

Interview guide

Questions - revised

Interview Questions for a Place of Worship

***we have used the word “church” instead of “place of worship”, however “church” is meant to be just one representation of a place of worship**

How did you pick the church that you go to now?
How do you go to church?
What are some daily practices of religion outside church?
Were you raised in this way?
What role does religion serve in your life?
Have you ever been non-religious? If so, what changed?
Do you ever feel victimized because of your religious beliefs?
How did you find your religion?
Eastern vs Western religion - why do you identify with that religion?
Converts -- why?
How often do the people in your life go to church? I.e: family/friends?
How do you deal with close people who don't share the same faith?

Religion acquisition

Tell me about faith and religion in your household while growing up
Tell me about faith and religion in your household now
Can you describe your religious beliefs?
Have you ever been non-religious? If so, what changed?
Have you ever doubted your faith?
Were you raised in this way?
How did you find your religion?
Can you talk to the role of religion/faith in your life?

Religion leaders

Can you tell me what you do on a daily basis?
What do you think is the role of faith and religion on a person's life?
How do people generally navigate religion?

How do you help people navigate religion/find themselves?

Have you ever doubted your faith? If so, what catalyzed the change that created your current lifestyle?

Tell me more about your lifestyle choice? What is the significance of what religion for society and individuals?

People profiles

Sunnyvale Hindu Temple

Head Priest - Pandit Kambhampati Bala Krishna Sarma

Observations

Head Priest Pandit received us in the Sunnyvale temple, in his place of worship among the temple visitors. He came to the US in 2001, when he moved to NY/NJ before his move towards west in 2008 - when he came the priest in the Sunnyvale Temple.

Explained that "We are a priest family" - meaning that all men in his family are/were priests, except for his father who was an accountant. Like his dad he studied commerce (in India) but got his masters in Religious Studies (in the US).

"Everything is based on belief" - he explained that he can't evangelize or argue pro any religion because their are rooted on a belief "The belief that one person cannot do everything. We are not the creators of everything. We didn't make air, water, fire, earth so the belief is rooted in something greater - however you call it"

Temple visitors and prayers

Mostly Indian immigrants who go to the temple to feel connected to their culture - use of curiosity for religion to reconnect with roots and their own people. Children and new generation believers go to Sunday school where they explore their faith and are exposed to the foundations of Hinduism.

Q: Do you get white/Western people attending the temple?

A: "The ones who come are here like you: taking notes. They come to learn and briefly explore but they are not frequent visitors and followers of Hinduism."

"Religion is the common man's way of reaching happiness"

Q: Do you ever challenge your faith?

A: "You can't really challenge your faith and be a priest"

Q: "What is the hardest part of your job?"

A: "There is really no hard part to my job - I pray for people's happiness and fulfillment. It's all pleasurable and valuable"

Mountain View Buddhist Temple
Peggie - Temple administrator

Observations

Peggie volunteers 2x/week in the Buddhist temple and was raised buddhist. Interestingly, she was pretty reticent when talking about herself and preferred just talking about the temple and a bit about the religion.

When asked about how she raised her children and their religion, she mentioned that she likes to think of them as such as she did try to raised them Buddhists but "it is none of my business, it is their belief". "They do identify as Buddhists I think so that is something, but they don't come to church every week or anything like that."

"To me, buddhism is a way of living, part of my culture and who I am, not only my religion"

Q: "What does being buddhist mean to you?"

A: "It is realizing that everything is always changing"

Scientology Church
Suzanne - Church manager

Observations

Right away, the Scientology Church proved to be almost opposite to the temples and churches visited. Looking more like a doctors office, the waiting area was full of TVs and displays showing teachings and slogans of the religion. On the wall, "Bringing spiritual technology to Silicon Valley"

We were introduced to Suzanne, a German woman that works there as administrator.

Q: "Can you tell us a bit more about scientology?"

