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Half-Ass Faith? Popular Culture in Denver's *House for All Sinners and Saints*

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Abstract:

House for All Sinners and Saints, a congregation affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in Denver, Colorado, has recently attracted attention for its blend of confessional church tradition and embrace of popular culture. It attracts the types of people not usually associated with mainstream Christianity, including queers, recovering addicts, and abuse victims. Given these biographies, a range of different subcultures come together to shape beliefs and practices in unconventional ways; as a reaction to the opposition many members have experienced in the Christian mainstream, the congregation is rumored to ironically call itself "Half-Ass" (after the abbreviation of its name, HFASS). This paper frames religion and popular culture as entering into dialogue at House for All Sinners and Saints and discusses the meanings that emerge at this intersection. It argues that popular culture is not employed as a mere catch-all tool to fill the pews, but serves to express deviance and dissent from the religious mainstream, encourage new forms of consciousness regarding being 'unconventionally' Christian, and affirm alternative Christian-and-minority-member identities while simultaneously emphasizing the centrality of the confessional tradition for contemporary American culture.

Key Terms: religion and popular culture in dialogue, Christianity, LGBTQ, identity, deviance

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Introduction

The intersections of Mainline Protestantism and popular culture in the USA remain understudied across a range of disciplines, including in the Sociology of Religion, Cultural Studies, and Religious Studies. Typically, examinations of religion and popular culture in the American context focus on conservative Evangelicalism (e.g. Woods 2013, Kyle 2009, Romanowski 2005, Hoover 2005), a branch of Protestantism that is much more willing to adopt popular cultural elements in both worship and other formats. Mainline churches have been slow to follow suit, and many remain reluctant to do so. However, some recent studies have shown that mainline churches are increasingly willing to engage popular culture on different levels (e.g. Ellingson 2007, Freudenberg forthcoming 2018), and this calls for further investigations on how this process is taking place in the Mainline specifically.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is generally known for its liturgical worship, emphasis on the confessional tradition, and theological rationalism (e.g. Braaten 2007, Ammerman 2005, Noll 1992; see also Marty 2007). However, my dissertation research on the ELCA suggests that the denomination is currently in a phase of transition and has begun introducing fundamental changes in terms of both religious practices and organizational structures (see Freudenberg forthcoming 2018). Among other things, it is attempting to reconnect with younger Americans to discover what they, as the new generations, would want their churches to be like. During my research, I came across an ELCA congregation in Denver, Colorado that was rapidly gaining in prominence within church circles: House for All Sinners and Saints, or HFASS for short. HFASS started as an LGBTQ-inclusive congregation that also offers a place for recovering addicts, abuse victims, and other social minorities. It has grown to include members of various subcultures, and meanwhile also of mainstream culture, experiencing increasing media attention along the way. This article analyzes how the congregation uses popular culture to affirm *both* its minority identity *and* its Christian identity in the face of mainstream ideas and beliefs regarding what it means to be part of the Christian church. Consequently, this analysis sees religion and popular culture as being in dialogue, in the sense that HFASS utilizes popular culture to promote the core causes which constitute its self-identity: inclusivity of sexual minorities and embrace of confessional Christian values and practices.

Following a brief theoretical outline of the relationship between popular culture and religion in the next section, I turn to the House for All Sinners and Saints as this paper's empirical example. It is important to clarify that my dissertation research was not focused on HFASS and that the present discussion is a side-product of a larger investigation of the ELCA. A number of my Lutheran respondents in Wisconsin and Minnesota – pastors, congregants, synod staff, and seminary faculty – helpfully shared their knowledge and experiences regarding the congregation, and I use these insights as anecdotal evidence in the sense of Glaser and Straus (1967). However, I intentionally draw heavily from media material in my discussion of HFASS – particularly digital content from its website, digital and print publications by the founding pastor, as well as journalistic articles from large news outlets – to analyze how religion and popular culture enter into dialogue in the congregation's official self-presentation and in subsequent media coverage, which has greatly increased HFASS's visibility and popularity. As a result of this approach, the founding pastor features prominently in the analysis. This is

a conscious decision (without intending to reduce the congregation to its pastor, of course) because she is, analytically speaking, the key figure at the intersection of religion and popular culture at HFASS. In conclusion, I argue that popular culture fulfills a different function at HFASS than it does in conservative Evangelical congregations, namely to express deviance from mainstream Christianity and encourage new forms of consciousness and alternative identities.

