

A Guide to Canal St. Weirdos -- Nancy Callahan and the Unification Church

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Nancy Callahan, center, with her two chief Unification Church followers.

New Orleans has always been weirdo-heaven. Now don't get me wrong. Nobody loves a good weirdo more than I. But you have to admit that our charming metropolis standing alone as it does amid the physical decay and mental retardation that constitutes the rest of the Glorious South -- has had more than its share of deviates, crimes against nature as it were.

And New Orleanians are indifferent about all the indigenous and itinerant strangeness. If a 500-ton octopus were to rise up out of the Trade Mart lobby at five o'clock one afternoon and scoop up and eat 500 commuters, people passing by who were lucky enough not to be eaten would say to their companions, "Did ya see dat eat dem guys? Geez."

That's the same kind of public acceptance and benign neglect that accompanies the new evangelism on Canal Street.

There is no way anyone can get from Rampart to Camp without running into an evangelist. I don't know if the different faiths have already gotten together and divided up sections of Canal among themselves, but that's the way it seems; they don't ever cross each other's turf.

(I can see five or six religious leaders deciding, "Well, you can have from Strin's to Godchaux's and we'll take... ")

The average New Orleans accostee doesn't even bother to slow down when approached by a religious accoster. In fact, the accostees resort, very casually, to every tactic imaginable to avoid the confrontation. Once the accoster has been circumvented, the accostee can be heard automatically to mutter under his breath, "Weirdos."

When it was time for me to take my place among the accostees (as we all must do, sooner or later), I did not circumvent and mutter. It was Christmas, and maybe I had been a way too long and my old New Orleans indifference had been somewhat eroded by the two years, eight months, and twenty-three days I spent in the Army.

At any rate, I stood there like an idiot in front of Maison Blanche, allowing myself to be castigated, upbraided, soothed, explained and healed by a woman who had a calm voice but the eyes and slight twitch of a manic depressive.

I must have allowed this to go on for some time because when the initial shock wore off, Mr. Bingle, the Styrofoam snowman, had started his spastic movements in Maison Blanche's Christmas window again, and I knew it was time to cut my redemption short.

I said, "Shit, lady, you really are a mess." In an instant, both she and I were gone.

The street-comer appeal is not so much annoying as insulting. Insulting because, to a man, the new evangelists imagine their target to be an intellectual pauper and a spiritual decadent. Some go so far as to presume to know what you are thinking. But you can't ignore them. They're all over.

The following report assumes that we all realize that New Orleans has always had a disproportionately large share of native religious and spiritual fever -- from voodoo and mojo hands to St. Joseph's Day altars, from gospel singers' intensity to the willingness to believe in 1972 miracles.



A Unity Missionary on Canal

My intention is to focus exclusively on major (compared to some of the scragglier Jesus or reincarnation ad hoc committees) religious movements and organization of recent origin and national scope -- outsiders who have entered New Orleans recently in the person of intense, strangely intense, young people.

Getting pestered by a Unity Missionary at the corner of Bourbon and Canal isn't quite as unbearable as an encounter with one of your run-of-the-mill hard-sell Christian saviors. They're pleasant people -- in the sense that the ardent "Up With People" cast consisted of pleasant people -- and very well schooled in an almost high-brow sociology-theology.

And if anybody has all the answers, it's them. They also have an international organization. The organization and all the answers -- and the whole Unification Church -- were established by Mr. Sun Myung Moon at the age of 34, in 1954.

Mr. Moon had spent seven years, beginning at age 16, "in intense prayer, meditation and study, during which period he received The Divine Principle Revelation," according to one highly polished pamphlet. The text goes on to add, somewhat incongruously, "At this time, he also studied engineering in Japan."

As best as I can make out through the prevalent ambiguity that afflicts all such tracts, this "Divine Principle" is some kind of great thing that incorporates and supersedes, of course, all other -previous information about god (such as all religions) -- and, without -contradiction, goes on to resolve and explain all "fundamental philosophical differences."

No mean job for a "thing." I wanted to find out more, and I also wanted to know exactly what was involved in this Unification Church motto: "To restore the world, let us go forth with the Father's heart in the shoes of a servant, shedding tears for man, sweat for earth and blood for heaven. In other words, to be a living sacrifice."

So I visited the headquarters, the only quarters, of the Church here in New Orleans down at 1137 Ninth. I was lucky enough to talk to Nancy Callahan. Actually, she's about the only person you -can speak to, since she's the only full-time Unity Missionary in Louisiana, having been sent here at the end of March.

She spends about four hours every afternoon "witnessing" (which means talking to you) on college campuses and on Canal Street. Usually she's helped in the late afternoon by a chemist and a nurse -- who get off work early. She really enjoys Saturday afternoon, stopping people on Canal.

She also gives "Introductory Lectures on the New Creation" every Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. and every Saturday at 3, and you can call 897-0022 to ask questions.

Nancy Callahan is in her mid-20's, calm, intelligent and articulate enough to explain away every mystery. She was one of the original 80 people selected by Mr. Moon to launch his American crusade (One suspects that there's somebody big involved besides. Mr. Moon -- somebody with money.)

New Orleans is pretty tame compared to the baptism of fire she had in New City, where her area of ministry lay between Saks Fifth Avenue and Rockefeller Plaza (People walk a lot faster there than in New Orleans).

She stuck to the Unification Church, she explains, because life in general, college in particular (the University of California at Berkeley), and other orthodoxies had failed to answer her deep personal need for a practical experience of love and her parallel need to resolve "inner conflict."

Compared to some of the more light headed religion pushers, Ms. Callahan has worldly aspirations. As a matter of fact, her views seem very strongly nationalistic: She envisions America mounting a Super-missionary effort to save all the rest of the earth in the short time before Jesus shows up again: "There's a reason why America today is so wealthy -- to help fulfill our role in the last days."

Then you get inevitably into Unification's pronounced anti-communism. Communism, as you know, keeps man away from God But it always surprises me that so many Christian evangelists -- from Billy Graham to Ruthie the Duck Lady, whose experience of communists hasn't been as direct as Mr. Moon's must have been in Korea -- spend so much effort on denouncing communism, the monolithic version of which seems pretty dead.

However, the Unification Church seems different from the various "Christian movements funded by right-wingers like H.L (Tomato Sauce) Hunt, in that it claims to be as much anti-capitalist as anti-communist. Nancy Callahan explains that the movement's ideal world is somehow socialistic -- but I was never able to get a clear picture Anyway, if Christ is about to show up, who cares about social systems?

We talked and argued some more. She was amused, and charitable with my admittedly strong prejudices against her. When the lemonade was gone, I left, without realizing that I liked Nancy Callahan. She had been frank and honest. Imagine.