

A Test of Faith: Religion's Place in Progressive California

In the heart of California, where political and cultural liberalism often define the landscape, faith finds itself at a crossroads. With uniquely liberal stances, from the Ban on Non-Consensual Condom Removal to the California Consumer Privacy Act, people of all backgrounds move to California for its reputation as a state that provides the freedom and safety to be whoever they desire.

Beneath the sprawling shade of an oak tree, Daniela Lurey stands in a long red, floral skirt beside Kristan Hawkins, America's President of Students for Life, who converses with inquisitive students walking past UC Davis' Memorial Union. Around Lurey's neck is a delicate, silver cross. Daniela Lurey was raised Jewish. Three years ago, longing for her hometown temple, she began closely examining the Old Testament. In the process, Lurey says "I began to find that Christianity was Judaism fulfilled." Blocking the sun with her small hand, Lurey described her transition into Christian Orthodoxy and mission to find a place in the Church that Jesus founded.

Lurey, standing with fellow pro-life students, is also the president of the Davis College Republicans. A fourth year Environmental Policy Analysis major, her religious beliefs contrast sharply to California's liberality. Sun beaming down on her through the branches of the oak tree, Lurey says she finds both identities, Christianity and conservatism, inherently intertwined. She describes her Republican stance as something which allows her to demonstrate her Christian moral objectivity.

"They're extremely connected in the sense that my moral code is influenced directly by my religion." Lurey says, "In regards to the response of Christians to the whole California identity, I think it's incompatible with Christian members, because the whole idea about loving yourself first goes completely against Christianity."

Though data from the 2023 PRRI (the non-partisan, non-profit Public Religion Research Institute) shows religious unaffiliation in United States' younger population stands at around 36%, compared to 18% for seniors, Lurey sees conservative Christianity actually being on the rise. In stating her experience

of growth within the denomination, she highlights that despite the association of Christianity with Republican efforts on immigration and abortion policies, “the truth is we are very loving.”

The same message of acceptance is echoed by other Christian organizations that engage with the University community. At the Davis Christian Fellowship (DCF), located on the periphery of the UC Davis campus, a small stone pathway leads to a white front door, adorned with strands of string lights. Outside, on blue cushioned patio furniture, Samuel Lee, a third year Music major, describes what makes this organization special.

“DCF is a place where, when you go, you’re just accepted.” Lee says. “We just love people. We love people because we believe that we are made in the image of God, and that they have inherent value because of that.” With similar visions of Christian embrace, Lee also echoes Lurey’s perspective of Christianity’s conflict with California’s ideological nature.

“What comes up is that in California, probably the most liberal state, there’s the idea of a certain moral objectivity. You’ll hear people say, live your own truth.” Lee says. “Christianity calls people to do something that’s completely different than that.” Expressing his belief that “abortion is evil,” Lee expanded on Christianity’s principle that humans are inherently sinners, “your feelings and your desires are not always good, they’re actually broken by sin.”

The morals of Lurey and Lee are common amongst conservative Christians in California. In a study cited within *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Region* by Wade Clark Roof, Evangelical Protestants, the biggest denomination of conservative Christians in California, scored notably low on both moral and economic liberalism demonstrated through pro-choice and aid to minorities. According to Roof’s data, Evangelical Protestants comprise 9.1 percent of Christians within the state. Orthodox Christians such as Lurey, though a mere 1.3 percent of California’s religious demographic, have a participation rate that has nearly tripled in twenty years. While many conservative Christians emphasize acceptance, some progressive Christian leaders challenge the limits of that inclusivity.

At the Belfry, a Lutheran Episcopal Campus Ministry, Reverend Dr. Portia Hopkins walks towards her office. Trailed by a brown spotted mutt, affectionately named Scout, Hopkins’ grey, puggle boy

haircut bobs as they meander through the narrow, white hallway. Framed by a background featuring a multicolored seashell cross and a precariously balanced box of Costco salted nuts, Hopkins' take on Christianity is vastly different from other campus ministries, DCF being one. With an infectious smile, Hopkins highlights the mission of the Belfry.

"We say that the Belfry is a safe space where everyone's welcome." Hopkins, referring to the DCF, continues, "Certainly they don't mind LGBTQ students attending their things. But in terms of, would they ordain a leader who was queer? Probably not." Hopkins' words define the conservative atmosphere of the DCF. While such organizations maintain their love of all, acceptance only goes so far in regard to California's moral liberalism. In Hopkins' experience, trauma of conservative Christian upbringings that diverge from Californian ideology has defined her role as Reverend at the Belfry.

