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Introduction

Postdenominational Evangelicalism, Saddleback Church, and the Postsuburbs

Orange County, California, has a contradictory reputation. It is known simultaneously as the home of insular, conservative retirees (Richard Nixon being the most famous) and also as the setting for the shallow, plastic libertines of the reality television series The Real Housewives of Orange County. It is considered to be a high-tech hub for computers, military technology, and industrial design while also a center for major global surf and skate retailers. It is as straight-laced and traditional as it is laid-back and iconoclastic.

On many warm, sunny Sunday afternoons in south Orange County, this contradiction can be seen in the flesh when a heavyset, middle-aged man in a comfortable T-shirt and swim shorts wades into a fountain that would not be out of place in a new suburban, open-air mall. Surrounded by a crowd that sometimes numbers in the dozens and other times in the hundreds, he has an easy, jovial control over his audience. As the sun glistens off the water splashing around his considerable belly, others begin to line up near the edge of the fountain. On this Sunday, the first to join him is a ten-year-old named...
Kyle. His parents and extended family, pushed now to the edge of the fountain, cheer as he wades close enough to the older man to hug him.

The man keeps his left arm snuggly around Kyle and raises his right as he speaks. The crowd immediately attunes to his words. In a friendly, comfortable manner, he tells them that this is his favorite activity because his father once did this to him. He tells them that this is a symbolic act not the real act. He tells them that they have already accomplished the real act, and now through this act they can tell the world about what has happened to them. He tells Kyle to cross his arms, and lean back. “I baptize Kyle in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” he says gently as Kyle leans backwards, becoming fully immersed in the water. “As you are buried with Christ in death, you are raised to walk in the newness of life.” The crowd cheers as if the boy had a hit a home run. And the next one in line wades over to the half-soaked, fully cheerful man in the fountain.

This man is Rick Warren, a multimillionaire, best-selling author, and megachurch pastor who gives away 90 percent of his income. The fountain, though indistinguishable from one in any contemporary mall or office park, is part of the 120-acre campus of Saddleback Valley Community Church, known more commonly as “Saddleback” to Orange County, California, residents. Baptism scenes like this take place dozens of times a year at Saddleback’s main campus, usually after the largest weekend services. In what appears to be any place but a church, often dozens, sometimes hundreds, and, on rare occasions, thousands line up to be baptized “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” The sprawling campus blends seamlessly into the Orange County landscape of well-manicured office parks, oversized shopping and entertainment districts, high-end subdivisions and condominiums, and meticulously maintained freeways. A mundane space as this, so accommodating to the secular design aesthetics of newly sprouted sprawl, is a frontline in a battle for souls.

Saddleback Church is one of the largest and most influential evangelical megachurches in America. Its pastor, Rick Warren, is author of The Purpose Driven Life, a book that has sold more than 40 million copies, as well as The Purpose Driven Church, the best-selling church-growth manual in the history of the genre. In fact, “purpose driven” has become a popular brand of its own in American evangelicalism. The term, Warren argues, denotes a set of key purposes that should be at the focus of every Christian and church community, but it more subtly implies an alliance with Warren's broader theology and church-growth strategies. There are now “purpose driven” spin-off books, websites, church conferences, business strategies, addiction recovery programs, self-help regimens, and even sports camps.
In 2011 Saddleback held its highest attended Easter service in its history, bringing in over 50,000 churchgoers through the course of Easter weekend. Just weeks before the holiday, this south Orange County megachurch baptized more than 1,000 people in an afternoon after its introductory membership class (in 2008, they baptized some 2,600 before Easter). In the previous three years it planted three new satellite campuses, each drawing hundreds in their first weeks and now growing rapidly. And in the midst of the worst national financial turmoil since the Great Depression, it increased its revenue and operating budget to an all-time high of $47.9 million.

All of this growth and burgeoning attendance has occurred despite that fact that contemporary America is seen by many to be a nation losing its religion. In a series of recent polls on religious attitudes and behaviors in the United States, the American religious landscape is shown to be quite fluid and fragmented, far from one nation under God. One of these polls, conducted by the Pew Research Center, showed a near majority of respondents switching denominations or faith traditions throughout their lives. It also showed that a strong majority of religious adherents in the United States are quite tolerant of other faiths and thought that “many religions can lead to eternal life.” In early 2009, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS, a large national survey of religious attitudes conducted previously in 1990 and 2001) showed a historical decrease in religious adherence over the previous decade and a half.

Both the Pew and ARIS studies garnered quite a bit of attention. In the spring 2009 these surveys, alongside smaller post-election surveys, drove cover-page and above-the-fold headlines such as, “Losing Faith in Modern America,” “More People Say They Have No Religion,” “Almost All Denominations Losing Ground,” and “The End of Christian America.” The president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, R. Albert Mohler Jr., exclaimed, “The most basic contours of American culture have been radically altered. The so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture.”

