

RELIGION IN SIN CITY*

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ABSTRACT. Religion is an important, yet overlooked, aspect of local life in Las Vegas, Nevada. Many residents attend worship services and practice faith in an environment that often promotes the opposite of their religious beliefs. Using qualitative data from interviews with clergy across the spectrum of faith traditions, I analyze the adaptation of institutional religion to local circumstances in order to understand how religious belief reflects local sense of place. In a city bifurcated into tourist and local parts, such analysis provides a glimpse into the insider/outsider place dichotomy of long interest to geographers. It further illuminates how religion and place interact. Religious believers, in Las Vegas and elsewhere, often negotiate between their spiritual beliefs and their surrounding cultural environment. *Keywords:* *ethnography, gambling, institutional religion, Las Vegas, Nevada, sense of place.*

Religion may be the last thing that comes to mind when people think about Las Vegas. Jud Wilhite, a pastor at a large local nondenominational church, recalled his attempt to convince a Virginia woman that churches actually do exist in the city. Her response after he told her what he does for a living was matter-of-fact: “There are *no* churches in Las Vegas.” According to Pastor Wilhite, “Her certainty was absolute. . . . Her perception of the church just could not make room for Vegas” (quoted in Wilhite and Taaffe 2006, 169; emphasis in the original). Other clergymen echo this view. A local imam, Quadir Nassif, said: “When we talk to Muslims around the country, they don’t believe us that there are Muslims in Las Vegas.”¹ An Orthodox priest, Kent Sharp, a Catholic priest, Frank Green, and a Jewish rabbi, Josef Rothschild, have all been asked whether they have slot machines in their parish halls or synagogues. The stereotype is so strong that it prompts countering jokes. Father Green offered this: “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas, especially if you go to confession.” Rabbi Rothschild provided the more sarcastic comment: “Yeah, if you get a Torah, Torah, Torah, then the Ark opens up.”

Such encounters in the realm of religion echo the popular image of a broader Las Vegas experience and underscore the bifurcated nature of the city’s personality. On one hand, it is the “Entertainment Capital of the World,” a place of gambling, glitz, and glamour. This is the Las Vegas of the Strip, with its casinos, themed megaresorts, Cirque du Soleil shows, and adult entertainment. It is an escape from a normal life elsewhere, a place where tourists can let their inhibitions go and be someone else, if just for a weekend.

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On the other hand, Las Vegas is home to 2 million people who carry out their lives much as they would in any other city: They go to work, school, church, and T-ball practice. This Las Vegas is one of the fastest-growing cities in the nation, whose population has exploded from a few Native Americans, Mormons, and ranchers a little more than a century ago, to just over 10,000 in 1940, to around 250,000 in 1970, to 1 million by the mid-1990s, and to double that today (Paher 1971; Rothman 2002). Almost everyone in the city is from somewhere else; in fact, only 21.2 percent of the people living in southern Nevada in 2009 were born in the state, whereas 58.7 percent of all Americans were born in their state of residence (USCB 2010). Via growth, Las Vegas changes constantly, offers unique employment opportunities, and hosts a rich cultural and ethnic diversity (Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens 1999; Rothman 2002; Moehring 2005).

Las Vegas epitomizes the classic insider/outsider dichotomy of place, a subject of long-standing interest to geographers (Jackson 1970; Relph 1976; Tuan 1977; Pocock 1981; Ryden 1993; de Wit 2001). Institutional religions—insider entities whose teachings are often contradictory to the tenets of the outsider's Las Vegas—offer a unique view into that binary. Roger Stump, in his book *The Geography of Religion*, states that “religious belief and practice provide essential insights into . . . the complex interactions between culture and place” (2008, 6). Geographers often look to broader contexts of their area of interest—those spatial interactions of cultural or physical phenomena—in order to gain a deeper understanding of such complex interactions, a pattern of equal importance in the study of religion. “[Religious] adherents have simultaneously influenced and been influenced by the specific contexts in which they live,” Stump argues, which leads to a “perpetual reworking of religions by communities of believers into distinct local expressions linked to larger traditions” (p. 5). That “reworking” is a function of the “mutability of religion,” which is that belief systems “are constantly susceptible to processes of change” (p. 10). This characteristic of religion, akin to R. Stephen Warner’s “structural adaptability” (1993), often occurs because of the need—implicit or explicit—to “conform to local cultural practices” (Stump 2008, 10). Such mutability within local contexts can, in turn, impact other local practices, whether sacred or secular (Stump 2008).