"I spend a lot of time with students who have real wounds and trauma from strict religious upbringings." Hopkins says. For those whose moral values depart from the objectivity of conservative Christian belief and instead find alignment within California's liberality, "We do a lot of faith deconstruction work here."

The Episcopal denomination of Christianity has always been recognized by its liberal tendencies. Midday on a Tuesday, the smiling face of Caren Miles, Associate for Faith Formation at the Episcopal Diocese of California, shines across a Zoom window. With a gmail profile flaunting purple hair and a pink face mask, Miles' online profile drew distinction from the normative appearances of Davis, California's conservative Christians. Joining the Zoom, Miles' long, currently blond hair is held back tightly in a ponytail. Echoing the Belfry's Hopkins, whom she is an acquaintance of, Miles maintains the Episcopal perspective of an all encompassing religious acceptance.

"I'll say in particular, the Episcopal Church really has leaned into part of our baptismal covenant of respecting the dignity of every human being [...] at a church wide level, we have put out policies and support for LGBT rights." Miles' reflections on the inclusive policies of the Episcopal Church are reflective of state-wide policies that reinforce Californian liberality. Under the Civil Rights Department of California, LGBTQ+ residents are protected from discrimination in housing and

healthcare. Miles believes that such continuity between progressive Christianity and political liberalism is “not just because human rights are good but because Jesus told us to stand up for humans. Jesus gave us that example.”

At the same time, Miles recognizes the diverse perspectives that arise within different Episcopalian churches across California, “We’re not all completely more liberal leaning,” Miles says. Though political attitudes of Christians, both conservative and Episcopalian, largely fall towards either conservative or liberal, a small religious minority in California with an important perspective is Islam. The very presence of Muslim adherents within California provides evidence for the state’s tolerant nature.

Wishing only to be referred to by his first name, Othman, a fourth year anthropology major at UC Davis stands behind a table at the weekly Farmer’s Market in Central Davis. Morning sun illuminating his black taqiyah and small, coarse beard, the vibrant blue tablecloth he stands behind reads “Ask a Muslim.”

“In America, we have this problem where everybody’s ‘welcome’ but there’s a limit to how different you can be.” Harkening back to Hopkins’ expression about how acceptance from conservative Christians only stretches to a certain extent, Muslims like Othman offer insight into the experience of a religious minority that Roof says accounts for a miniscule 2.5 percent of Californians.

Despite such a minority presence, the 2020 U.S. Religion Census found Muslims to have a larger consolidated presence in Southern California than in the entirety of the United States. Given President Trump’s history of Islamophobia (he once used the term “rapefugees” to describe Muslims) it is no wonder that adherents to Islam don’t always feel the acceptance that conservative Christians describe as so important to their historically unchallenged religion.

On a wooden bench beside another tall, shady oak tree, Iyad Majid, a Muslim and third year biology major at UC Santa Barbara, describes both the misunderstood nature of his religion and California’s hospitable identity compared with other parts of the US.

“I think a big misconception that people have is that we’re very strict but no, we’re very accepting,” Majid says. “The liberal agenda in California definitely fosters the growth of Islamic participation.” Though California inevitably holds residents with discriminatory ideologies, “If I wanna

go pray for example, I'm not afraid to go pray in public." Recalling an experience he had over the summer, Majid highlights California's liberality as a departure from other US States, "I was in a conservative area in Virginia, I was praying with my cousin in public and we got heckled."

Evident within Majid's testimony is that Californian liberality provides acceptance for marginalized religions that have not experienced the mass protection and community that conservative Christianity has had throughout American history. Though the liberal identity of California is contested by conservative Christians, it's important to recognize the important role it plays in the lives of those who would be marginalized in other parts of America.

As President Trump continues efforts to limit the U.S.'s most liberal policies, the ideological landscape of California will inevitably shift alongside his presidential actions. While conservative Christians like Daniela Lurey and Samuel Lee find themselves in conflict with the state's liberal ethos, religious minorities such as Muslims and progressive Christian leaders like Reverend Dr. Hopkins and Caren Miles see California as a place of inclusivity and growth. The tension between moral objectivity and individual freedom continues to shape people's beliefs across the state. With the future of the U.S. uncertain, it remains to be seen whether California's unique acceptance of all belief systems will endure or shift, whether in tolerance or full embrace.