If America has entered a secular, post-Christian era, evangelical churches like Saddleback have found a winning counterstrategy. This book looks at the ways churches like Saddleback are growing in size and influence while older, mainline churches and denominations continue a decades-long decline in membership. However, while there are many excellent studies of thriving contemporary evangelicalism, this book examines the particularly geographical strategies these churches employ in their quest for growth and relevance. This requires looking at and listening to not only what they say and do but
where they are saying and doing it. From this perspective, place (and other geographical concepts such as space, landscape, and scale) emerges not only as a setting or stage for religious action but as fundamentally integral to such action. The strategies that lead to Saddleback’s growth and influence, then, are in part geographical. They are not just bound to their geographical settings, but they are also densely composed of geographical representations—of “the church,” “the family,” “the believer,” “home,” “the world,” “the globe,” and, most importantly, their postsuburban environment—the sprawling, freeway-laced landscape that is the setting for Saddleback and thousands of evangelical churches like it.

These geographical representations work within a set of cultural performances, acts that draws on deep cultural structures of meaning that bind or fuse individuals together in groups both small and large. This cursory definition relies on the recent work of the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander and others who argue that cultural action cannot be reduced to economic or political interests, and that effective cultural action “fuses” the elements of performance: actor, background culture, audience, setting, and structures of power are all seamlessly woven together in successful cultural acts, while they are “de-fused” or disconnected in unsuccessful ones. I explain in greater detail in chapter 3 that performance is a useful metaphor for cultural-geographical action because it alerts us to the ways such action, when it is successful, creates and is created by place.

The performances of Saddleback and churches like it work, in part, because they seamlessly incorporate everyday places into larger evangelical narratives, fusing them with deep religious themes and thereby transforming everyday places into religiously meaningful places. Through sermons, weekly small-group meetings in members’ homes, monthly training classes on evangelism, religious service, and worship, and the more intimate exercise of prayer and fellowship, Saddleback members recast places in their lives as sites of spiritual self-transformation. The freeway, the office cubicle, the soccer field are no longer mundane locales; they are made holy by incorporating them into evangelical narratives of grace, salvation, and holiness, which are crafted within the organizational infrastructure of Saddleback Church. Far from withdrawing from these mundane and secular places, Saddleback draws them into webs of sacred significance that its pastors and members co-create. The church sanctuary at Saddleback, then, becomes but one religious island in a sea of religious potentiality. This is in sharp contrast to “traditional” religious performances that rely on strictly marking and separating secular and sacred place.6 Sacred place achieves its power precisely because it is sharply bounded and removed from everyday life. But
these new evangelical performances blend the sacred and secular so that the secular becomes only the potential for the sacred, not its opposite. From one perspective, the sacred in these performances invades every crevice of daily life, but it is this invasiveness that also makes them so fragile. The proximity of the secular and sacred in late modern societies means that invasion and corruption goes in both directions, with the sacred in peril as much as the secular. But more than this, what makes these performances precarious and unstable is the geographic paradox that lies at their core. The paradox is that these evangelical churches are aimed at, and must cohere within, an understanding community even as their location in postsuburban peripheries means that they lack such a community.

Overwhelmingly, the contemporary evangelical “local” is situated in what is often referred to as the suburban fringe, exurbia, sprawl, or postsuburbia. By any name, the most common site for large and growing evangelical congregations is on the multi-functional periphery of large metropolitan centers. Almost all of the largest and most influential evangelical churches are in such postsuburban locales as Bill Hybels’s Willow Creek Community Church outside of the Chicago metropolitan area (23,500 weekly attendees), Kerry Shook’s Fellowship of the Woodlands on the periphery of Houston (15,600 weekly attendees), or Andy Stanley’s North Point Community Church on the edge of Atlanta (17,700 weekly attendees). Rick Warren’s Saddleback Valley Community Church in postsuburban Orange County, California, with its 22,000 weekly attendees, is perhaps the most famous. Clearly, the metropolitan periphery is fertile ground for some of the largest, most innovative and influential evangelical churches in America. But is it the ground—the cultural geography, the built environment of postsuburbia—that is so fertile? It is not just the felicitous socio-spatial context of postsuburbia that allows these churches to grow to such sizes and exert such influence. Their success is rather the product of a very active but tenuous collaboration between church organizers, postsuburban constituents, and postsuburbia as a cultural and material place. In other words, successful evangelical churches are culturally responding to both their social and spatial environment.

To say that Saddleback’s success is due to it responding to its environment is to restate a set of influential explanations of recent evangelical popularity that cohere around what is broadly conceived as the religious market model. From this perspective, churches are firms that deal in supernatural goods, and they thrive in an open religious market so long as they respond effectively to the needs and desires of local communities as potential customers. As the sociologist of religion R. Stephen Warner puts it, “religious institutions flourish when they reflect, as well as engage, the cultures of the people
who are their local constituents.” But what does it mean for postsuburban evangelical churches to respond to the cultures of local communities when the latter are newly formed, fragmented, dispersed, and transitory, as postsuburban communities typically are?