Religion, then, becomes an invaluable lens through which cultural geographers can understand local sense of place. Stump offers a number of examples of context, mutability, and localism in his book (2008). Such an approach is rare in geographical studies of the numinous, however (Levine 1986; Kong 2001; Slater 2004; Holloway 2006; Starrs and Wright 2006; Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2009; Yorgason and della Dora 2009). Furthermore, the scant local scholarship on the topic offers only a few clues for Las Vegas (Leibovich 1999; Rothman 2002; Ward 2002; Willhite and Taaffe 2006). Following a short discussion regarding the interplay between local and tourist sides of the city and some methodological notes, I will explore the mutability of institutional religion in the context of Las Vegas and how it can help foster a deeper understanding of the city’s “local” sense of place.

COMPLICATING THE INSIDER/OUTSIDER DICHOTOMY

Even though Las Vegas is an excellent example of the insider/outsider geographical dichotomy, the contrast between the two divisions is complicated by the immense strength of the Vegas image in popular culture. Indeed, the perspective of marketers and tourists frequently overshadows the experience of residents, leading to the misrepresentations they encounter. As a result, many locals often have to convince others of the existence of their Las Vegas, sometimes through sarcasm and sometimes by explaining how normal their life in this city is.² In fact, Las Vegans commonly assert that life here is the same as anywhere else and that their experience in the local's Vegas is unequivocally separate from that "other," tourist place (Rowley 2009).

Such a perception, however, belies the influence that the tourist corridor actually has on local life. Significantly, the gambling landscape in the city is omnipresent beyond the Strip. Slot machines are found in nontourist spaces such as bars, in grocery and convenience stores, and in any number of large and small casinos scattered throughout the city. Gambling is the second most common entertainment activity for locals, who budget more than \$3 billion annually for the activity. Ironically, the most popular leisure activity, a visit to the movie theater, occurs most often in cineplexes attached to the Strip-style gambling venues—appropriately called "neighborhood casinos"—that are located in every corner of the city (LVCVA 2008; Rowley 2009).

The economic impact of tourist-resort properties on locals is also undeniable. The city relies on leisure and hospitality revenue more than do other U.S. cities and the nation as a whole. Employment in this sector makes up nearly 30 percent of the total local workforce and 19 percent of the city's gross domestic product; visitor spending accounts for an additional 29 percent (AA 2010). And considering the dependence on construction in support of the Strip infrastructure and the (ongoing) postwar housing boom—a result of the expansion in tourism and related employment—economic dependence on tourism activities becomes more pronounced. Indeed, Las Vegas is a postindustrial economy driven largely by the engine of tourism on the Las Vegas Strip (Rothman 2002). Furthermore, the diminishing revenues from these two sources following the post-2008 nationwide economic crisis had huge and disproportionate local impacts, reemphasizing the city's reliance thereon.

Beyond everyday activities and raw economic impact, locals interact with the tourist side of their city in ways often unnoticed. The reasons that "transplants" give for coming to the area—to start over, to seek opportunity in a constantly changing place, to pursue a middle-class lifestyle made possible by high-paying blue-collar jobs in the service sector, or to follow a dream to make it big in the city that offers everyone an equal chance at the (figurative and literal) blackjack table—all are rooted in a Las Vegas spirit of change, opportunity, and chance that stems, in part, from the city's historical *raison d'être* as a frontier gambling town (Rothman 2002). Additionally, many newcomers fail in their pursuit, thus fostering a tran-



FIG. 1—The pod of the Stratosphere looms above a local church 3 miles east of Las Vegas Boulevard, a symbol of the ever-present landscape of gambling and temptation for many believers in the city. (Photograph by the author, April 2007)

sient culture in the city. According to the Nevada state demographer and county-to-county migration data derived from address changes on yearly tax returns, between 1990 and 2006 1.2 people moved out of the city for every two people who moved into it (Hardcastle 2008; IRS 2008). Such transience reflects the mind-set of a gambler who drops a handful of coins into a slot machine in hopes of hitting a jackpot but departs prematurely at a hand of bad luck. Finally, the iconic skyline of the tourist corridor, visible from most parts of the metropolitan area, has become a symbolic landscape for locals. Its omnipresent proximity shapes their attachment, identity, and local sense of place (Meinig 1979; Schein 1997; Rowley 2009) (Figure 1).