A: "Most importantly, we don't tell people what to think. What is true for you is only what you learn yourself. We can't enforce belief. Whatever you believe in, it is important for you to find it yourself"

Right afterwards, she proceed for deferring all of our questions to a series of 7 monitors spread around a long hallways with benches in the middle like one would see at a technology museum. Each of the monitors, interactive, presented multiple facets of the religion.

In between videos, we attempted asking our host about herself and her beliefs, but she kept going back to the same maxim of: "My case is not important to your learning - each experience is its own"

We were able to learn though, that she was introduced to Scientology by a friend via the book "Dialectic" - the basis of the religion. After reading the book - top all-time NYT self help best seller - she came in and slowly was introduced to the religion. Such introduction goes by through courses, exams and surveys, all paid.

Of all aspects of the religion we were exposed to in that hour and a half, some of them stuck out, like: "The subject of scientology is you", "Scientology provides the tools that allows you to overcome your own challenges"

Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann

Stanford University Chaplain and Senior Associate Dean for Religious Life

Observations

Largest projects at Stanford

- Whole Stanford Whole Student

students live a highly compartmented life that leaves them with a sense of unfulfillment and disconnection with their own lives. she is attempting, alongside with many other university officials, to bridge curricular, extracurricular, personal and professional lives of Stanford students. try to answer questions like "how do you live a whole life?" "how do you bring everything together?"

- Grief group

22% to 30% of Stanford students at any given moment are grieving the loss of a close family member who passed away less than one year ago
but only 15-20 students in the group at a time

- "How do you use the wisdom of religious traditions to live a better life, choose relationships, find jobs, etc?"

help students use faith and religion to fulfill their most fundamental needs

Rabbi Patricia told us the story of a young gay man she help before she worked at Stanford. The man was the son of a Rabbi and was struggling to come out to his parents about it. After much thought and consideration, they realized that he need to base himself on the foundations and common ground of Judaism that he shared with his parents - especially one of honesty and openness. Based on such common ground, they were able to work out the differences.

Personal Life and Navigation

Patricia grew up in a secular house but her family joined a congregation when she was a early teen for community social reasons. And she was pretty checked out from religion until she reached high school and faced her first big challenges in live. With her dad out of money and grandfather passing away, she got closer to the Rabbi at her congregation who aided her through that tough time and convince her to start taking some classes on the subject. Slowly she started getting more involved with religion and her own faith until her senior year of college when she found comfort on the idea of doing social work and becoming one of the few ordained Rabbis in the nation (at that point, there was only one other female Rabbi in the planet)

Q: Have you ever doubted your faith?

A: "So, I lost my parents when I was very young. My mother died first and when I was pregnant of my first child, my dad moved in with to help take care of my daughter but he got too sick. 5 days before my first daughter was born he passed away. That created a serious juxtaposition of life and death in my life. I mean, people were coming home to offer their condolences and we had a pink bow on the door announcing it was a girl. After a few weeks I remember seating at a cafe nursing my daughter and talking to my Rabbi when I asked probably the most important question of my life: "Is my faith ever going to return?" to which I got the most important answer of my life: "It will"

Biggest challenge for helping the community

- In times as challenging as these, with police brutality, sexual assault, divestment talks people feel "fear, oppressed, fragile, disenfranchised, powerless" and what she focuses on is one question: "how do we renew our hopes?"
- What she hears the most is "I don't feel my voice is being represented and heard" and "Because of who I seem to be, people attribute thoughts and opinions to my account" "so hard to stop and think, just think"

Christopher Yang
BA, MA in Religious Studies

Observations

Background

Dad is strong atheist and mom self identifies now with daoism, but Chris remembers that "I saw her transformation; like until I was 13 or so, she was a non believer but then she went through a self search"

“But by then I kind of looked down on her - as most educated rebel teenagers I saw no place in society for religion and was filled with skepticism. My beliefs were based on the “absolute truths of society”: science and technology”

Q: What can religion do for the believer?