The evangelical church does not simply survive in its postsuburban environment, it thrives. This presents the religious market approach with two problems. First, the post–World War II American metropolitan periphery is socially and spatially fragmented with few homogenous communities expressing clearly delineated values, needs, and desires. The broad sea change in consumer preferences postulated by proponents of the religious market approach assumes a relatively coherent and homogenous group of churchgoers. But this jibes neither with the socio-spatial environment of postsuburban evangelical churches nor with these churches’ highly differentiated and dispersed organizational structures. The second but related problem is that the largest, most popular and influential churches reach well beyond a local area for constituents. Even if homogenous and coherent local communities exist in postsuburbia, the evangelical church’s reach is so geographically vast that no single local community could be its sole target. In other words, what it would mean to “reflect, as well as engage, the cultures of . . . local constituents” in a postsuburban evangelical church is not immediately clear.

The religious market approach, though, has a larger and more general problem. It forestalls the question of meaning. If a church is a firm that deals in supernatural goods—goods that are inextricably connected to “existential” or “fundamental” meaning—and its congregants are customers, we have explained very little by referring to the effective marketing campaigns of successful congregations. The real question is how meaning is made, shared, and negotiated. The religious market approach, in essence, reinterprets the question of variation in religious popularity by re-envisioning the effects of pluralism; it does little to explain such popularity. To explain why churches, in this case, postsuburban megachurches, are successful, we must get to the heart of the matter: the socio-spatial work of making, sharing, and negotiating meaning.

By looking at such work as a set of performances, the postsuburban megachurch seems to reconfigure its local environment in ways that infuse the secular geographies of postsuburbia with spiritual significance. The mundane spaces of recreation, consumption, and labor become stages for spiritual self-transformation. A strictly critical approach to these socio-spatial performances would surely find them embodiments of false consciousness, enactments of self-delusion, self-grandeur, and self-therapy. While this project does not absolutely eschew such an approach, it is above all an effort to
“give a brother’s account of belief,” in the words of the literary critic James Woods, rather than treating sincere religious action as “some unwanted impoverished relative.”

This so-called brother’s account is concerned with how practitioners of American evangelicalism use the spatiality and materiality of their postsuburban environment to make their lives meaningful. Such an account is based on the premise that every act of inhabiting, using, and thinking about a place is an act of meaning-making and therefore open to the charges of false-consciousness, self-delusion, and so forth. To take such geographic meaning-making seriously is to focus on not only what is false about such acts but what is also, in the very same instance, true.

Megachurches, Evangelicalism, and Saddleback Valley Community Church

There is no more perfect expression of American evangelical vitality than the megachurch. While technically a century-old phenomenon (and by no means evangelical in origin), megachurches did not become identified with evangelicalism until their rapid proliferation in the 1970s and 1980s.

When they became popularly known in the 1980s and 1990s, especially through the soft-edged “seeker” megachurch, Chicago’s Willow Creek Community Church, and the hard-edged, fundamentalism of Jerry and Jonathan Falwell’s megachurch, Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, the many variations were quickly conflated in the popular imagination. One reason for this is that the common definition of a megachurch is any congregation with more than 2,000 weekly attendees. Such a definition makes it easy to speak of megachurches as a unitary phenomenon. This is especially the case when the most prominent examples of megachurches, both within the United States and internationally, share many important characteristics. But it is important to note that there are significant differences.

The most important differences are in aesthetic and organizational style. By contrast, the theological differences are minimal. Most megachurches can be considered nondenominational evangelical. The most recent and authoritative data on megachurches shows that of the one hundred largest megachurches, only four have mainline denominational affiliations. An overwhelming majority (68) are either nondenominational or part of the loosely organized Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) or Calvary Chapel network (see the appendix for a detailed table). The former type is best exemplified in Willow Creek Community Church or Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Community Church, and the latter two in Rick Warren’s Saddleback Valley Community Church (SBC) and Chuck Smith’s Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California.
While these churches and the thousands of smaller counterparts are not connected by any formal structure (again, save for those connected with the loosely networked SBC and Calvary Chapel), they are strikingly similar. Donald E. Miller’s characterization of the typical nondenominational evangelical church (in his words, “the new paradigm church”) highlights several similarities:

The typical new paradigm church meets in a converted warehouse, a rented school auditorium, or a leased space in a shopping mall. These meeting places boast no religious symbols, no stained glass, and no religious statuary. Folding chairs are more common than pews. At the front is a stage, often portable, which is bare except for sound equipment, a simple podium, and sometimes a few plants. People come to worship in casual clothes that they might wear to the mall or a movie. On a warm day, they might wear shorts and a polo shirt. The clergy are indistinguishable from the audience by dress.¹⁸