In short, the relationship between insider and outsider, between local and tourist, is not black and white but becomes blurry as the two sides interact, illustrating something of the character of the place. The relationship between religious belief and this “city of sin” also follows such a pattern.

RELIGION AND PLACE

To understand the inner workings of a locale, place scholars often turn to the perceptions, stories, and residents’ experiences (Western 1992; Ryden 1993; Feld and Basso 1996). After all, places are created out of human experiences in specific spaces (Tuan 1977; Pocock 1981; Jackson 1994). My analysis of institutional religion in Las Vegas is based on participant observation in the city between 2005 and 2008



FIG. 2—Locals often recommend that people who think religion is not a part of life in Las Vegas drive around on any weekend morning to see worshippers' automobiles filling the parking lots at places such as Saint Viator Catholic Community, seen here on a Sunday morning in July 2005. (Photograph by the author)

and on interviews with twenty-seven religious leaders across the spectrum of faith traditions in southern Nevada.

According to the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, more than 43 percent of residents in Clark County—where Las Vegas makes up more than 96 percent of the population—regularly attend worship services (Figure 2). Catholics make up 40 percent of churchgoers, and dozens of protestant denominations constitute 16.7 percent of adherents. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon) is the next-largest group, with 13.8 percent of local adherents; and a number of Jewish synagogues host another 12.7 percent. The remaining 16 percent comprise several smaller faith traditions, including Eastern Orthodoxy and Unitarian Universalists. The local Muslim population has grown with the city and now supports two mosques and nearly 1,700 adherents (ASARB 2000) (Figure 3). Though not included in these totals, 26,000 Las Vegans attend nondenominational megachurches, according to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Central Christian Church, Pastor Wilhite's congregation in the Las Vegas suburb of Henderson, is the country's fifteenth-largest megachurch, with more than 15,000 weekly attendees (HIRR 2006).

Based on the spectrum of belief in the city, I interviewed a sample of representatives from each type of creed. I chose a typological classification because of its focus on social characteristics of belief systems and how they relate to the secular



FIG. 3—The newly completed Jamia Masjid (mosque) in eastern Las Vegas attests to the growing diversity of faith in the city. (Photograph by Rexine Rowley, August 2009)

world of adherents (Corbett 1993; Steensland and others 2000; Bauer forthcoming). Of the several possibilities available, I based mine on one employed by the geographer John Bauer (2006; forthcoming), who has mapped religious patterns in the United States and their changes over time. Bauer's taxonomy provides for the rich variety within protestant denominations, an aspect that fits the religious personality of Las Vegas well.

Table I shows the eleven classes I used. I derived eight of the groups directly from Bauer's taxonomy and used his list of faith traditions within each group to target specific interviewees. I added three groups not represented in Bauer's classification—for which he had no data—in order to better represent the religious population in Las Vegas: Nondenominational Protestant; Eastern Orthodox and Other; and Islam. With the exception of liberal Unitarian Universalists, which had only one congregation in Las Vegas, I interviewed at least two representatives in each of the eleven major religious groups.

As the head of a congregation, the cleric represents the belief system of a group of people. As the guiding figures of their faith's followers in the area, clerics are aware of the teachings and doctrine of their religion and how that may converge and/or conflict with the environs of Las Vegas. Notably, the leaders' perspectives may result in a partial view of religion in the city: As the authority for their congregation, the clergy's view may be one-sided—that of intent and what is ideal for the

TABLE I—CLASSIFICATION OF CLERGY INTERVIEWEES IN LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

RELIGIOUS GROUP	FAITH TRADITION	NAME	TITLE
Roman Catholic		Antoine Pomeroy	Priest
		Frank Green	Priest
		George Toomey	Priest
		Armando Sánchez	Priest
Evangelical Protestant	Southern Baptist Baptist Missionary Assemblies of God	Ian Kaiser	Senior Pastor
		Melvin Roberts	Pastor
		Glen Reardon	Senior Pastor
Mainline Protestant	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America United Methodist Episcopal	Hank Taylor	Senior Pastor
		Gary Gable	Pastor
		Tim Fuller	Rector
Nondenominational		Peter Nickel	Education Director
		Jeff Howell	Senior Pastor
Black Protestant	African Methodist Episcopal Church	Sergio Needham	Senior Pastor
		Jonelle Randolph	Pastor
Liberal	Unitarian Universalist	Elijah Randolph	Pastor
		Raymond Drake	Program Director
Mormon (Latter-Day Saints)		Ted Burke	Bishop
		Mark Lewin	Bishop
Confessional Protestant	Lutheran (Missouri Synod)	Ian Sears	Pastor
		Ralph Merrill	Pastor
Judaism	Reform Orthodox Conservative	Josef Rothschild	Rabbi
		Levi Behar	Rabbi
		David Banks	Rabbi
Muslim		Quadir Nassif	Imam
		Azaan Hossein	Imam
Eastern Orthodox and Other	American Orthodox Old Catholic Church	Kent Sharp	Priest
		William Estes	Bishop