Popular Culture and Religion

> *Popular culture is the way of life in which and by which most people in any society live. […] It is the everyday world around us: the mass media, entertainments, and diversions. It is our heroes, icons, rituals, everyday actions, psychology, and religion — our total life picture. It is the way of living we inherit, practice and modify as we please, and how we do it.*
>
> Browne and Browne 2001, 1f.

This well-known definition suggests that popular culture, as the communication and manifestation of ideas and preferences of different groups of people through a variety of channels, intersects with social and political agendas on equality, gender, the environment, race, and so on, and is influenced by age, personal and group histories, language, and other background elements. Knoblauch terms popular culture a shared communicative code which allows people belonging to different societal segments to find common ground and interact on certain topics (Knoblauch 2009, 239). Browne and Browne importantly point out that “popular culture actually consists of many overlapping and interworking cultures, like scales on a fish” (2001, 2).

This paper also understands popular culture as a “process by which new forms of consciousness, new conceptions of the world arise” (Hall 1996, 27). Although important arguments can be made regarding the sedative effects of certain popular cultural products on civic, social, and political participation, the focus here is on popular culture’s potential for “*positive* political engagement” (Bennet 2009, 82). Popular culture provides channels to express deviant views, voice dissent, and propose alternatives to the status quo. It increases group cohesion and can be a source of support for those whose voices would otherwise remain unacknowledged. Popular culture enables counter-hegemonic discourses to emerge and develop, and becomes a site of alternative identity negotiation and engagement for different groups within society (Gramsci 1971). This view raises the question of the relationship – or, more to the point, the tension – between popular culture and counterculture or subculture, in the sense of an alternative lifestyle. Arguably, what originates as a subcultural niche, such as punk culture, enters mainstream culture over time and becomes integrated into it at least to a certain extent. To dress and act “punk” today typically has less radical, countercultural connotations than when the subculture emerged in the 1970s (see e.g. Moran 2011) because as Western societies liberalized in the second half of the twentieth century, popular culture incorporated (some of) punk subculture’s tastes and fashions. Conversely, this indicates that not all popular culture is necessarily mainstream culture, but that certain parts of popular culture intersect with subcultures. The dynamics of popular culture, this article holds, stems precisely from this intersection: popular culture is constantly in flux and feeds from both mainstream and subcultural currents.

But what about the relationship between religion and popular culture? Forbes (2005) famously differentiates four different ways of conceptualizing this relationship – religion in popular culture, popular culture in religion, popular culture *as* religion, religion and popular culture in dialogue (10 ff.) –, and it is the latter perspective which this article takes. As a religious agent, House for All Sinners and Saints selectively employs popular culture to affirm its identity as both welcoming sexual minorities, typically considered deviant in Christianity, and as a confessional, liturgical Christian congregation, typically considered stodgy and old-fashioned by broader American culture. It is in this sense that religion and popular culture are in dialogue at HFASS. As we shall see, the congregation partakes in what Williams (1980), discussing popular religion, calls "extra-ecclesiastical symbolic activity" (228) in appropriating the confessional faith. It explicitly distances itself, at least to a degree, from higher church authority in order to criticize what it perceives as elitism, sexism, and judgementalism and strategically utilizes popular cultural elements to create and sustain an alternative Christian identity. Quoting Lippy (1994), Albanese speaks of "popular religiosity" as "a formation that includes a 'central zone' of religious symbolizations touching base with official religion but also 'subsidiary zones' containing a lot more" (1996, 734). Arguably, new meanings and identity formations emerge in HFASS's "subsidiary zones", where religion intersects with popular culture.

House for All Sinners and Saints

House for All Sinners and Saints is an ELCA congregation of around 350 members located in Denver, Colorado. Its founding pastor is a former drug addict and recovering alcoholic who started the church together with friends in 2008 with the idea of creating a community for people who typically do not fit in in mainstream Christianity due to their identities, personal histories, and expectations of what church should be. Many members come from Christian backgrounds but were alienated by their conservative religious upbringing. One of my Upper Midwest respondents, who went to seminary with the congregation's pastor, told me that the congregation calls itself "Half-Ass" after its abbreviation, HFASS, which – if the rumor is true – would indicate an ironic response to mainstream Christian demands and expectations. Regardless, what seems to attract members most strongly to HFASS is the congregation's commitment to both observing the confessional tradition and rituals as well as creating a counter-hegemonic space for minority lifestyles and identities. In what follows, I examine key intersections between religion and popular culture to show how both Christian and minority identities are simultaneously affirmed.

