

Faith in fashion: When faith marries the Zeitgeist

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 2, 2004](#) issue

Martha Sawyer Allen isn't here anymore. She's off to new adventures." That line ended Allen's final column in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* (September 4). Her predecessor, Willmar "Bill" Thorkelson, who left that paper a score of years ago, continued to cover religion news as a freelancer. I hope Allen does the same, given her excellent record as interviewer and reporter. Her last column was a round-up of her "furious two decades in religion," written with a perspective we historians might well envy.

Without using the academic term "postmodern" or lapsing into the jargon we academics sometimes favor, she discusses postmodernity in American religion with insight and finesse. She begins by describing a visit to a White Bear Lake megachurch, where she learns that the name Baptist, to say nothing of which sort of Baptist (in this case, General Conference), means nothing. Cedar Valley Church used to be Bloomington Assembly of God. Now it's downplaying its denominational ties. It's a market world, and entrepreneurial or do-it-yourself identifiers appeal most directly.

Minnesotans tell polltakers they believe in God, but most don't think you need to go to church to be a good Christian. The Rev. Greg Boyd of Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul mentioned a member of one-year's standing who learned the place was Baptist and demanded his money back. Boyd says that's a symptom of "how our culture has lost a commitment to things bigger than the individual. There's something sad about that."

Allen agrees with sociologist Robert Wuthnow that there are now basically only two denominations in America, "conservatives and liberals." Liberal Lutherans, Catholics and Methodists "share more in common because they oppose the death penalty, despite their different faith traditions." Let's call *them* "pro-life," though Allen does not. Conversely, the pro-death (as in "penalty") folks link with the like-minded across

Protestant-Catholic boundaries.

Popular culture has simply taken over the task of shaping theology, as in the world of the *Left Behind* series and *The Da Vinci Code*. Faith has become a “life-style issue.” Evangelical Christianity prospers, says one interviewee, because it is so at home with pop culture. Bibles are now tailored-to-taste, consumer-driven products. It’s all the fashion.

In the *Wall Street Journal* (Septemer 8) I read a parable for postmodern religion. “As consumers mix and match, the fashion industry starts to fray. Designers and retailers work to serve shoppers seeking their own individual style.” The industry’s “authority has been shattered as consumers take their cues from a proliferating new array of influences.” If fashion is no longer fashionable, we are truly in a postmodern situation, almost as culture-driven as is consumer-based religion. “Consumers’ newfound freedom to customize their lives—from burning their own music CDS to publishing political commentary online—is throwing basic business models . . . into disarray,” writes Teri Agins.

Department stores are in trouble, while boutiques are “in.” The surviving department stores are becoming collections of boutiques. Megachurches still hold huge plenary gatherings, but they also house boutiques that cater to most of the measurable tastes around. And if the *Zeitgeist* changes, they will adapt. Dean Inge was famed for saying that if the church marries the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit and fashion of the time, it will soon be widowed. In the postmodern case, wrong: churches marry, divorce and remarry the *Zeitgeist* over and over again.

Maybe Allen will track that phenomenon in her “new adventures.” Until then, we’ll miss her.