congregation—and may neglect the experience of everyday practitioners of a faith tradition. Even though the clergy's view may not be a transparent window into religious experience in a place, my goal was to determine how religious institutions interact in the context of Las Vegas culture, and the position of leaders provides a means to that end.

At the same time, religious leaders are themselves believers, practitioners, and insiders to their faith. They typically dedicate much of their lives to meeting the needs of congregants and therefore can potentially understand the collective experience of a larger set of believers. From a practical standpoint, then, one interview can—and did—provide insights into many lives. Religious leaders also are able to reflect on and describe those insights without divulging private information, thus respecting the privacy of the congregants while gathering information needed for the project (Arksey and Knight 1999).

Religious leaders can thus be both insiders, as believers themselves, and outsiders, as observers and participants in their congregants' faith. Such intersubjective

interaction is important in a discussion of the interaction between insider place and outsider place (Dowling 2005). It can also provide the needed understanding of adaptations made by Las Vegans as they try to follow a faith tradition in the local context.

WAGES OF SIN

Many of the challenges Las Vegas believers face stem from the city's culture of vice. Hal Rothman explained how Las Vegas was built on industries of vice by offering visitors something they could not have at home, and it thus took on the label of "Sin City." Las Vegas, he wrote, "is a code for self-indulgence and sanctioned deviance" (2002, xviii). Indeed, "vice" is common in the local vernacular in reference to the activities for which the city is known. Of course, "vice" and "sin" connote different things to different religions and cultures. Some activities locals refer to as "vice," such as gambling, are legal, whereas others, such as prostitution, are not. Similarly, some vices are not considered sinful at all. At the same time, one recent roundtable of representatives of Las Vegas faith traditions concluded that most religions, even the most liberal, have a conception of "wrong," something contradictory to how one should act, even if they do not call it "sin" (KNPR 2010). And nearly all of the clerics I interviewed recognized an abundance of such contradictory influences—temptations—in Las Vegas that affect how congregants worship.

Interestingly, some clerics played down the temptation their congregants face, claiming that it is no different in Las Vegas than anywhere else. Sergio Needham, an African Methodist Episcopal pastor, said: "People always say 'Sin City.' You tell me what city is not Sin City. We just happen to have that label, that identity." Similarly, Azaan Hossein, an imam at a local mosque, noted: "I think a lot is being said from all religions because this is called 'Sin City' and because of the gambling. Most congregants don't feel that. Temptation to do wrong is everywhere. Even in Jerusalem. . . . There is prostitution in Jerusalem. There is gambling in Jerusalem. And that is the holiest of cities."

But even someone who argues for the normality of Las Vegas cannot avoid its uniqueness and the impact it may have on believers. Consider Imam Hossein's next comment: Even though the same social and psychological challenges can be found everywhere, "the Las Vegas economy is dependent on gambling, and that sometimes creates a dilemma for some Muslims. Gambling is forbidden in Islam." Dr. William Estes, an Old Catholic Church bishop, put a finer point on this temptation: "I don't think it is any different than any other city. . . . They have the same junk in Seattle and Portland as they do here. They have Indian casinos there. . . . They have the same topless bars in the big city as you do here. It's no different than anywhere else. It's just bigger, that's all."

For twelve of the leaders with whom I spoke, the fact that sin is "just bigger" or more prevalent in Las Vegas was a key point. Jeff Howell, senior pastor of a non-denominational congregation in northwest Las Vegas, for example, said bluntly: "Las Vegas has every temptation you can find elsewhere, but it is on steroids here."

Mark Lewin, a Mormon bishop, explained that believers, living “in the world,” know they will be presented with temptations, “but here it’s just more prevalent.” Glen Reardon, senior pastor of an Assemblies of God congregation, gave the following explanation: “As a man, you just get bombarded everywhere you go with temptation. They try to confine most of that to the Strip, but everywhere you go you have to keep your guard up. In other places, it’s there but it’s more subtle.” He said that, on his drive to our meeting, he looked out his side window and saw a nearly nude photograph on a locally ubiquitous adult entertainment newsrack. He recalled his thoughts at that moment: “There she is in all her glory, in one of those boxes.”

