

A Gospel of One's Own: The Rise of Personal Spirituality in SoCal

Ella Heydenfeldt

14 March 2025



At Santa Barbara's Unity Church, faith is participatory—worshippers join in song and affirmations, embracing a spiritual but not religious approach to belief.

Peter Panagore has died—twice.

"I had the opportunity to stay," he tells the crowd gathered in the sanctuary of Unity Church in downtown Santa Barbara. "I was welcomed. And I chose to return."

His first near death experience was as a young man ice climbing in 1980. The second was from a heart attack in 2015.

The audience listens to his near-death story in rapt silence. They've come to this International Association for Near-Death Studies ([IANDS](#)) meeting to hear about the other side—not through doctrine or scripture, but through firsthand accounts.

Panagore's voice is calm yet matter-of-fact. He describes a warm love, a place beyond the human realm. But most strikingly, he describes choice. He had free will, he says. Both times, he chose to come back.

Some of those who are present nod in recognition. They, too, have glimpsed something beyond, something hard to define. This group has a common thread with other non-traditional faith groups scattered throughout Southern California. A thread that transcends conventional faith structures in favor of deeply personal spirituality.

The West Coast has long attracted those drawn to individual spirituality. From [yoga](#) and meditation to metaphysical study groups, California has embraced practices that emphasize personal enlightenment. This openness has also made it a hub for those exploring alternative faith paths — and, some would argue, for cults and fringe spiritual movements as well.

The religious landscape of the United States has traditionally been dominated by Western monotheistic traditions—primarily Christianity. But this landscape is shifting, and Southern California has long been ahead of the [curve](#). In Santa Barbara, less than half the population identifies as Christian, compared to two-thirds nationwide, according to the Public Religion Research Institute. Even on a national level, religious affiliation is declining, according to the

[Pew Research Center](#). But declining religious affiliation does not equal a loss of spirituality.

Instead, more people identify as "spiritual but not religious," a category that embraces self-directed exploration over organized worship.

Joseph Blankholm, a professor of religious studies at UC Santa Barbara, notes that alternative religions flourish here not because of extremism but because of openness. "Religion in California differs compared to the rest of the country because Christianity is less important," he says. "Faith groups have more flexible beliefs, and Eastern beliefs are integrated."

[New Age philosophy](#), which emphasizes self-discovery, personal transformation, and eclectic spiritual practices, alongside Eastern religious traditions gained a foothold throughout California in many faith groups and religions. While some of these practices initially came from [New York City](#) in the late 1800's, they quickly migrated to the West Coast. According to Blankholm, over the past century, California has not only a leading edge, but is a major hub for these New Age practices, where they have gained significant traction. "Part of this story is simply migration. California is part of "Pacific rim" culture, and post-1965, it's received a disproportionate number of Asian immigrants, who've certainly influenced its religious/spiritual variety."

Three distinct groups stand out in the Santa Barbara area: The United Lodge of Theosophists, The Unity Church of Santa Barbara, and The Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara. All resemble traditional religions in the way they meet, many times in a sanctuary, but differ in their approach to faith. Instead of a cross behind the pulpit, there may instead be plants, colorful stained glass, or a large statue of a metal globe.

The United Lodge of Theosophists in downtown Santa Barbara feels more like a study group than a religious institution. Theosophy, a movement that emerged in the 19th century, blends elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Western esotericism. Notably, the Theosophists, including Annie Besant, discovered Ojai in the early 20th century, establishing a community that still draws spiritual seekers today.



Theosophy blends Eastern and Western philosophies, offering Santa Barbara seekers a space for deep spiritual inquiry beyond traditional religious structures.

James Tepfer, an author and philosophy lecturer at Oxnard College, spoke about the tenet of individual faith at a recent Sunday evening gathering. "Religion is turning towards the divine,

the unknowable," Tepfer said. "Theosophy points to that which is not visible or tangible, but what has to do with the heart."

For some attendees, Theosophy provides a space for intellectual and spiritual inquiry without rigid boundaries. It also serves as a space for connection. "Religion is what binds a person together, and what binds a community together," said Kirk Gradin, a longtime member of the lodge. He said Theosophy offers a space for those who struggle with traditional religious dogma, focusing instead on concepts of "Divine Wisdom" and "Eternal Good."

Meanwhile, the Unity Church, located in downtown Santa Barbara, espouses similar practices for its members. Rev. Temple Hayes, part of the [Association of Global New Thought](#) leadership team, says his church blends new thought practices with modern-day mysticism and science of the mind. "[Unity Church] teaches you how to think, not what to think," he said.

On any given Sunday morning, about 40 people attend the service, mostly older, seated in a semicircle of chairs around a raised stage. The energy in the room feels warm and participatory. The congregation recites in unison: "We are here to celebrate our spiritual magnificence..." The words emphasize personal choice, a common theme in Unity's teachings.

Rev. Cathy Norman, dressed in a black and gold blouse with a high bun and chunky gold earrings, leads a meditation. Her voice is slow and measured. "Dear God, we recognize your light. Let the light permeate your being. Feel the knowing that you are guided to the right place at the right time."

Norman delivers a sermon on self-talk and the power of words. "Your words tell the universe, the ultimate creative intelligence, just what it is that you want. Words create an undeniable impact. They put out energy and act like a magnet, inviting the same type of energy back to you. You are an alchemist of energy."

Unity's focus on affirmation and manifestation draws those seeking a spiritual practice that emphasizes empowerment and positive transformation.

By contrast, the Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara differs slightly by focusing less on motivational speakers and more on individuals sharing personal stories. Its Sunday service feels like a traditional church setting—wooden pews, a stained-glass circle above the altar, a choir singing *Here We Have Gathered*. About 30 people, mostly older, with a few young families, sit in the sanctuary.



The Unitarian Society in Santa Barbara offers an open dialogue on faith, welcoming diverse perspectives in a setting that honors both tradition and personal exploration.

Peter Hale, a white-bearded member of the Worship Arts Team-- a group of speakers who lead USSB services-- opens the service in a period of silence. "In each service we set aside a few minutes for what we sometimes call prayer, reflection, mediation, or silence," Hale said. "Nothing to do, nothing to think about."

Lifelong Unitarian and speaker Deb Karoff, wearing a striped sweater and glasses, approaches the stage to share a personal story about her partner, Anna. Karoff was raised a Unitarian in the

'60s and '70s, and speaks of "living on the margins" and finding a home in the Unitarian Society, where she and Anna were legally married in 2008.

While rooted in Jewish and Christian traditions, The Unitarian Society strives to be progressive, open to all, and draw from many other religions, sciences, and arts. "Personal experience, conscience, and reason should be the final authorities in religion," is written in its Personal Statement. "Religious authority is not found in a book or person, but within ourselves."

Much like other institutions, these communities emphasize finding the divine — and faith — within oneself. Whether through meditation or prayer, ending in "amen" or "namaste," they offer a welcoming space for people to gather and connect.

From talking about near death experiences to intense study of the metaphysical, when it comes to faith in southern California, experts would say it is not disappearing—it's evolving.

Back at IANDS, Pangore concludes his talk with a simple yet complex statement: "I am, like everyone, both flawed and Divine." The common thread is back: these groups emphasize that spirituality and faith originate from within. As a result, each person's belief system should be uniquely tailored to themselves.