Behind these few stylistic accommodations to contemporary white, middle-class American tastes, lies an unwavering commitment to traditional evangelistic orthodoxy. From its inception, evangelicalism was a broad religious movement that nevertheless worked through the distinct ideology, symbolism, and materiality of the individual’s relationship with God. Against religious formalism, early evangelicals like John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards advocated for a personal religious transformation through an intimate relationship with the spirit of Jesus Christ. The mass revivals in eighteenth-century England, Ireland, Scotland, and New England were backdrops to the accounts by these evangelicals of specific individual, spiritual awakenings.¹⁹ Evangelicalism, from its beginning, has focused primarily on the individual qua individual. Its pietist origin, stressing above all an “inward spiritual renewal,” is evident in the common defining elements of evangelicalism: “new birth” through the acceptance of “Christ’s redeeming work on the cross” (conversion and crucicentrism), the ultimate authority of the Bible (biblicism), and an engaged sharing of one’s faith with nonbelievers (activism).²⁰

Contemporary American evangelicalism is a diverse movement containing countless refinements of each of these elements.²¹ However, our focus here is not on American evangelicalism per se, but rather on one particular configuration that I call “postdenominational evangelicalism” (PDE). The overarching characteristic of PDE is its unbending concern with engaging contemporary secular life with the goal of converting the “unchurched” and
retaining the already churched. Several other terms have been coined for this subset of evangelicals, such as “postdenominational confessionalism” “seeker,” “neo-evangelical,” and “new paradigm.” The problem with using these terms is that they are either too broad or too narrow. For example, “seeker” is a well-known and fairly precise term used to describe churches that are intensely concerned with reaching the “unchurched.” However, it is sometimes used in contrast to other evangelical churches that are focused on pastor-centered, charismatic worship or on culturally contemporary churches interested in a more explicit devotion to doctrine. Churches like Saddleback, Willow Creek, and North Point, however, are variegated institutions that include these other styles of evangelicalism. What is needed, then, is a term that captures the similarities between different large and influential postsuburban evangelical churches. Therefore, PDE is the term devised to categorize a subset of evangelical churches that share important religious, organizational, and geographic characteristics. Among these are:

1. A loose denominational or nondenominational church structure
2. An overarching and fundamentally guiding concern with evangelizing (spreading *evangelium*, the “good news”) to the unchurched and under-churched (i.e., their growth is not meant to be at the expense of other churches)
3. Weekend and weekday services that are produced in multiple contemporary idioms
4. Services and programs that have a markedly therapeutic style and message
5. Internal church structures that are highly segmented to accommodate smaller demographic niches within the church
6. A highly conservative and traditionally evangelistic theology
7. A location typically on the extreme periphery of large cities, what I will call postsuburbia
8. A heavy reliance on small groups of members, no more than fifteen in each group, which meet in each other’s homes—as opposed to a central church campus—at least once a week to share about their daily lives, pray together, and participate in Bible studies or prepared church programs.

Saddleback Valley Community Church embodies each of these characteristics (see chap. 7, n. 37, for a full description of small groups). Planted in a far-flung postsuburban high school gymnasium on an Easter Sunday in 1980, Saddleback has pioneered or perfected over the years many of these post-denominational elements. After attending an SBC seminary in Texas in the
mid-1970s, its pastor, Rick Warren, received various levels of support from SBC contacts in planting his new church (including help from the Southern Baptist Director of Missions in Orange County, California). However, the word “Baptist” would not be a part of the church’s name nor would it be advertised at any of the weekend services. For Warren, the key goal was to grow a church by reaching those without a church, but denominational affiliation was not the way to do it. Warren spent his first three months in Orange County going door to door, surveying residents on their views of churches (expressly following the example of megachurch pioneer, Robert Schuller). His respondents, according to Warren, found churches to be insular cliques unconcerned with their real-world, daily problems. Warren writes, “What seemed interesting to me about our survey was that none of the complaints from the unchurched in our area were theological. I didn’t meet a single person who said, ‘I don’t go to church because I don’t believe in God.’”34 In this environment, denominational affiliation would do little to attract new churchgoers and could possibly repel them.

These marketing strategies—along with several others, such as delivering therapeutic and easily applicable sermons, producing high-quality, upbeat, and cutting-edge worship services, and promoting and maintaining small groups—have proved quite winning. With over 22,000 weekly attendees, an almost $50 million annual operating budget, and the cultural capital to have its church and pastor invited into American presidential politics, Saddleback is not only a prime example of the popularity and influence of PDE churches, it is also a leader of this movement. From 2005 to 2009 it held at least five international conferences a year on its main campus in which hundreds and sometimes thousands of pastors and staff from around the United States and the world would come to learn about the “purpose driven” methods of church planning and growth. Additionally, Warren claims that through these conferences, his pastoral resource website, and international consulting, Saddleback has led more than 500,000 pastors “in purpose driven training.”35 Saddleback, then, is not just a popular, influential church in south Orange County. Its influence is felt nationally and globally.

