



Katie Day. *Faith on the Avenue: Religion on a City Street.* Photographs by Edd Conboy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xiv + 247 pp. \$31.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-986002-9.



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Empowering the City: A Narrative of Faithful Communities on Germantown Avenue

In a debate with Oxford professor John Glover on the role of religion in society, conservative author and columnist Dennis Prager asked this humorous, yet serious question: “If you, Professor Glover, were stranded at the midnight hour in a desolate Los Angeles street and if, as you stepped out of your car with fear and trembling, you were suddenly to hear the weight of pounding footsteps behind you, and you saw ten burly young men who had just stepped out a dwelling coming toward you, would it or would it not make a difference to you to know that they were coming from a Bible study?”^[1] As Katie Day reveals in *Faith on the Avenue: Religion on a City Street*, it makes all the difference. Serving as the Charles A. Schieren Professor of Church and Society at the Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia on Germantown Avenue itself, Day catalogs the interaction that makes up the religious contribution to the urban ecology of Germantown Avenue as it meanders its eight-and-a-half mile course through poverty and drug-stricken neighborhoods toward more affluent suburbs.

Along with the work of urban photographer Edd

Conboy, Day draws on contributions from Beth Stroud and Leila Ortiz as well as decades of experience in teaching and preaching in the Greater Philadelphia area. Day’s groundbreaking research primarily focuses on the way in which place and faith shape the urban ecological system of Germantown Avenue. Day demonstrates these impacts through the positive contributions communities of faith provide to the economy, public health, quality of life, fighting of criminal activity, and access to educational opportunity.

In chapter 1, “Mapping the Faith on the Avenue,” Day sets the historic, demographic, cultural, and physical boundaries for her study. Motivated by the work of researchers, such as Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street* (2000), and an ecological approach to urban religion pioneered in the Chicago School of Sociology, Day demonstrates how churches are an important component in cities “where physical space and human experience interact in symbiotic relationship” (p. 8). Day explains how other urban studies neglect to mention the agency of faith communities, while criticizing them for not paying

property taxes or contributing to the economy in meaningful ways. In the next three chapters, Day shows how religion is in the business of empowering the city and she effectively closes the door on the line of thinking that ignores its impact. Day's concrete observations put into quantitative terms the solid contributions congregations have made in the areas of human services, education, and the arts. Congregations have fed the hungry, provided counseling, prevented suicide, fought AIDS, and sought to end gun violence. They have also provided a refuge for minorities and helped to gentrify poverty-stricken neighborhoods. Chapters 5 and 6 focus primarily on religious minorities on the avenue: Latin American Pentecostals and Muslims. The concluding chapter 7, "Urban Flux," contains a wide array of topics, from historical demographic shifts to contemporary life of the avenue.

History plays a key role in the narrative throughout the book. It serves not only as a backdrop for Day's study of urban ecology, but also has agency of its own in shaping the spiritual and social life of groups living and serving in the area. There are myriad instances of this, from the presence of the John Johnson House, part of the underground railroad, which continually figured in sermons, to the Quaker burial ground in the Fair Hill section, where abolitionist leader Lucretia Mott is buried. Historic churches such as Mother Bethel and Germantown Mennonite as well as African American and Episcopal churches shaped the urban ecological narrative, providing aesthetics, stability, and a place to develop each congregation's distinct identity. In a narrative on the ethnogenesis of African American culture in chapter 7, Day points to the historicity of black neighborhoods in the area that pulled southern African Americans north and prompted a situation where "churches became the center of social life" and provided a host of social services, including job support, unavailable to the black population elsewhere (p. 193). These historic centers of worship continued their role as congregants sought both individual and communal empowerment.

The strengths of *Faith on the Avenue* lie in Day's ability to pull out quantitative and qualitative data supporting the positive impacts of faith communities. The information gathered represents a collection of detailed surveys that include basic data of "denomination, membership and attendance, [and] demographics" as well as "the impact of pastoral ministry" on those who "stopped using drugs, found jobs, stayed out of prison, or avoided suicide" (p. 69). With 43 of 108 total congregations in the area interviewed, some stunning activity emerges. For example, one congregation "with about 35 active

members is helping to provide more than 3,100 meals a year" (p. 118). In a city where schools are continually falling behind in music and art for students, Day comments that "every member usually has at least one role to play in church life, many of those roles are musical" (p. 118). Congregations have provided meals for local children in vacation bible school programs and free health screenings and flu shots. They have supported campaigns to fight AIDS and end gun violence. The author also finds that "congregations large and small contribute to the local economy indirectly but vitally through support and encouragement to entrepreneurs within their fellowships" and by supporting business empowerment organizations, especially for religious and racial minorities (p. 93).

As the work of a faculty member of an urban seminary located right on Germantown Avenue, Day's book itself can in some ways be seen as an important contribution to the urban ecology described. Day is writing primarily for the benefit for her students, but *Faith on the Avenue* also contains more than a few tangential arguments more indicative of an active mainline Protestant minister than an outside observer. For example, in chapter 7, the author describes a "pluralistic faithscape" where "theological beliefs become less important than public practices in establishing religious identity" (p. 184). A key question here is, how do public practices establishing religious identity not arise out of theological belief? In chapter 3, she employs Jeremiah 29:7: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf." If one indeed believes the prophet Jeremiah, as cited above and mentioned multiple times in the study, would not one's social activity reflect the theological belief that God blesses those who seek and pray for the welfare of their city? The image of a cosmopolitan, "pluralistic faithscape" seems to reflect Day's own beliefs as a faith leader in the Presbyterian Church USA more than the research so expertly conducted, and partly undermines the structure of the narrative as a result. Other examples can be seen in theological critiques of so-called exclusivist congregations, which would be better termed "insular," as well as welcome, yet non-contributory critiques of prosperity gospel preaching.

Further, in a historical analysis on church life in chapter 7, Day mentions that "a loss of families is not good news for communities of faith who want to increase their memberships, or just survive" (p. 202). This statement is never expanded, but Day places blame narrowly on the automobile industry giving more opportunities for people to travel further on Sunday mornings (p. 202).

An interesting question to probe would be how family life specifically contributes to the growth of congregations and how churches address the growing number of fragmented families. Of the congregations surveyed, the most fragmented are the Latino Pentecostal churches composed mostly of abandoned mothers (p. 148). These congregations are quite vibrant and it would be interesting to see another chapter on how fragmented families acting within churches have contributed to the urban ecology of the avenue.

Despite these drawbacks, Katie Day has presented a solid narrative of urban ecology and effectively demonstrated how place and faith influence the urban ecosystem that is Germantown Avenue. The work functions al-

most as an apologetic and corrective to those who wish to discount the contribution to economy, public health, and quality of life religion has on contemporary pluralistic society. Day's narrative and methodological approach is sure to benefit anyone seeking to apply an urban ecological lens to the contemporary religious life of Germantown Avenue or other urban centers that have yet to be studied.

Note

[1]. Dennis Payer, quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Nashville: Nelson, 1994), 41.

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