Alternative Lifestyles and Christian Identities

HFASS began as an "LGBTQ inclusive" congregation – most of its early attendees identified as belonging to the LGBTQ community – and remains so to this day. About a third of the congregation are LGBTQ (Religion and Ethics Newsweekly 2016), which is why the founding pastor chose to address the topic of homosexuality – obviously a hot-button issue in most religious circles – when asked to contribute to an evangelical leadership conference in 2014. Her congregation made a video in which eight people briefly introduce themselves as queer and as part of the "Body of Christ", i.e. as fully accepted members the Christian church (The Huffington Post 2014). They are all younger (presumably in their 20s and 30s), express a variety of styles in their

appearance, and speak candidly about their faith and their sexuality. At the end of the video, the pastor quotes from the Bible while a colorful bust of Jesus in a relaxed pose and wearing sunglasses perches in the background. Here, popular cultural elements – fashion and language characteristic of Millennials and Gen Xers paired with an affirmation of queer sexuality – communicate that HFASS is a young, unconventional, inclusive space, while the frequent references to worship and the Bible serve to ground it in the Christian faith. As another example, according to the pastor every church needs a drag queen because “it just makes church better”, as she humorously states in an interview with *The Atlantic* in 2015. In it, she recalls how a drag queen at HFASS proposed to solicit donations by making T-shirts that say “This shit ain’t free” on the front and “You better tithe, bitches” on the back (The Atlantic 2015). The language, images, and particularly the humor at work here – both in the example the pastor cites and the way she retells it – are steeped in popular culture and are used to emphasize both an embrace of “deviant” sexuality and behavior and the importance of the tithing as a central Christian practice. That is to say, popular culture functions not only to express an alternative lifestyle but to *simultaneously* affirm a decidedly Christian identity. This becomes even more explicit in a recent short documentary, in which Steve, the drag queen, is introduced as the congregation’s “Minister of Fabulousness” (see also Bolz-Weber 2013, 53) while pictures of him in full costume flash across the screen. Then, wearing his regular outfit, he says of his church, “I don’t have to check any piece of myself at the door. […] I can bring all of that stuff with me, just like people can bring their questions and their doubt and their unbelief” (Religion and Ethics Newsweekly 2016). Steve’s drag queen side and unconventional ideas are obviously popular cultural elements, but they are closely linked to his faith and, by extension, to Christianity as practiced at HFASS. This reveals how popular culture functions to help individuals who do not fit in in the American Christian mainstream find a place of belonging at House for All Sinners and Saints, and importantly also suggests that popular culture is an important tool to reconnect other congregations within the ELCA to younger, religiously alienated Americans.

While inclusivity is central at HFASS, this applies not only to gender and sexual identity but to a diversity of lifestyles and backgrounds in general. Most members are younger, belonging to the Generation X and Millennial cohorts, while some Baby Boomers and senior citizens also attend. There are single parents, recovering addicts, people with physical and mental health issues, married couples, young families, and other individuals who have found what they perceive to be a unique space of acceptance and belonging. The majority of the congregation’s members were raised in the Christian faith but left their churches because they did not feel accepted, oftentimes due to a strictly conservative interpretation of the Bible. I argue that against the congregation’s background of disenchantment with conservative Christianity, popular culture takes on a specific function at HFASS, namely to express inclusivity of a broad range of gender, sexual, social, and personal identities. It projects an image of the congregation that speaks not to how Christians ‘should be’, in the eyes of others or of the church, but to how contemporary Christians *are* – in other words, popular cultural functions to claim space for the types of people hitherto largely unacknowledged in Christianity. House for All Sinners and Saints describes itself as a group of “urban, postmodern folks” (House for All Sinners and Saints, 2017a), embracing their identity of being both Christian and firmly rooted in modern culture.