Secularization, Postsuburbia, and the Flexibility of Religious Community

The success of Saddleback and PDE churches in general is notable not simply because their attendance numbers are large, local financial impacts significant, or cultural presence widely felt. Rather their success calls for closer examination because they are growing within a larger context of
secularization. This does not mean that PDE churches are growing as individuals become more secular, although there is evidence for this. Instead, PDE churches are growing as their socio-spatial context becomes more secular. This assertion runs against the grain of the growing assumption of secularization theory's demise. The most sophisticated renderings of secularization theory provide a useful foundation for understanding how PDE churches grow within a larger context of pluralism and differentiation (what I later refer to as cultural de-fusion). From this perspective, secularity (as opposed to secularism, a particular historical ideology) is a macro-social situation in which explicitly religious practice becomes differentiated from secular spheres of action such as the market, state, and civil society. As religion is confined to its own sphere of action, no single religious group receives formal support from the state, and thus all religious groups are (theoretically) free to participate within this religious, differentiated sphere of action. Because this means that any incursions by religious groups into the market, state, and civil society can be seen as illegitimate, religious practice becomes an ultimately local phenomenon. Therefore, the success of religious organizations is dependent on their appealing to local communities.

The socio-spatial situation of religious organizations in the United States is one of differentiation (of social spheres and functions), fragmentation, and diversity. This is even more true for PDE churches because of their spatial location in postsuburbia. Suburbia and postsuburbia can be seen as the spatial manifestation of the social differentiation at the core of secularization theory. Just as the specialization of different spheres of social action was integral to the emergence of the nation-state, techno-scientific bureaucracy, capitalism, and civil society, so it was integral to the specialization of space. For the present study, the most important specialized differentiation of space occurred between work-space and family-space because this separation is at the heart of suburban form and function.

The differentiation of work-space from family-space was conceived, perceived and lived as one of center and periphery. This spatial binary was fused with cultural binaries so that the peripheral spatiality of the family, home, emotions, meaning, and spiritual life became opposed to the central spatiality of society, work, rationality, economic interest, and politics. However, these cultural binaries became blurred and reconfigured as the nature of suburban spatial differentiation changed. With the rise of the automobile, the socio-spatial experience of center and periphery was inverted so that the home came to be the center of everyday life and anything within reasonable driving distance was periphery. This inversion of center and periphery is the apotheosis of the logic of spatial differentiation. The result is not only a
spatial fragmentation of contemporary U.S. cities (evinced in such adjectives as “multi-nodal,” “multi-polar,” “satellite,” and “edge”), but also a social fragmentation of daily life.

The most significant result of socio-spatial differentiation for explaining the success of postsuburban PDE churches is not anti-modernist withdrawal, white-flight revanchism, or consumerist decadence. It is the fragmentation of daily life, experienced in a variety of ways. Members of Saddleback in south Orange County related feelings of absence, loss, and emptiness in their stories (“testimonies” in evangelical parlance) about becoming Christians and members of Saddleback. Of course, these are old themes in Protestant narratives of salvation. But for Saddleback members these stories were experienced in terms of an absence not of salvation, grace, or God’s love, but of social orientation. The terms “aimless,” “lost,” or “disconnected,” and explanations like “I didn’t know where I was going in life,” and “I needed something to center my life on,” were elaborations on one of Saddleback’s signature themes: Purpose. Often these stories of salvation, or of simply deciding to attend Saddleback over another nearby church, were about the radically different and usually opposing demands of work-life and family- or personal-life that led to what was later interpreted as a fractured sense of purpose. What spoke to this work/family tension for many of these Saddleback members were (1) the sermons that related directly and easily to mundane but crucial problems in work and at home’ (2) the diversity, accessibility, and flexibility of the numerous programs and events at the church; and, (3) later on, the communal intimacy of small home groups. The sermons, programs, and small groups came to serve as threads that sewed together the differentiated, fragmented aspects of these members’ lives.

Or at least this is how many of the stories went. What I began to see over time at Saddleback, however, was how this megachurch was just as socially and spatially fragmented, and its membership just as dynamic and flexible, as its postsuburban environment. Despite the stories of Saddleback members that suggest communal reintegration (from socio-spatial differentiation) and the stated mission of Saddleback to continuously deepen the connection of its members to the “body of Christ” (i.e., the church), I saw members (both newer and older) take very fluid and variegated approaches to church belonging. Because sermons are streamed and archived online, a member could skip attending a week or several and still not miss a single message. Or if the amount of time it would take to stream a sermon is too much, the member could catch the highlights in a Tuesday night small group. If, alas, Tuesday night won’t work, this week or the next, someone from small group will email or post a message on a Facebook page, just checking in. In
all likelihood, this member will be back at small group next week, sincerely thankful for the messages.