A: “Slowly I realized that the relationship between religion and the believer is not transactional, at least it is not supposed to be. It is not something like: I pray and get something in return. It is much deeper”

A: “Actually religion comes from rei-ligio which basically means bringing back together - that by itself indicates that religion is supposed to have a deep relationship with community and sociological interaction”

A: “But at the end, there are obviously multiples benefits from religion to the believer, from comfort to intellectual motivation - and several studies show it - even if it is an illusion or placebo”

Religious feeling

“In my case, and I think this is the case for most believers, religion doesn’t come from daily interactions or habits but from a moment of extreme religious feeling. Here I am not necessarily talking about talking and directly interacting with a higher force; I am talking about a feeling that can generally not be explained”

“One day I remember lying down on a field, I felt in a way like I was the field and vice versa. And a bird flew over and that’s when I felt it. At that moment, I understood something and I felt something completely new - and that changed my belief in something greater or not.”

Needfinding

People need to conceptualize Otherness through a framework of Sameness

Observations:

- “The ones who come here are like you: taking notes. They come to learn and briefly explore but they are not frequent visitors and followers of Hinduism.” - Head Priest Hindu
- “It’s super hard to practice my faith without being branded as a terrorist” - Mrs. Gulati
- When Rabbi Patricia was choose a life path, there was only one woman rabbi and she said "someone has to imagine it for you, I had to imagine for myself"
- People who are not sure about their faith and are part of a religious minority, feel threatened and insecure - Christopher Yang

Interpretation process:

There is curiosity but not true engagement inter communities

Why? in face of the unknown, we get defensive and tread more lightly

why? because we don't find common ground on our differences

Concluding interpretations:

It is easy to find differences between belief systems and intuitive to make assumptions and feel defensive towards different religions, however there is more common ground then differences between them. If people look at different beliefs through lenses of sameness, they will achieve different results and truly empathize.

High level need:

People need to conceptualize Otherness through a framework of Sameness

How might we help family members with different faith and religion find the core similarities in their beliefs?

We see this as trying to figure out a way of helping people find common ground in their beliefs and through that empathizing with different people and faiths.

People frame decisions of communal inclusion based on recreating positive memories

Observations:

- Faith falls in line with tradition, we didn't come across many converts.
- Hindu Temple's Head Priest's family was a "priest family"
- "My elders did it - there must be something to it" - Mrs. Gulati
- Rabbi grew up in a secular home, but was actually super comforted by the regularity of the candles.
- "Pure belief is more important and that is something I cannot teach" - Head Priest

Interpretation process:

People stuck to what they'd known since they were little.

Why? Because it gave them comfort.

Why? Because it was predictable.

Why? Because it was familiar.

Why does it matter that its familiar? Because you have positive memories associated with it.

Concluding interpretations:

Initially, one of our main focuses was to look at converts and understand how their decision process takes place. However, by interviewing religious leaders, we quickly realized that by far the most significant portion of believers have their faith founded on their own personal histories. We learned that people cling to this background but they have trouble conciliating these positive memories with their current beliefs and actually understanding the foundation of these. We want people to fight the inertia of believing and think about the origins of their own faith.

High level need:

People need to be able to connect their current beliefs and faith with their own historical experiences

How might we help young adults find the foundations of their beliefs in their family traditions?

For us, this is all about connecting past and present, origin and status, and truly understanding the foundations of one's belief.

