

What is shaping culture? The new religions

By  Brett Rogers

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I explore the edges of culture and how things are changing, providing valuable insights for brands wanting to understand who and what is shaping culture. First up, those activities that people have unconsciously or consciously adopted ... religiously.

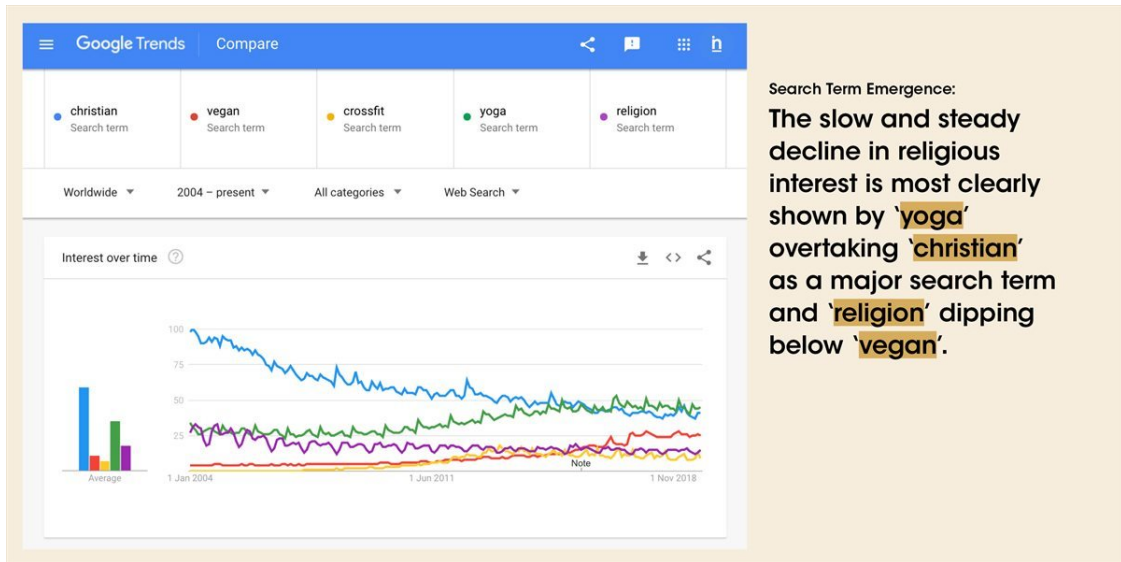


Image source: Gallo/Getty Images.

Over the past decade and a half, there has been a consistent and steady decline in the number of people seeking information about religion generally, and Christianity specifically. In general, mankind has not only stopped believing in a higher power, but we also lost faith in the structures that controlled and directed that belief.

At the same time, there's been an uptick in the number of people wanting to learn more about 'yoga', 'CrossFit' and 'veganism'. Proof of what, as Jeff Goldblum put it in Jurassic Park: "Life will find a way". Human nature has found a way to replace that which it lost when we stopped believing. What we call "the new religions" are activities, belief systems or ideologies that we as people have taken on as substitutes for religious structures.

So now, the 'religious' are no longer the only people living according to strict dictates. Those with strict diets, training programs or traditions are now living with the dogma that used to be the preserve of the religious.



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Markers that identify religious beliefs are multi-fold and, while not all of the activities we explore below contain all of these markers, they do have many. Some of these are:



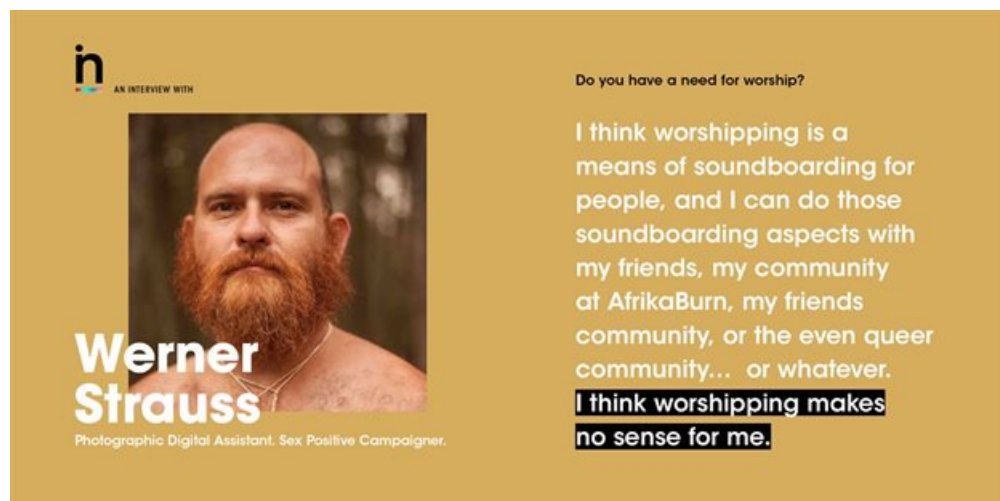
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Worldwide, society is subjected to dramatic changes in philosophies and ideologies, for example: Marxism, Moonies, Veganism. The faster the new norms take hold, the quicker we need to learn what our place in that world is. Our previously conceived notions of right and wrong were often dictated to us by leaders in our communities, most often these people were religious representatives. Even if they were not personally in charge of policies, they very often had input directly into the ears of the politicians who did.

The 21st century has seen the gap between believers and non-believers grow at a pace previously not experienced. And, while we as people change our belief systems, our needs very often do not change at quite the same pace. This left us with a gap in our life experiences; religion had contributed to our experience of the world in ways that we had not been aware of nor appreciated.

How has this gap been filled?

AfrikaBurn devotee Werner Strauss, at one time known as Werner the Burner, doesn't let his lack of belief in structured religion preclude him from incorporating a spiritual aspect into his life. Over the years, AfrikaBurn has facilitated a positive connection with his spirituality. For instance, the sacred space of Temple Xam and the community of AfrikaBurn, as well as the spiritual and practical guidance he has received from them, have certainly provided him with some of the structures of religion.



