

# **BIBLE STUDY BREW: Coffee's influence at church\_72803**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)-When Maryetta Anschutz arrived at Christ and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Westport, Conn., three years ago, she noticed a disturbing trend at coffee hour.

"People were sneaking off to Starbucks down the street," she recalled. "Some would even return with their decaf mocha latte shamelessly in hand. I was the first to call them on it. I'm the church coffee cop."

Anschutz knows exactly what's wrong with her church's coffee. "It's sludge!"

But coffee hour is "the center of our community," she noted. "It's why many people who have few chances to socialize because of family and work go to church."

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Finally, after tiring of trailing parishioners to Starbucks, Anschutz found the perfect solution: She got Starbucks to donate pots of regular and decaf each Sunday, and sold coffee to parishioners at \$3 a pop. The proceeds

went to the high school outreach group she's taking to build homes in Jamaica this summer. In two months, she raised more than \$2,000 from coffee hour alone.

It's hard to exaggerate the importance of coffee to American church life. Pulled apart by their views about salvation, biblical interpretation and social issues, nearly all Christians share a common dedication to the beany brew.

In most mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, parishioners gather before or after services in the fellowship hall or church basement for kaffeeklatsches that often bear modest names like "fellowship hour" or "community hour."

An old Lutheran joke calls coffee hour the "third sacrament," after baptism and communion.

Young evangelical Christians have taken coffee spirituality off-site. In the past decade, hundreds of coffeehouses have popped up across the country with names like "The Jesus Shack," "Holy Grounds," "One Way Cafe," "Cup O' Joy" and "The Revelation Room."

So essential is coffee to churchgoing that when someone added arsenic to the coffee urn at Gustaf Adolph Lutheran Church in New Sweden, Maine, this spring, killing the 78-year-old head usher and hospitalizing 15 others, parishioners defiantly drank coffee for the TV cameras the following Sunday. Bishop Margaret Payne even showed up to take the symbolic first sip.

"I just wanted to make it clear that this isn't a place where you have to be afraid of drinking coffee," she said on CBS news.

As with many Christian practices, a whiff of the pagan lies at coffee hour's root. The preparation of coffee has a timeless alchemy about it—grind beans

(crush wing of bat), steam milk (boil cauldron), add cinnamon (toss in eye of newt), followed by ritual incantation: "How do you take it?" "Cream and sugar?" "One lump or two?"

And though not as strong as the Native Americans' peyote or the Norsemen's mushrooms, coffee contains a drug—albeit the one drug Ned Flanders can take without feeling guilty.

Caffeine also does what Christian fellowship is supposed to do. It's uplifting; the drink itself is warm and inviting. Coffee hour offers a "level-playing field," noted Anschutz. "It's not the yacht club. Anyone can come and mingle freely. Even if you don't discuss your faith, something in a sermon may draw you into a meaningful discussion about God and life."

Christianity hasn't always cottoned to coffee. In her aptly titled book "Coffee," Claudia Rosen explains that 16th-century priests wanted Pope Clement VIII to ban "the devil's drink." They insisted Satan had forbidden his followers—Muslims—from drinking wine because it was used in Holy Communion. Instead, the devil provided this "hellish black brew."

The elixir made from coffee beans does in fact have a long history in Islamic regions. African tribes mixed the crushed beans with animal fat and molded them into balls to eat as a stimulant before battle. Arabs made the first hot coffee beverage, in 1000 A.D. Dervishes—mystic devotees of Islam's Sufi sect—consumed coffee at all-night ceremonies as fuel for achieving religious ecstasy.

Coffee may have remained a Middle Eastern exotic had not Clement VIII decided to put it to the taste test before banning it. "Why, this Satan's drink is so delicious," he declared, "that it would be a pity to let the infidels have exclusive use of it. We shall cheat Satan by baptizing it."

In 1683, a Franciscan friar named Marciano d'Aviano stopped a Turkish invasion of Austria, and along the way, some claim, invented cappuccino.

The retreating Turks left behind bags of coffee beans, historians say, which the Viennese found so bitter that they added milk and sugar, creating a frothy, sweet beverage. Legend says the word “cappuccino” comes from d'Aviano's Capuchin order, so named for their brown robes. Pope John Paul II, himself an avowed coffee lover, beatified Marciano d'Aviano this spring (citing other, presumably decaffeinated, miracles he performed).

Still, in mid- to late-18th century Europe, coffee was viewed with mistrust.

Johann Sebastian Bach, an avid coffee drinker and devout Lutheran, composed his “Coffee Cantata” in 1732. In this satirical operetta, a stern father forbids his daughter to touch the evil drink. She pleads: “Father, don't be so severe! If I can't drink my bowl of coffee three times daily, then in my torment I will shrivel up like a piece of roast goat.”

Today, it is sometimes more proper to be a coffee believer than a Christian one. In Salt Lake City last year, where Mormons generally shun caffeinated beverages, Baptists ran a coffeehouse as part of their ministry at the Winter Olympics.

Christian rock bands commonly play the coffeehouse circuit as a way of building an audience. For years, Jars of Clay included in their concerts a paean to coffee usually introduced by Dan Haseltine's dead-on imitation of the rude whorling sound of a barista steaming milk for cappuccino.

Many young evangelical Christians frequent coffeehouses because they are looking for a place to congregate that is not a bar.

They have that in common with recovering alcoholics. Coffee has been a staple at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings since the non-denominational group's formation in 1935. While its high is relatively benign, coffee is nearly as effective a social lubricant as alcohol.

Some faiths are too pure even for coffee. Mormons drink Postum, the

cereal-based coffee substitute that made C.W. Post a fortune at the turn of the 20th century, after he smeared coffee as unhealthy in an aggressive ad campaign.

Few church coffee drinkers, however, think coffee may be the least Christian drink of all.

“I pay \$4 for a latte,” said Christ and Trinity's “coffee cop,” Anschutz. “I should put the money I spend on coffee every day into my United Thank Offering box and send it to sub-Saharan Africa. Did you know that a grande latte only costs Starbucks 11 cents to make and 22 cents in overhead?”

“It's appalling,” she said, “and yet I still go in and buy them.”

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