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Díos Ha Muerto?

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"God is Dead," declared Nietzsche, or if he wasn't yet, many people were certain he would be soon. So, when the Pew Survey finds that more and more Hispanics claim no religious identity and that their rates of church attendance decline the more time they spend in the United States, it should come as no surprise. Becoming more secular is what they are supposed to do.

Such surveys, while extremely valuable, are based on an incomplete view of religion. They assume that religion can be compartmentalized -- that just as we go to work from nine to five, so we pray on Friday or Sunday and that is that. But, for many people, religion is an all encompassing way of life. They don't just put it back in the box when they put their prayer book back in the pew. Faith guides how they live their everyday lives, who they associate with, and the kinds of communities they belong to, even among people who claim they are not religious.

The immigrants I spoke with while writing *God Needs No Passport* repeatedly drove this home. Most people could not separate Irishness from Catholicism, Indianness from being Hindu, or what it means to be Pakistani from what it means to be a Muslim because they believe that religion and culture go hand and hand. They have a much broader understanding of what religion is and where to find it than many Americans. They see religion and spirituality as routinely spilling over into the workplace, the schoolyard, the health clinic, and the law office. When people put up "saint magnets" on their refrigerator doors, light candles in honor of the Virgen, or decorate their dashboards with photographs of their gurus, they imbue the quotidian with the sacred. When a Latino family celebrates its daughter's fifteenth birthday or a Hindu son invites his elderly parents to live with him, it is a religious as well as a "cultural" act.

What's more, many people never enter a formal house of worship to express their faith. They have no experience belonging to a single religious community with whom they pray on a regular basis. They are comfortable worshipping at any temple or mosque because faith is an individual rather than a collective affair. You can do it at home or in the park just as well as in an official sanctuary.

And, just as the walls of religious buildings are permeable, so are the boundaries between faith traditions. Many people come from countries where they have always combined elements from different faiths. Brazilian Catholicism, for example, has always incorporated indigenous, African, and Christian practices, giving followers permission to be many things at one time. Though loathe to admit it, Dominican Catholicism integrates many Haitian practices. For many people, then, boundary crossing, or combining elements from different faiths, is the rule not the exception. So when surveys sound alarms that Latino Catholics are defecting to Pentecostalism, we can safely assume that at least some people belong to two congregations at once.

While it is clear that more Hispanics claim "no religion" after they have lived for some time in this country and that their church attendance declines, this doesn't necessarily signal they are becoming less religious. Faith takes many shapes and sizes. It rears its head in many places. To really understanding the changing dynamics of religious life, we need to know where to look.