Such prevalent sexual imagery in the city causes tension with the teachings of many religions. To understand that tension, I asked interviewees how they would view a congregant’s involvement in the sex industry. Tim Fuller, an Episcopal rector, told me that his church is firmly against any illegal activities but added: “Being a liberal church, we stand welcome and would treat someone like that the same way as someone with a drinking problem or a gambling problem.” Father Green similarly explained that, although the Catholic church looks down on involvement in pornography, it will accept the person involved in sin and will offer help: “We distinguish between the act and the person. We don’t like the act, but we . . . love the person.” Bishop Ted Burke expressed a similar welcoming attitude among Latter-Day Saints, and Pastor Howell put it this way: “Come dirty with whatever [you] have and God will clean you up.”

Some less conservative churches welcome worshippers regardless of background and without requiring change. Pastor Hank Taylor characterized his Lutheran church as such a place. He explained that he knows of strippers in his congregation but that his position is one of grace. “It doesn’t matter if you’re a stripper,” he asserted. “It doesn’t matter if you’re a bartender. Grace is when God looks at you and says, ‘I love you because I made you, because you’re forgivable.’ ‘Ungrace’ is when you have to do this or that to be accepted.” Pastor Taylor explained that his is a philosophy derived from Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Christ accepts all, he noted, and continued: “As a Galatians 3:28 church what we’re lifting up is that grace is not only preached here, but practiced here.”

Some interviewees explained that their approach to the sacred-secular divide is simply to teach and guide the flock away from sin and toward a more pure and faithful life. After a great deal of thought—and a long pause—Bishop Estes answered my question about tension as if he were delivering a sermon: “There’s always tension between right and wrong. [*Another pause.*] But, when Christ died on the cross, he said, ‘It is finished.’” The bishop explained that we can accept His grace and His forgiveness, have a conversion, and be born into the Kingdom of God: “If a person is living by the spirit of Christ, then there is no tension, unless he chooses to get involved with the world, . . . unless he chooses to sin. Then that’s

where the tension starts. [In Romans 7:15] Paul said the things I want to do I can't, and the things I don't want to do I do. That is the natural tension between the flesh and the spirit."

Imam Nassif explained a similar lesson that he teaches followers of Islam. He gave the example of several Muslim taxicab drivers who attend his mosque. When they come to worship, the imam asks them to park their taxis some distance away from the mosque because "they have naked women on them" and he wants to protect other worshippers from such imagery. In addition, he mentioned the difficult situation that such an occupation places believers in because they often take passengers to and from topless clubs. Even in such an environment, Imam Nassif explained, what is important is the heart and soul, and one needs to stay as far away from sin as possible. Every time one moves the line of limits through exposure, rationalization, or desensitization, the danger becomes more imminent. To illustrate, he quoted the Muslim hadith, or statement from the Prophet Muhammad: "If you have no shame, you may do what you please."

When I asked religious leaders specifically about their views on gambling, I found relative uniformity of response. Aside from Mormons and Muslims, who explicitly forbid gambling, the general feeling among clergy is that the practice is acceptable, as long as it does not become habit-forming or lead to loss of rent money. Here is a sample of such a perspective from a number of faith traditions.

- Nondenominational Pastor Howell explained how the Bible does not specifically teach against gambling. He paraphrased 1 Corinthians 10:23, where Paul teaches that "everything [is] permissible, but not everything [is] beneficial." The closest thing to gambling's being a sin, he noted, would be that gamblers ignore the value of work and seek to gain something that is not rightfully theirs: "It turns into a neutral." He compared playing an \$80 round of golf to spending the same amount at a casino on slot play and a buffet with a spouse. If gambling is considered entertainment, and if one can afford it, then it is fine and not a sin; but he cautions his congregants against the "abuse of and the addiction to" gambling.
- Baptist Missionary Pastor Dr. Melvin Roberts has a similar perspective about gamblers in his flock: "There is a difference in doing it playfully and doing it religiously. Doing anything to excess is sin." When asked how he might counsel someone who budgeted gambling, he responded that he would focus not on sin but on general principles: "I would tell them to reposition themselves for more satisfying entertainment, as I would an excessive spender. It's not a sin to be in debt, but it makes things difficult." It comes down to teaching them to "sustain wealth and not throw it away."
- Orthodox Rabbi Levi Behar and Reform Rabbi Josef Rothschild tow a similar line between entertainment and addiction. Rabbi Rothschild explained: "When you cross that line and spend money you don't have or that you can't afford to lose, then it becomes a problem." Both referred to greater principles they seek to teach: living within your means and not relying on charity,

valuing money and work, not receiving something that is not your own, and involving oneself in a productive lifestyle.