Confessional Tradition and Contemporary Culture

Worship at HFASS reveals less popular cultural elements at first glance. The services are very traditional in form. While parishioners attend in street clothes, both pastors wear pastoral vestments, either alb and stole (a tunic and a festive cloth draped across the shoulders) or black garb and the white clerical collar. The altar is festively decorated with an ornate crucifix, the Eucharist, candles, and sometimes an incense burner. The Lutheran liturgy as corporate ritual, including the Opening Confession, various scripted prayers and Gospel acclamations, the Nicene Creed, Holy Communion, and Benediction, presents the heart of worship at HFASS and is conducted with seriousness and reverence; the usual joking and sarcasm are absent during these formal parts of the service. Music usually consists of traditional hymns sung *a capella*, as the congregation does not have a worship band or an organist. During "Open Space", people pray, read Scripture, reflect on the sermon, or engage in other creative activities. The importance of the liturgy for the congregation's identity becomes apparent in its self-introduction on HFASS's website: "We are … a group of folks figuring out how to be a liturgical, Christo-centric, social justice-oriented, queer-inclusive, incarnational, contemplative, irreverent, ancient/future church with a progressive but deeply rooted theological imagination" (House for All Sinners and Saints, 2017b). This statement expresses a commitment to the Lutheran tradition, socially progressive values, and critical self-examination, as well as an affinity with the Emerging Church[1]. Elsewhere on the website, Sunday services are described as being "[p]retty much just like a Rolling Stones concert … uhh, we mean, nothing at all like a Rolling Stones concert. We follow the ancient liturgy of the church …" (House for all Sinners and Saints, 2017a). Interestingly, the hymns that are actually sung during worship have nothing in common with rock music, as an Episcopal priest pointed out in an interview with *The Denver Post*: "The liturgy [at HFASS] is traditional and sacramental, with ancient chants and traditional hymns. This is not some rock-band-led, happy-clappy church in the suburbs. And yet young, radical Christians come every Sunday" (The Denver Post 2011). There Rolling Stones reference suggests the congregation embraces a "bad boy" image to a certain degree in order to create an environment attractive to the kinds of alternative and subcultural groups not usually drawn to Christianity. In this instance, a reference to popular culture is dropped in passing in order to connect contemporary Americans to a confessional Christian tradition. While the example may seem trivial at first, it is one of many in which religion and popular culture are in dialogue at HFASS in the sense that popular culture is used as a connecting link to encourage serious engagement with Christianity. For instance, the congregation's founding pastor said at a 2015 conference,

> At House for All Sinners and Saints, the absolution we often use goes like this: "God, who is gracious and merciful and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, loves you as you are. As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ, and by his authority, I declare to you the entire forgiveness of all of your sins." [*pauses*] No one says that shit to me in yoga class. (Religion and Ethics Newsweekly 2016)

This statement stimulated bouts of laughter from the audience, but the pastor's demeanour was serious, even emotional. The tension she maintains in this example between speaking of God and the church on the one hand and yoga class, peppered

[1] The Emerging Church has been characterized as a loosely organized, progressive, late modern religious movement (see e.g. Marti and Ganiel 2014, Freudenberg 2015, Packard 2012).

with a little swearing, on the other – between graveness and comedy – reveals popular culture surfacing in both content and style of her remark as, crucially, connected to a decidedly religious message concerning the nature and power of God. Her demeanour indicates that she does not intend to merely provoke laughter, but, more importantly, reflection on the depth of confessional faith compared to diffusely 'spiritual' cultural fashions in America. The popular cultural reference grabs attention and redirects it to the 'deeper' issue of the Christian absolution of sins.