There are more than twenty different programs and services that this member could attend every week. What this means in practice is that if she misses anything at all, it will come around again. The same holds for weekend service: if she misses the Saturday evening service at 4:30, there will be six others that weekend. And if she has not attended small group in such a long time that she would feel awkward going back, there are over 3,800 other small groups to choose from. And these small groups? They are in homes scattered across southern California. Chances are there is a small group meeting in a home a couple of blocks away. What this means is that the religious community at Saddleback is no gemeinschaftlich (community-like) gathering, bound by repetition, ritual, and homogeneity. Like its surrounding postsuburban environment, Saddleback is a dispersed, multi-nodal, multi-scaled network through which individuals link up in varying degrees with other individuals.

The linking of individuals at Saddleback is never taken for granted precisely because there is no communal center. There are, of course, the weekend services and the central “worship center.” But in a paradoxical inversion that fits perfectly with the logic of postsuburbia, the weekend services at the worship center are seen by Warren and his staff to be peripheral to the “core” of Saddleback. During interviews with Saddleback pastors and staff, I was often referred to Warren’s “5 Circles of Commitment” (see fig. 1.1) in efforts to explain how different programs were targeted to different types of churchgoers. It was striking to me that the weekend service and church campus—the spatial and performative center of Saddleback Church—are designed to appeal to the periphery of this concentric ring model, particularly the “community” and “crowd.” The community is the mass of individuals within reasonable driving distance of Saddleback, while the crowd is the group of people who attend weekend services but do not get further involved. The most spatially diffuse programs—small groups in members’ homes and global missions work—were designed for the center of the concentric rings, the “congregation,” “committed,” and “core.” The closer one gets to the “center” of the Saddleback practice of Christian faith, the farther away this practice is from the spatial center of the PDE church.

Saddleback and the Performance of Secular Postsuburban Space

American Protestantism has suffered a steady delegitimization over the course of the twentieth century. This story is told in a number of ways that
cohere around the theme of pluralization. A proliferation not only of disparate lifestyles but of disparate life-spaces has led, in the words of the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, to a “de-fusion” of legitimating rituals for all large scale institutions. In other words, the fragmentation of shared meaning has made “authentic” performances very difficult to enact because, for a large-scale audience, there is little chance of fusion between background cultural codes and cultural action. From a geographic perspective, the finer the scale and more localized an audience, the greater the chance that cultural codes will be shared and thus a proficient performance will fuse these elements together in a seemingly “authentic” way.

“Performances in complex societies seek to overcome fragmentation by creating flow and achieving authenticity,” writes Alexander. “They try to recover a momentary experience of ritual, to eliminate or to negate the effects of social and cultural de-fusion.” In this sense, secularity is the state of widespread social and cultural de-fusion. It is an environment in which the background cultural-religious codes are no longer fused with shared narratives, symbols, and performative acts. The challenge then for religious entrepreneurs is to find ways to re-fuse these elements.

The innovative success of PDE churches have come through a conspicuous amalgamation of widely shared secular narratives, symbols, and places with narrower, explicitly evangelical Christian narratives, symbols, and places. Whereas Marx’s moderns “anxiously conjure[d] up the spirits of the past to their service;” these PDE churches conjure up the spirits of the present to serve doctrines and liturgy of the past. This dynamic appropriation of contemporary, secular culture by evangelicals has been widely noted. But such appropriation is largely seen as aesthetic, as a change in musical style, architecture, or multimedia use. From a cultural geographic perspective, however, the performance of secularity by PDE churches has meant a fundamental transformation in the spatiality of the church. An effective re-fusing of religious performance with its socio-spatial environment requires that the church enacts the spatial fragmentation of postsuburbia. Performing secularity, then, is not just about adding a hard rock venue on Sunday or designing the “worship center” (not a chapel or cathedral!) in the image of a shopping mall. It means that the church must become as diffuse, localized, and fragmented as its urban environment.

At Saddleback, the performance of postsuburbia is held in three acts. The first act is produced for the outer two rings of Warren’s “5 Circles of Commitment” (see fig. 1.1). The weekend service is designed for the “community” and the “crowd,” specifically to appeal to the “unchurched” community and encourage them to become part of the Saddleback crowd. The design and
production of these weekend services and other main campus programs work to reconfigure major postsuburban themes of expressive individualism, loneliness, gender identity, and work/life balance. These themes are re-presented as thoroughly spiritual ones that are fully understandable only when linked to larger evangelical narratives of salvation, sin, and the necessity and fulfillment of a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. The latter narratives are worked over in countless ways on the main campus, through themes of masculinity (in Thursday morning’s men’s Bible study called “The Herd”), self-improvement (as in “Leadership Training” classes), or self-therapy (through sermons titled “Life’s Healing Choices,” “You Really Can Change,” and “A Lifetime of Growth”).