- From the Roman Catholic point of view, Father Antoine Pomeroy compared gambling with drinking: “I always [explain] that the church accepts the use but condemns the abuse.” But, he cautioned, “It is easy to be swept into the mentality of Las Vegas when you . . . live here.” He has witnessed the detrimental effects of that addiction in confessions.
- Elijah and Jonelle Randolph, husband-and-wife pastors at an African Methodist Episcopal church, agree. They see gambling as unfavorable on a personal level but teach moderation. Elijah tells followers: “As a personal preference, it’s probably better if you don’t. I can’t say it’s a sin. . . . It’s a good practice not to do it because it becomes habit forming.” Jonelle added: “You can’t say they are going to hell if they do it.” Elijah summed up the views of many interviewees who denounced gambling only when it goes from budgeted entertainment to destructive habit: “When you get to the point where you use your bill money, that’s when you cross the line. That’s when it becomes a sin.”

This attitude of balance, possibly hinging on ambivalence, reflects the mutability of religion and the connection between locals and the tourist image symbolized by gambling and sex. Many religious Las Vegans, the argument goes, can choose to partake in some aspect of Sin City—gambling for entertainment purposes or working in proximity to the forbidden strip clubs to make a living—without totally losing their souls within it. The ever-present nature of adult entertainment, as indicated by my interviewees’ comments, means that religious leaders—and, by implication, believers—must address it more deliberately. Gambling, more important, is so omnipresent in the city that it has seemingly become more acceptable, in religious terms, than it might be in other locales. In fact, some involvement in gambling—whether direct or indirect—seems to be a necessary evil in this city. Some additional thoughts on gambling lend support to that hypothesis.

On a personal level, many religious leaders consider gambling unacceptable and would likely preach against its ills in congregations located outside Las Vegas. But some clerics admitted that they could not speak out against gambling in this city without potentially alienating many of their congregants who make a living or find entertainment value in the industry; such a loss could threaten the viability of the congregation. The adjustment that Ian Sears, pastor of a Missouri Synod Lutheran church, had to make in coming to Las Vegas is telling: “Dealing with the gambling issue[,] . . . I’ve realized that I can’t hammer at it all the time.” He still sees a need to teach about its evils but focuses instruction on recognizing the “difference between moderation and excess.” Rabbi Rothschild explained that he once gave a sermon about gambling that was really about the fundamental principle of living a meaningful life, doing good things with the resources you have, and not throwing them away. But, he recalled, it did not go over well with members who worked in the industry. Similarly, Pastor Needham said that when he preaches

against gambling and the “wages of sin,” it does not register: “What you’re trying to combat is the same income that is coming to your church to help the church grow.” And Dr. Gary Gable, pastor of a United Methodist church, bluntly explained that, although Methodists “don’t believe in gambling,” in Las Vegas religious leaders put blinders on and choose only to deal with overt problems like a gambling addiction: “In order to stay viable in the community, we choose not to deal with the issue.” That choice is indicative of the pressures that some religious cultures have to “negotiate” with and adapt to their place context (Watling 2001; Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2009). “[Believers] reconcile their religious system to the specific circumstances in which they live” (Stump 2008, 22). Stephen Warner put it this way: “Market incentives induce religious elites to maximize the appeal of their organizations to potential constituencies” (1993, 1068).

Employment in the gaming industry is another way in which Las Vegans show an implicit acceptance of gambling as a necessary evil. Echoing the comments of several clerics I interviewed, Dr. Roberts described employees in the casino business: “They are looked upon as anyone in any industry in any other town [is].” The comments of another—nonclergy—interviewee illustrate this notion. Jeremy Mont, a longtime Las Vegan whose father made his career in the casino industry, is often asked, “Your dad is a devout Catholic and a pit boss. How do you reconcile that?” to which he responds, “There’s nothing to reconcile. That’s just the way it is and it is acceptable.”