A number of events at HFASS are steeped in what Williams (1980) calls "extra-ecclesiastical symbolic activity" (228) practiced outside of formal church settings because these are no longer adequate in themselves. Examples include "Beer and Hymns", or singing classical hymns over drinks at a local bar; "Bluegrass Liturgy", when a Bluegrass band plays at the service; yoga class every other week; "Park(ing) Day", on which parking spaces are occupied and turned into space for worship, work, or relaxation for the day; and the "Blessing of the Bicycles", where bicycles and other means of non-motorized transportation are blessed to "celebrate being conscious of our transportation choices and the impact they make. […] And afterward we have a keg of Fat Tire [beer]" (House for All Sinners and Saints, 2017a). These extra-ecclesiastical symbolic events bring religion and popular culture into dialogue with a dual purpose: they communicate that Christianity is compatible with the lifestyles of contemporary Americans, but that contemporary culture lacks depth and meaning without incorporating Christian rituals and beliefs. This becomes particularly evident in the example of yoga: The pastor is a self-declared fan of yoga, as it helped her overcome her substance addiction, and supports regular yoga events at the congregation. Her remark on the absolution of sins above, however, indicates that yoga, on its own, is not 'enough': in her mind, the liturgical tradition and sacraments of the church are crucial to experience grace, mercy, love, and forgiveness. The underlying message is that Christianity needs contemporary culture to survive, but that contemporary culture likewise needs the Christian faith. The intertwined-ness and inseparability of both is illuminated in a response to the question of why a place like House for All Sinners and Saints is necessary for its members: "We no longer have to culturally commute or bracket out parts of ourselves to be in Christian community" (House for All Sinners and Saints, 2017a). Again, HFASS members are claiming their place as full members of the Christian community – not by conforming to others' expectations of what fully accepted members 'should be like', but by accentuating their individual identities, styles, preferences, and worldviews.

Crafting a Media Image

As explained in the Introduction, I draw heavily from media material in my discussion of HFASS in this section to analyze how religion and popular culture enter into dialogue in the congregation's public self-presentation and particularly in the pastor's media image. This is not to reduce the congregation to its pastor, of course, but to acknowledge that she is the key figure at the intersection of religion and popular culture at HFASS.

The House for All Sinners and Saints has received increasing media coverage, including in outlets such as the *BBC, The Guardian, The Washington Post, The Atlantic, CNN,* and *The Huffington Post*. This rising interest has confronted the congregation with new challenges, for instance regarding the growing numbers of spectator-visitors at worship.

While the congregation makes a point of welcoming everyone who wishes to join in worship, it states that its "priority is to make space for residents of the Denver Metro area who need a sanctuary to call home" and that it hopes "to reserve as much space as possible for local folks in a position to build an ongoing relationship" because it wants to be a "local congregation rather than a destination church" (House for All Sinners and Saints 2017c). Again, this is very reminiscent of Emerging Church approaches[2], but what is particularly important to realize in the context of the function of popular culture at HFASS is that the desire to remain a neighborhood church clearly sets it apart from church growth-oriented, typically conservative evangelical congregations (e.g. Oswalt 2012, Thumma and Travis 2007, Schultze 2003, Miller 1997), a point to which I return in more detail below. At HFASS, popular culture functions to integrate hitherto marginalized groups of people into the Christian community and provide them with a form of expressing their identity as *both* social and/or cultural minorities *and* as members of the 'church of Christ'.

The congregation's founding pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber, has published several books on her faith, her congregation, and her personal background, and is a sought-after speaker at Christian conferences and other events. She is frequently asked about her congregation's approach to Christianity, and draws heavily from popular culture in the way she presents herself. Tall and muscular, she has short dark hair with an undercut, revealing tunnel earrings. She is also heavily tattooed, including on her arms and collarbone, and demonstrates her tattoos and imposing physique in photos. For instance, in an article for the *BBC* Bolz-Weber reveals her tattoos wearing a short-sleeved, low cut top, looking at the camera above her hipster-style black glasses with an ironic expression on her face. Her arms depict characters and scenes from the Bible, including Mary Magdalene and images for Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. The caption describes Bolz-Weber as "a foul-mouthed tattoo-loving Lutheran pastor who was once a Pagan, an alcoholic and a stand-up comedian [and] is reinventing church" (BBC 2015). Similarly, an article in *The Guardian* depicts Bolz-Weber in a black outfit with a clerical collar, a larger silver cross on her chest, and wearing prominent earrings, her elbows on her knees, revealing the tattoos on her forearms, looking straight into the camera against a backdrop of stained-glass windows. The photo's caption reads: "With her bracing outlook – and her body art – the Lutheran pastor from Denver may be able to attract people to her church who would otherwise be wary of this form of Christianity" (The Guardian 2014). A piece in *The Daily Mail* – entitled "Tattooed female weightlifter who boozed and took drugs becomes rising star of the Lutheran church" (Mail Online 2013) – shows Bolz-Weber in the same outfit and pose, except that she has her hands folded as if in prayer. Other photos in this piece depict her standing with her forearms folded across her chest and sporting a large belt buckle around her waist. She owns several such buckles and typically wears them with tight jeans or pants. At least one of her belt buckles is custom-made and depicts a brightly colored icon of Jesus topped with the phrase "Jesus Loves You"; she proudly presented it to her followers on her Twitter account @Sarcastic Lutheran (Bolz-Weber 2014b). Other photographs, for instance on her personal website or for an *Atlantic* article (nadiabolzweber.com; The Atlantic 2015),

[2] See Packard (2012) for a discussion of organizational growth and the threat of institutionalization to the Emerging Church as a movement.

show her with similar hairstyles and accessories, but with a comic-sarcastic expression on her face.