Moments of hardship are definitive for the establishment and intellectual challenge of one's beliefs

Observations:

- "In hardship, am I gonna turn to people or am I gonna turn to God who is infinite" - Mrs. Gulati
- "I truly wish a little bit of hardship to everyone, because those are the moments who challenge you and make who you are" Mrs. Gulati
- It is important to be around people who have been through hardship and similar problems - Rabbi Patricia
- In times as challenging as these, with police brutality, sexual assault, divestment talks people feel "fear, oppressed, fragile, disenfranchised, powerless" and what she focuses on is one question: "how do we renew our hopes?" - Rabbi Patricia
- 22% to 30% of Stanford students at any given moment are grieving the loss of a close family member who passed away less than one year ago - Rabbi Patricia
- When people are seeking guidance, they go to the rabbi when unsure of what is happening
- "Is my faith ever going to return?" to which I got the most important answer of my life: "It will" - Rabbi Patricia

Interpretation process:

Moments of hardship are defining moments for establishment of one's beliefs

Why? in such moments, people are searching for support and explanations

Why? because they want to find answers in their own faith for mishappens

Concluding interpretations:

When asked about moments where they doubted or second guessed their own beliefs, believers seem to tie them to specific moments of hardship (especially grief). Interestingly though, they mentioned that such challenges made them think harder and better understand their faith, ultimately strengthening it. We identify such connection and recognize that people need to have the outlets and support to be able to achieve such transformation.

High level need:

People need to intellectually explore their own beliefs through the support of other in time of hardship

How might we provide the proper intellectual and spiritual environment to allow grieving people to find the answers and support they are looking for?

Rituals are a container to embody the values and are a concrete representation of faith and belief

Observations:

- "Rituals provided comfort and predictability when i was a kid and I felt comfort in that I guess" - Mrs Gulati
- Rabbi grew up in a secular home, but was actually super comforted by the regularity of the candles and that was her "port of entrance" to religion
- "Rituals are a container to embody the values that religion implores me to actualize" - Rabbi Patricia

Interpretation process:

Rituals are an important part of religious practice.

Why? Rituals provide concreteness to a highly spiritual area and people find comfort in that

Why? People need repetition and actionables to express their faith

Concluding interpretations:

Rituals are no more than containers to the embodiment of religious and spiritual values, however they are important as they give believers something concrete and actionables to grasp one and express their faith. People, specially those who are exploring and discovering their own faith, need such means to express their beliefs.

High level need:

Young people who are exploring their faith need concrete actionables to express their faith

How might we provide believers who don't want to go visit temples/churches with concrete and actionable ways of expressing their faith?

For us, this is about creating alternative means of expressing one's faith that can be more accessible to religion newcomers and explorers.

People live highly compartmentalized lives that prevents a sense of complete fulfillment

Observations:

- Rabbi Patricia main project: "Whole student, whole Stanford" trying to answer questions like "How do you live a whole, fuller life?" and "How do you bring everything together?"
- Mrs. Gulati felt first hand compartmentalization upon moving to America
- "The main question for my job is how do I use the wisdom of religious traditions to live a better life, choose my relationships, find jobs, etc?" - Rabbi Patricia
- Rabbi Patricia's job description goes through "helping students and staff use faith and religion to fulfill their most fundamental needs" and compartmentalization of their lives is one of the main obstacles to this
- "I hear a lot of people saying stuff like: "I don't feel my voice is being represented and heard" or "so hard to stop and take time just to think" and I am certain that this is a direct consequence of compartmentalization of their lives" - Rabbi Patricia

Interpretation process:

People feel unfulfilled and not in control of their own experiences

Why? because they never get a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment

Why? because the different aspects in their lives are disconnected

Why? because their lives are compartmentalized

Concluding interpretations:

Talking to Rabbi Patricia, she presented to us a need identified over the last 6 months through her work alongside with the Stanford d.school. Stanford students live highly compartmentalized lives, preventing them from finding fulfillment or the sense of a "whole life". Talking to other religious leaders and people not from Stanford, we were able to confirm that this is a trend outside the bubble as well. Our goal here is to analyze what prevents people from connecting the dots and living a full life and hopefully design a product/idea/platform that helps them accomplish such proven need.

High level need:

People need a way of connecting the different aspects in their lives to live a fuller experience

How might we help young professionals and students connect the multiple aspects in their lives to find a sense of fulfillment in what they do?

For us, this is about helping people feel a new found fulfillment in their lives by simply connecting the different facets and elements towards a common goal.