Jobs in the industry are so ubiquitous, in fact, that the two religious groups that forbid gambling—Muslims and Mormons—have faithful members in supportive positions within casino establishments. Latter-Day Saints are encouraged not to take jobs as dealers, but Bishop Burke pointed to faithful Mormons he knows who worked at jobs from carpentry at one Strip resort to upper management at another. Imam Hossein said the question of how to reconcile faith and work frequently arises in his conversations with other Muslims. The answer, he explained, is often left to the individual: “[Some people will say that] it is OK as long as you are not serving alcohol or directly involved in gaming itself [as a dealer]. Others will say to stay completely away from the evil.” He concluded with a summarizing remark about the spiritual negotiation that occurs in Las Vegas: “I wish I could say, ‘Don’t go into that environment at all,’ but the reality is you have kids to feed.” As one religious instructor explained to me, sacrifice is giving up something you want now for something you want more in the future. Some pious Las Vegans, it seems, put aside their deep feelings against gambling for the long-term goals of providing for family, furthering a career, or, in the case of some religious leaders, retaining worshippers.

BLESSINGS OF FAITH

Amid the challenges to faithful worship in a vice-ridden town, several religious leaders highlighted positive outcomes of being in this city, to which they adapt their message and ministry. One such advantage relates to a spiritual need in the

Las Vegas Valley that some interviewees felt fortunate to be able to meet. Pastor Howell quoted from Romans 5:20, a verse frequently referenced by other local Christian pastors: "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." He then spoke of his decision to minister in the city: "This is the city of grace. Have you ever seen a city with more grace?" Pastor Howell saw this "spiritual hunger" as a huge attraction: "The opportunity was evident [to build a church] in the fastest part of the fastest-growing city, at the very gates of hell itself."

Several Christian pastors realized a "calling" or "mission" to heal the spiritually sick in Las Vegas. Pastors Elijah and Jonelle Randolph, for example, saw the potential for service in the city after a vacation there in the early 1980s. They recalled how friends criticized their move from Fort Wayne, Indiana, to Las Vegas to lead a local black church: "You're crazy. You're going to Sin City. You're going to Sodom and Gomorrah." Elijah would respond: "If it is as bad as you say it is, then maybe that's where we need to be as two ministers."

In his book *Stripped: Uncensored Grace on the Streets of Vegas*, Pastor Jud Wilhite notes that his own life experience as a recovering drug addict prepared him for helping Las Vegans: "I know how it feels to be broken, to feel trapped to the point of hopelessness. . . . Out of this experience comes my tremendous compassion for others who are struggling, and I believe this is part of why I ended up in Las Vegas" (2006, 125). He invokes Paul's teachings on grace: "No matter how damaged we are by life, God's grace and love are only a turn away. That's why I don't call Vegas Sin City. I call it Grace City" (p. 69).

Not all religious leaders, however, feel that theirs was a special call to reclaim sinners in Las Vegas. The majority of my interviewees, in fact, played down the Sin City image and made it clear that their jobs in Las Vegas were the same as they would be anywhere else. Father Kent Sharp's comments are representative: His goal, regardless of location, is to work out his own salvation and then "be a light in the community" to help other people through faith-based and service activities: "I don't feel a calling to go out and grab people out of the casinos."

Even as leaders argued for the normality of Las Vegas, many still recognized the place's uniqueness and its effect on their ministry. Imam Hossein, for example, saw an opportunity in Las Vegas, but not necessarily to reclaim the sinners: "I was excited in one sense, because, if Muslims can express their religious identity in a place called 'Sin City,' they can do it anywhere." Lutheran Pastor Ralph Merrill recognizes Las Vegas as just another place where people need to hear the gospel, but he also sees the singularity of this city: "I don't see Las Vegas as being a typically difficult place to do ministry. There is sin everywhere, but it is on a greater scale here. . . . With gambling, drugs, and alcohol, people can hit rock bottom, and usually they will turn to the church."

Some religious leaders find their ministry to be less complicated here, in part because Las Vegans are more honest and open to help, in contrast to believers elsewhere. Pastor Jeff Howell compared his Las Vegas experience to his prior post: "In the Midwest it is more about face, about how you present yourself. . . .

