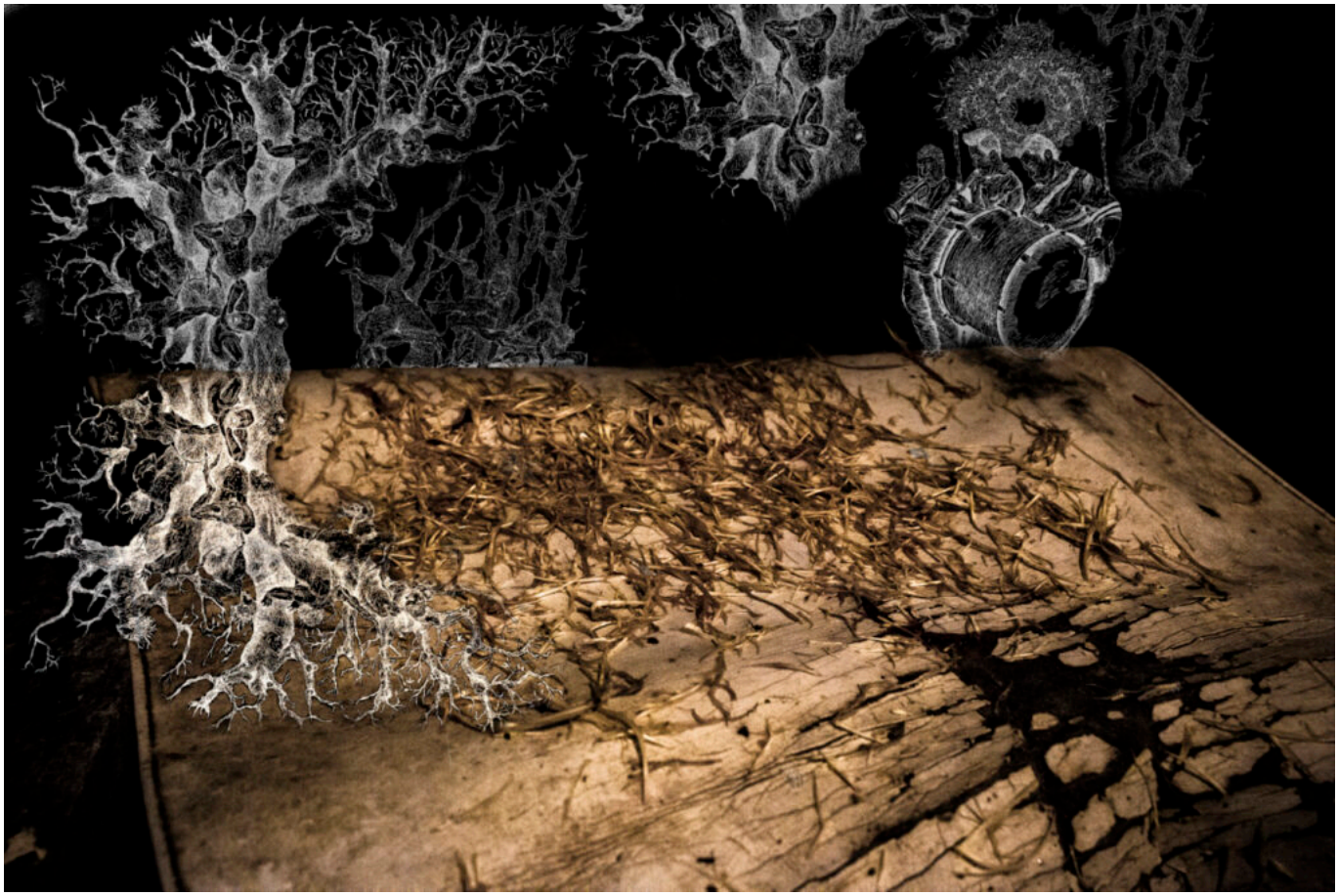
A Sacred, Sullied Space

- Solmaz Daryani (photographer)
- Sasha von Oldershausen (writer)

This project documents the religious practice of the Mandaeans at the banks of the Karun River in Iran. Mandaeanism is a Gnostic, dualistic religion that originated in the Middle East around 1 CE with Greek, Jewish, and ancient Iranian influences. While it still endures in Iraq, southwestern Iran, and across their diasporas, Mandaeans are known to be a secretive people. Much of the focus of *A Sacred, Sullied Space* seeks to understand how adherents practice their faith as a minority amid the Shia Muslim majority. The Karun River is the site of important Mandaean baptismal rituals: celebrating births, and marriages; healing ailments, cleansing sin, and blessing travels. It is also severely polluted which poses a set of environmental and spiritual complications that Daryani and Oldershausen attempt to address with nuance in their photo essay.