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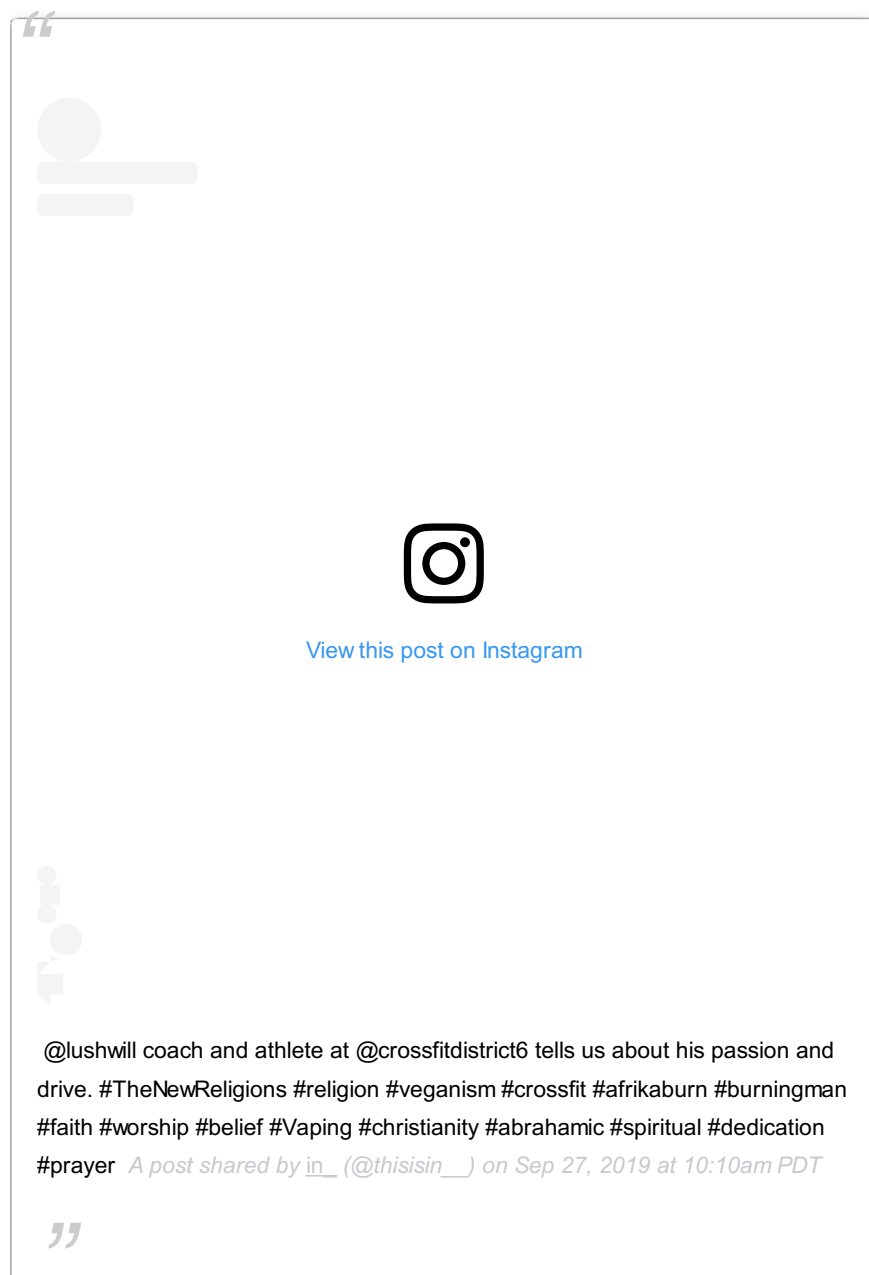
Prof Gillian McCann has severe concerns about how we are replacing religion with non-religious activities. Her primary concern is food fads and how the people who adopt them apply moral values to food choices. Many religions have their own food rules, so for us to continue a moral antagonism towards those 'non-believers' who refuse to join your diet- based belief system is not unusual. It also highlights one of the ironies about the new religions, that of why the very reason some people abandoned religion in the first place becomes one of the attitudes they adopt in the new: The Us versus Them self-righteousness.



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With today's mirror on personal attractiveness, it's also no surprise that something like sport could appeal to those seeking out ritual, community and sacrifice, as well as inspire the single-minded meditative focus associated with prayer.

When one considers the extreme danger that big wave surfers put themselves in, that they have to be at peace with the fact that that which brings them joy also is the very thing which can end their lives, it's easy to see the similarities with religion. But proponent Frank Solomons doesn't see his pursuit as particularly spiritual. Neither does Crossfitter Lushwill Roussouw, but both men's activities hit religious markers of, sacrifice, transcendence and dedication.



In the case of Crossfit, there's also the so-called sacred texts of Greg Glassman – his 100 words – as well as the 'missionary' work of converting people to join Crossfit.



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Religion is a deeply divisive topic, and we hope that the religious do not interpret our analysis as wanting to undermine the sacredness of their belief systems. Rather, what we are seeing is that the positives society adopts from religion might very well be what helps it navigate the future of humankind.

ABOUT BRETT ROGERS

Brett Rogers, culture lead at Cape Town advertising agency HaveYouHeard and content curator for In_, a channel of content, which showcases cultural forces that are changing the world. It aims to inform, inspire and entertain the viewer and does so with multimedia posts, including podcasts, videos, google trends, mini Q+A's and more. In_ talks to those interested in in-depth cultural exploration and those curious about the world we live in.

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