Here it's not that way. Here they come and dump their truck." He told of a woman who came to him soon after he arrived in southern Nevada: "I was molested as a child. I've been raped. I've had an abortion. But what I want to talk to you about today is that my boyfriend is beating me." Her story, he added, is only one of many. He continued: "In the Midwest it would have taken ten years of



FIG. 4—The Las Vegas Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints overlooks the Las Vegas Valley and the Strip. One Mormon bishop noted that, ironically, the view from this sacred building is of a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah. (Photograph by the author, July 2005)

trust for someone to tell you one of those things. Here it takes five minutes." Pastor Reardon measured his experience in Las Vegas against that in his native Texas. Elsewhere, he explained, you might try to help someone make a connection or create a relationship with Christ in a public sermon, but few are likely to respond to an altar call. The pastor noted that someone in Texas might say, "You're crazy if you think I'm going to raise my hand with Joe sitting right over there." In Las Vegas, however: "When I make an altar call, the hands go up. . . . When people feel that conviction, they'll respond."

Another benefit that the clerics identified relates to the spiritual strength that can be fostered in a city that presents overt opposition to religious teachings. A believer in Las Vegas has a distinct choice between sin and virtue. While recognizing that exposure to vice can also be bad, George Toomey, a Roman Catholic priest, saw the positive side of easy access to sin: "One thing about Vegas is that everything is out there and there's no pretension."

Bishop Burke also acknowledged the negative side of exposure to gambling, added that people recognize its presence, "fortify themselves against it [and] tend to be stronger." He added: "If you live here, it's kind of hard to have a run-of-the-mill lifestyle. You're either in the gambling, sex, and drugs side of things, or you're not. There's no middle ground."

Another Mormon, Bishop Lewin, explained how the city's ever-present temptation affected youth in his congregation: "I found it easier to teach [the youth] about good and evil" because of what Las Vegas is. He added that, because of the blatant visibility in the valley of both the Strip and the Las Vegas Temple—one of many such edifices around the world that are considered to be the pinnacle of worship for Mormons—the distinction is readily apparent (Figure 4). "There is such a contrast that you can delineate more easily between good and evil."

Imam Nassif's characterization of the black-and-white nature of vice and virtue in the city was particularly poignant. He spoke about the openness of sin in the community, calling it "a negative and a plus." I asked, "Why a plus?" He responded: "A plus because the evil, or sin, is not creeping up on you. It's out in the open." So, he added, it is easy to see, making it easier to avoid: "You don't have to just say, 'Beware of the boogeyman.' Here's the boogeyman right here."

SAINTS IN CAESARS PALACE

The influence of the popular "Vegas image" is readily apparent to religious believers in this city, and the reaction to that influence provides an important glimpse into the relationship between locals and tourists in this bifurcated city. Looking through the lens of religious mutability in a local context, I have noted a number of ways in which local congregations struggle with and benefit from being in a city marketed to tourists and known worldwide for its "sin." Beyond the challenges and rewards of worship in such a place, religious leaders noted a number of additional examples in which the city's personality traits can be further recognized in the interaction between religion and place: Diversity within congregations highlights the city's character as a growing place of transplants; many newcomers arrive in Las Vegas with a desire to start over, and attachment to a church, even one different from their former place of worship, is an important part of a new beginning; sense of community in a transient town is often found in churches, synagogues, and mosques; and the city's 7-day-a-week, 24-hour-a-day culture leads to odd work schedules for believers, in turn affecting a congregation's worship schedule and dynamics. Such an encapsulation of local traits within the religious experience indeed shows how religion can be a looking glass into the personality and identity of a place.

Sin City's spiritual experience also underscores a more generalizable pattern in place-religion interaction. Though distinctive in many ways, Las Vegas is not wholly unique, of course. People everywhere, in big cities or small ones, espouse aspects of belief and, at the same time, promote or participate in objects and philosophies that oppose religious teachings. Believers are therefore obliged to choose or compromise between "the sacred and secular [that] frequently exist cheek by jowl" (Kong 2001, 212). As the Las Vegas experience teaches, one can remain a person of faith while living in a den of sin, but doing so requires a level of tolerance and negotiation between spiritual foundation and the surrounding environment. After all, as several interviewees underscored, every place can be a sin city. Dr. Roberts's

comparison applies beyond the lights of Las Vegas: “Even though it is called ‘Sin City,’ you must remember that, even in Rome in the days of old, there were saints in Caesar’s palace. And, there are saints in Caesars Palace today.”

NOTES

1. Unless noted otherwise, all quotations and comments are taken from interviews I conducted with residents in southern Nevada between 2005 and 2008. All interviewee names used here are pseudonyms.

2. I use the term “local” as a general reference to residents of metropolitan Las Vegas. Such reference, when used as a noun, may seem somewhat pejorative, but it is standard form within the city’s vernacular.

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