La Sangre y la Lluvia: Petición de Lluvias

- Yael Martínez (photographer)
- Orlando Jesus Velazquez (graphic artist)



Source: Yael Martínez and Orlando Jesus Velazquez.

This project explores the survival of ancient rain petition ceremonies in Zitala community of Guerrero, Mexico. During the era of Spanish colonization, the conquistadors systematically destroyed Indigenous faith traditions and killed those that did not convert to Catholicism. Given the Spaniards' campaign of genocide, conversion, and assimilation against Indigenous people, the survival of blood and rain ceremonies is a profound testament to the ability of people to pass on sacred traditions despite overwhelming odds. These ceremonies are rooted in Aztec creation myths that suggest a cyclical relationship between the natural and spiritual worlds. In the ceremony, which involves ritual combat, Zitala warriors shed their blood in exchange for rain from the heavens. This represents how physical pain and suffering experienced on earth are connected to the spiritual world and the renewal of life.

In a *New York Times* article covering the project, Martinez discusses the artistic challenge of physically rendering the complex meaning of the ceremony while also respecting the privacy of the participants.

> ***What I tried to do was to make an image of living between physical and the invisible. I tried to find images that were more symbolic, so then we could recreate them later with photos and graphics. Along with an anthropologist, we documented each of the ritual's symbols. In a way, we were trying to conceptualize the images.***
>
> —*Yael Martínez and David González*, "Making Visible the Spirit World of Mexico's Indigenous Communities."

The Un/Holy Land

- Tanya Habjouqa (photographer)
- Dimi Reider (writer)
- Muhammad Jabali (writer/technologist)



Source: Tanya Habjouga via press release by the Magnum Foundation.

This project's collaborators document the overlapping lives and spiritualities of Muslims, Jews, and Christians in Israel/Palestine and how religion, politics, secularism, and tourism collide to produce various forms of conflict and coexistence in the region.

> ***The purpose of our project was to side-step the trichotomy and to describe the people and places where Islam, Christianity and Judaism meet and overlap; and to side-step the dichotomy of secular and religious, sacred and profane – showing how closely the two blend in***

> ***almost every iteration. . . .***
>
> ***Nearly a year into the project we have abandoned our original idea and the binaries that come with it; the land is neither holy or unholy, and it is both, and so much more; strangeness reflected in weirdness, realpolitik in surrealism, loneliness in multitudes and the shifting moods of crowds in a single stationary figure, a gate, a hill, a home, a gaping hole where a home once stood or is yet to be built; a true Sacred Space Oddity—or maybe Odyssey—depending which notion you subscribe to, of observation or of exploration, an erratic flow of events, or a twenty-years detour on a way to a place you could once call home.***
>
> —Dimi Reider, *Sacred Space Odyssey: The Un/Holy Land*.

Photography in Collaboration: Migration in Religion (2018)

Image by Brett Sayles via Pexels.

In 2018, a second cohort of grantees were selected, to explore the theme of religion and migration. The participants of this initiative had the opportunity to work with BBC World Service to produce documentaries based on their work. Members of the 2018 cohort included the following:

- Cinthya Santos Briones: A photographer, photojournalist, and anthropologist whose project *Living in Sanctuary* explored faith-based resistance to deportation in America. She collaborated with artist and media educator Anna Barsan.
- Soumya Sankar Bose: A photographer whose project *The Marichjhapi Massacre* documents the 1979 genocide of Bangladeshi refugees by the government of Bengal.
- Ziyah Gafic: A photographer from the Balkans whose project on Mecca is still in progress.
- Gareth Smit: A photographer, historian, and philosopher who worked with poet Ofelia Zepeda to explore the violence perpetrated by US border policy. Their project *The Place Where Clouds Are Formed*, visits the ancestral lands of the Tohono O'odham in southwestern Arizona.

The Revealer published a special issue with the full content of the On Religion and Migration and Religion projects.

Explore the special issue of the Revealer

View the presentations