The second act is staged in the residential home. Every week more than 3,800 Saddleback small groups meet in homes around southern California. These groups—in other PDE churches they are referred to as “cell groups,” “life groups,” “community groups,” “neighborhood groups,” or “home fellowships”—are considered by Saddleback to be the “foundation” and “backbone” of everything else the church does. This is where casual members, “the crowd,” are turned into committed members, “the congregation” and “the committed.” Typically made up of six to twelve members, these groups...
meet once a week (typically on a weeknight, but some groups meet during the weekend) and are structured for casual and even intimate social interaction. A small group meeting will typically begin with informal conversation as individuals or couples arrive. As everyone finds a seat, usually in an ad hoc circle in the family room, someone, usually the host, calls for an opening prayer. Afterward, the host, who usually undergoes hours of training overseen by Saddleback pastors, asks individuals to share about their triumphs and tragedies—“praises and prayers”—from the previous week. Following this, groups typically engage in a prepared curriculum by Saddleback or another PDE church such as Willow Creek. Sometimes groups will choose to do a month-long study of a book in the Bible, or other times choose a popular Christian book, such as The Shack, to read and discuss. These groups, however, do more than “close the back door of the church,” in the words of Warren. They are sites where individuals are encouraged to integrate the disparate narratives, symbols, and places of their own fragmented lives within a coherent narrative of evangelical holiness. This holiness, in earlier evangelical generations, was tied to visible self-improvement through the grace that comes from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The term “holiness” is rarely used in PDE performances, but its central theme of tangible, evident behavioral transformation through a relationship with Jesus is the touchstone of PDE practice. When Warren writes and speaks of “The Purpose Driven Life,” this is what he means. The practice of holiness is meant to be complete and holistic, and is meant to cover every aspect of one's life. This integrative all-encompassing aspect becomes a crucial element in the performative recasting of secular postsurbia into sacred space.

If the first two acts are staged at the scale of the home and the urban region, the final act attempts to stage itself at the global scale. The most ambitious new project at Saddleback, elements of which have spread to other PDE churches, is a global missionary effort in which thousands of lay members are trained and sent on short-term missions abroad to work with local churches. Its innovative nature lies in the fact that it is effectively a democratization of missionary work. The history of Christian missions is one in which the central actors have been denominations, para-denominational missionary organizations, quasi-professional missionaries, and the targeted communities who were to be Christianized. For Saddleback and other PDE churches following its lead, only this last group has continued relevance. The effort to democratize missionary work, regardless of its effects on the ground in the targeted regions, is a further performance of postsurbia evangelicalism that is meant to incorporate the mundane places of home, work, and shopping within a larger narrative of world-historic, spiritual significance.
the stories and symbols of the global south—of Africa, South Asia, and Latin America—to the months-long training and preparation within classes and small groups, to the weeks-long experience itself, and finally to the reincorporation of the experience back in south Orange County, this democratization of missionary work provides one more thread that weaves together the disparate narratives, symbols, and places of postsuburban Orange County.

Methods

This project is based on participant observation conducted over the course of eighteen months, from January 2008 to July 2009, in south Orange County, California. During this time I lived in Ladera Ranch, an unincorporated master-planned community only a fifteen-minute drive from Saddleback. I regularly attended Saddleback weekend services, a small home-group in the Mission Viejo area (and visited several others), and various programs, training sessions, and conferences held on the central campus. I conducted formal open-ended interviews with five pastors, six staff members, and twenty-eight congregants in addition to having off-the-record, informal conversations, some quite in-depth, with dozens of additional staff and congregants. Interview subjects were selected through convenience sampling, that is, through meeting in church services, small groups, training seminars, or church conferences. I also met several congregants in the Ladera Ranch neighborhood, at parks and at local eateries. Most of the pastors interviewed I contacted through email but also met personally either on the church campus or at nearby eateries. I collected weekend brochures, training materials, small-group study guides, various handouts, and a vast amount of website material (mostly Saddleback websites, blogs, and twitter feeds). I also took detailed notes on my daily experience of the people, places, and landscapes of south Orange County. I coded and analyzed all interviews, textual material, and notes using an inductive coding scheme that drew on both “sensitizing concepts” (themes, terms, and symbols used from theoretical and historical research) and “indigenous concepts” (themes, terms, and symbols that emerged from the data).45

Outline of the Book

The early chapters of this book are devoted to elaborating on the theoretical groundwork of the main argument: that Saddleback and PDE churches more generally have incorporated postsuburban strategies for making religious meaning in and through a larger environment of secularity. In chapter 2, we
see that secularization theory may not explain or predict an absolute decline in religiosity. It is, instead, a set of descriptions and explanations of how Western societal differentiation and pluralization has led to a relative decline in religious authority and legitimation. This means that on a macro-social scale, churches are hindered from enacting effective cultural performances, but on the local scale a host of opportunities are still present. For Saddleback and other PDE churches, effective performances will speak to narratives of individuality, family, and local place instead of larger societal matters related to the state, the market, and civil society.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the analytical role culture and performance play in understanding the innovative spatiality of PDE churches. Through the lens of cultural performativity, we can see that the socio-spatial actions of a church like Saddleback can be analyzed as a series of differentiated and fragmented performances designed to make meaning out of a differentiated and fragmented socio-spatial environment. I go on to focus on how this environment—postsuburban local place—is assembled into meaningful performances by evangelical churches. Postsuburban evangelical congregations do not just “make community” (as it is often said)—these churches actively mobilize both cultural texts and the socio-spatial environment in ways that make postsuburban life meaningful—but only rarely in a traditionally collective sense. The PDE assemblage of the discursive and material environment is woven into a panoply of church programs that are narrowly focused and continuously evolving. A performative collaboration between church organizers, postsuburbanites, and postsuburbia-as-a-place opens up spaces for a flexible, fluid, and dynamic religious community.