Bolz-Weber's style and body language suggest that she draws heavily from popular culture and subculture in her self-presentation in the media. For one, tattooing is simultaneously a contemporary popular cultural form and an ancient religious practice (Jensen, Flori and Miller 2000), and she brings both together in the themes and the extent (in terms of skin area) of her tattoos. For another, her style indicates punk and goth subcultures, which typically express dissent and deviance from mainstream conceptions and expectations (e.g. Moran 2011). The fact that she combines this with conspicuous Christian symbolism introduces religiosity as her chosen site of deviance and dissent: Bolz-Weber is affirming an identity as an alternative, minority Christian claiming a place for herself and her people like her within a tradition that, more likely than not, shuns gays, addicts, and anyone else outside of the mainstream. She symbolically asserts the right to be part of the confessional tradition not in spite of, but because of being 'different'. Her body language suggests self-confidence, resolution, and, in the context of the article topics ("tattooed female weightlifter", "boozed and took drugs", "bracing outlook"), even defiance. Drawing from popular culture to make a statement about religion in this way has the potential of creating new forms of consciousness about what it means to be part of Christianity.

One scene in the *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* documentary shows the pastor on a stage speaking to a large crowd at a Youth Gathering. She is sporting her customary haircut and outfit, including a big belt buckle and a top that shows her tattoos, and the documentary commentator goes so far as to claim that "[f]or thousands of fans and believers, the pastor has become a religious icon" (2016). In a sense, he is correct; Bolz-Weber has become a star in the liberal Christian world because of her pop culture allure. However, it is arguably more than her contemporary style – more even than her commitment to confessional, liturgical Christianity – that draws people to her. She has initiated a counter-hegemonic discourse, to speak with Gramsci (1971), in mainline Protestantism which allows individuals on the margins of society (i.e., minorities of sorts) to enter the debate and engage in negotiating an alternative Christian identity for themselves. In this process, new forms of consciousness emerge which question and oppose existing conceptions of 'church' and encourage the construction of alternative spaces, symbolic and physical, of religious participation.

The effects of this counter-hegemonic discourse, which is subversive to the confessional church as an institution[3] to a certain degree, cannot be discussed in much detail here for reasons of scope. House for all Sinners and Saints is experiencing increased attention and support across the ELCA, which has largely reacted positively to the congregation's development. Innovative leaders, in particular, have been outspoken in praising Bolz-Weber as "the primary female voice for the Emerging Church", with which parts of the ELCA identify, and HFASS as a place of "forward motion" that radiates "a sense of

[3] This process could be analysed from various theoretical angles, e.g. deinstitutionalization in organizational theory (Scott 2008, Oliver 1992) or the routinization of charisma in sociological theory (e.g. Weber 2010 [1922], Bourdieu 2000), to provide fascinating insights into the current development of mainline Protestantism (see also Freudenberg forthcoming 2018).

adventure"[4]. Her books, which are autobiographical, have also been received favorably in the ELCA. In stark contrast, she is heavily criticized in conservative evangelical circles. For instance, she was nicknamed "Pastrix", a derogatory spin-off of her pastoral title, in several conservative blogs, the implication being that women pastors are considered inacceptable. In reaction to this critique, Bolz-Weber adopted the term as the title of her 2014 autobiography[5] in an ironic gesture expressing her disregard of such opinions and dismissal of voices opposed to female pastors. Both this book and her next publication, "Accidental Saints" (Bolz-Weber 2015), heavily emphasize progressive, inclusive social values and the practice of critical self-examination.