The next chapters offer examinations of the performances of postsuburban place at Saddleback Church. Chapter 4 explores the weekend services where the collective narratives of Saddleback are presented seven different times over two days, at five different campuses around Orange County, in eight different demographically targeted styles (called “venues”). From the laid-back coffee shop atmosphere of the “Terrace Cafe” service to the ear-splitting rock music of “Overdrive,” the Saddleback churchgoer can shop around on Sunday morning (or Saturday night when two services are held at 4:30 p.m. and 6:00 p.m.). The venues are spread around the campus and range from an ad hoc tent revival feeling to a highly produced, MTV-style set. The main service in the “worship center” aims for the broadest audience. The building itself looks like a conservatively designed civic performing arts center, both inside and out. Although each venue attempts its own unique feel, they are all designed with the singular, unified purpose of moving individuals from the “crowd” to the “congregation” and the “committed.”
This movement is initiated during the weekend on the main campus (or at a satellite campus) but is completed during the week by participating in a small group in a member’s home. Chapter 5, explores the fragmentation and diffusion of the PDE church through the small group. In members’ homes every week, thousands of Saddleback members meet and enact their own performances and counterperformances of an evangelically inspired post-suburban life. This weekly diffusion of the church allows for many challenges to arise to the structural and narrative hegemony of the central church. Yet, this very vulnerability allows for rapid and dexterously adaptive responses by the church, through the small-group host in real-time, and also through feedback the hosts give to Saddleback staff and pastors. The dynamic interactions that take place during the week in homes around southern California lead to equally dynamic performances on the weekend.

Chapter 6 follows the intended journey of the Saddleback member to the “core” of the “5 Circles of Commitment” by focusing on the most spatially diffuse program at Saddleback, “Global P.E.A.C.E.” The program is a rather innovative effort to democratize missionary work by training and sending abroad lay members to work with local churches around the world. What this chapter looks at is not the effects on the ground of Global P.E.A.C.E. but rather how the program is presented, received, and incorporated within the context of daily life in south Orange County. In this way, I interpret P.E.A.C.E as an additional thread in the weaving together of the disparate, differentiated, and fragmented aspects of postsuburban life. In other words, P.E.A.C.E becomes another way to orient oneself in a centerless cultural-material environment.

It might seem that the focus of this project on the local performance of place belies the recent national and state political involvement of Saddleback Church and its pastor. How could I argue that the performances of Saddleback are local when it has injected itself into a presidential political campaign and a state ballot proposition controversy? Chapter 7 examines the way Warren and Saddleback Church deftly incorporate supralocal structures, interests, symbols, and narratives without using them in the service of supralocal ambitions. This chapter shows that Saddleback’s politics are not political at all. In the end, such events as the “Saddleback Civil Forum on the Presidency” in which Barack Obama and John McCain appeared together for the first time in the 2008 presidential campaign, are rather elaborate performances meant to retell secular stories in a religious key and religious stories in a secular key. The desired result for Saddleback and Warren is not some Falwellian desecularization—a more Christian American government—but rather an increase in saved souls in south Orange County, California.
Conclusion

By looking at postsuburban evangelical megachurches as cultural performances I develop an explanation of both evangelical and megachurch popularity that does not forestall the question of meaning and culture but rather makes them central. As a human geographer, I see meaning and culture as integrally material and spatial, and so the centrality of culture in this book implies the primacy of things and places. But here, things are neither simply goods exchanged in markets, nor merely dead objects upon which culture is inscribed. And here, place is not only a bounded location in which religious firms compete for customers, nor just an inert backdrop in which real action happens. Things and places are seen as active participants in the meaning-making enterprise of religious action. If the postsuburban megachurch meets the “needs and desires,” “the tastes and preferences” of its congregants (in the words of religious market oriented sociologists),[46] it does so by mobilizing the things and places of postsuburbia in service of powerful religious narratives that tell participants about who they are, where they came from, and where they are going. Some of these stories are grand, and some are small and narrow. Some of these stories push participants to look beyond their local environs while others draw them into its center, the residential home. But these stories are told through and many times about postsuburban place. Through the endlessly flexible narratives of classical evangelicalism—with themes of salvation through grace, an intimately personal relationship with Jesus Christ, or the manifestation of holiness through self-transformation—the disorienting, fragmented environment of postsuburbia takes on intelligibility, meaning, and design. In other words, it becomes a “purpose driven” place.