The discussion of popular culture as creating counter-hegemonic discourses and new forms of identity in the dialogue and interaction with religion marks a central contrast between the progressive Mainline and conservative Evangelicalism. Both traditions draw from popular culture, the latter much more than the former; and while both use it to emphasize their Christian identity, they do so in very different ways. Conservative evangelical congregations are often oriented on church growth (e.g. Oswalt 2012, Thumma and Travis 2007, Schultze 2003, Miller 1997), and employ popular culture to offer modern and technologically advanced worship services – whether in the form of television shows, popularized liturgy, or a range of contemporary Christian music (Knoblauch 2009, 251) – to increase their membership. In doing so, they necessarily emphasize uniformity of their membership bodies, and expect new members to conform to existing practices and structures. In contrast, popular culture in alterative, progressive congregations such as House for All Sinners and Saints functions to emphasize religious deviance and dissent instead of conformity among members, and encourages alternative identity negotiation and new forms of consciousness. Being 'different' yet being an integral part of the Christian community is the identity which emerges as the intersection of religion and popular culture. Church growth for the mere sake of growth is not considered a goal, as the desire to remain a "neighborhood church" (see above) and a "do-it-yourself", creative community (see Bolz-Weber 2013, 178 ff.) suggest.

Conclusion

This article has argued that popular culture has a dual function in the way it enters into dialogue with religion at House For All Sinners and Saints. On the one hand, it serves to integrate a broad range of minority individuals into the confessional Christian narrative, enabling the construction of alternative identities and a space of belonging for people typically excluded from mainstream Christianity. Tattoos depicting the liturgical calendar, drag queen humor encouraging people to become active in church life, and an ironic embrace of derogatory conservative Christian labels, such as "Pastrix", express non-conformity at that same time as claiming membership not in spite of, but because of being 'deviant'. On the other, it affirms the confessional, liturgical Christian tradition as crucial for contemporary American culture, in the sense that it provides meaning and depth in what is considered to be a prejudiced and superficial environment. By expressing their faith through the subcultures they belong to, the members of HFASS

[4] These opinions were expressed to me by young pastors and seminary students during my qualitative fieldwork on the current development of the ELCA in 2013 and 2014 (see Freudenberg forthcoming 2018).
[5] Bolz-Weber, Nadia. 2014a. *Pastrix. The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint*. New York: Jericho Books.

disown their previous marginalization by Christianity and assert themselves as social and/or cultural minorities and full members of the confessional tradition, at the same time emphasizing the relevance they perceive this tradition to have within wider American culture.

As I have shown, extra-ecclesiastical symbolic activities, in particular, are sites of interaction between religion and popular culture in the sense that they communicate both Christianity's compatibility with alternative, subcultural identities – even more, that these identities are valuable assets for the tradition – and the importance of confessional rituals and beliefs in providing these identities with deeper meaning. Activities such as the “Blessing of the Bicycles” and “Beer and Hymns” can be understood as “subsidiary zones” of religious symbolization (Lippy 1994) in which novel religious meanings emerge to supplement the “central zones”, such as worship and the sacraments. Importantly, subsidiary zone activities foster a counter-hegemonic discourse that enables new forms of consciousness to emerge which question and oppose existing conceptions of ‘church’ and encourage the construction of alternative spaces, symbolic and physical, of religious participation. At this intersection, HFASS's members assert the right to be part of the confessional tradition precisely because of their ‘difference’.

This assertion of ‘being different yet belonging’ arguably stands in important contrast to the way popular culture is employed in conservative evangelical congregations. While conservative Evangelicalism is typically aimed at numerical growth and relative conformity of membership – including a conservative reading of the Bible, a focus on religious conversion, and the shared task of proselytization (Woods 2013) – progressive, emphatically alternative congregations such as House for All Sinners and Saints express religious deviance, dissent, and diversity in their use of popular culture. They do so to make the claim that Christianity is more than its mainstream and to assert a space of belonging for minorities in its midst. Thus, while both conservative evangelical groups and progressive congregations such as HFASS draw from popular culture to affirm their Christian identity, I argue that the purposes with which they do so are fundamentally different. At House for All Sinners and Saints, the typically strict boundary between who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ – who is allowed into the Christian fold – is intentionally rendered porous and malleable in the act of utilizing popular culture in these ways to create an environment of acceptance and belonging. If I were to guess what HFASS's reaction to this assessment would be, I would expect an ironic remark somewhere along the lines of, “Well, after all, not everyone can be Half-Ass”.

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