

Seeking God, or Peter Thiel, in Silicon Valley



Everything clicked when Peter Thiel gave the speech about God.

The occasion was a 40th birthday party for Trae Stephens, who is Mr. Thiel's venture capital partner as well as one of the founders of Anduril Industries, a maker of high-tech defense systems and weaponry. It was a multiday affair, held in 2023 at Mr. Stephens's home in New Mexico. It began with an evening roasting the birthday boy, followed by another toasting him and then a brunch with caviar bumps, mimosas and breakfast pizza. At the brunch (the theme was the Holy Ghost), Mr. Thiel, the Silicon Valley billionaire and right-wing kingmaker, delivered a talk about miracles, forgiveness and Jesus Christ. The guests were enthralled.

“The room of over 220 people, mostly in technology and venture capital, were coming up to us saying, ‘Oh, my goodness, I didn’t know Peter Thiel was a Christian,’” recalled Michelle Stephens, Mr. Stephens’s wife. “‘He’s gay and a billionaire. How can he be Christian?’”

That reaction — eyebrows raised, curiosity genuine — gave Ms. Stephens an idea: Gather influential people, including in Silicon Valley, to talk about Christian belief. Last year, she started a nonprofit called ACTS 17 Collective, which holds events where the bigwigs of the tech and entertainment industries discuss their faith. For those seeking not just spiritually but also professionally, it’s a chance to get close to industry demigods.

Mr. Thiel was the featured speaker at the first ACTS 17 event last May, at the San Francisco home of Garry Tan, the chief executive of Y Combinator. He talked about how Christian theology informs his politics and which of the Ten Commandments he finds most meaningful. (The first and last: Worship God, and don’t covet what others have.) A D.J. added ambience, mixing worship beats for the more than 200 attendees.

In October, the nonprofit hosted another talk at Mr. Tan’s home, this time with Dr. Francis S. Collins, former director of the National Institutes of Health, who has long talked about how he reconciles science with his Christian faith. Ms. Stephens is planning more events in San Francisco, as well as one in Los Angeles, and has reached out to potential speakers like Pat Gelsinger, the former chief executive of Intel, as well as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, an activist and Muslim turned critic of Islam who converted to Christianity.

The name ACTS 17 is an acronym (Acknowledging Christ in Technology and Society), but it also refers to the biblical chapter in which Paul the Apostle crisscrosses Athens and Thessaloniki to spread the Gospel among Greek “kings and queens of culture,” as Ms. Stephens puts it, the eminent and affluent demographic that she aims to minister to today. It’s a somewhat counterintuitive Christian calling, she acknowledged.

“We were always taught as Christians to serve the meek, the lowly, the marginalized,” Ms. Stephens said. “I think we’ve realized that, if anything, the rich, the wealthy, the powerful need Jesus just as much.”

Silicon Valley executives are accustomed to chasing the elusive — fortune, breakthroughs, power — but God has not tended to rank high on the list. The Bay Area is one of the least churchgoing parts of America, where people have been more apt to meet their spiritual longing with meditation, ayahuasca, intermittent fasting or cold plunges. An episode of the HBO show “Silicon Valley” once satirized this with a gay entrepreneur aghast at being “outed” as Christian. In a place built on stretching human limitations, where people exert dominion over everything from fertility to outer space,

even turning mortality into a business opportunity, the divine has seemed, to some, obsolete.

Mr. Thiel has long been an exception to the atheism and agnosticism of his peers. He has said his Christian faith is at the center of his worldview, which he expounds upon with a heterodox approach — fusing references to Scripture and conservative political theory, parsing ancient signs and wonders for their connection to tech wonders today. In recent podcast interviews, he draws on biblical prophecies to warn of an Antichrist who will promise safety from existential threats like artificial intelligence and nuclear war but bring something much worse: one-world government. (Mr. Thiel declined to be interviewed through Ms. Stephens; his spokesperson did not return an email.)

Other tech and entertainment gurus also seem to be embracing religion. Last year, Joe Rogan talked about the importance of faith in multiple podcast episodes, saying he had at times been “pretty atheist” but [became more spiritual](#) after the death of his grandfather. “As time rolls on, people are going to understand the need to have some sort of divine structure,” Mr. Rogan [said](#) in an episode last February. “A lot of very intelligent people, they dismiss all the positive aspects of religion.”

Elon Musk, in a recent interview with Jordan Peterson, a psychologist who has become a sort of manosphere guru, said he was a “big believer in the principles of Christianity.” Mr. Musk summed this up in a ditty on X: “Atheism left an empty space, secular religion took its place,” he [wrote](#). “Maybe religion’s not so bad to keep you from being sad.”

ACTS 17, which is nondenominational, aims to give people an easy, approachable introduction to religious belief. Its website deploys the hallmarks of millennial direct-to-consumer branding, featuring pretty people in puffy jackets talking and smiling alongside floating sans serif promises about “redefining success for those who define culture.”

If religious rituals offer up old ways of muddling through newly tumultuous times, it’s unsurprising that they’re resurging now in Silicon Valley, which seems to be going through its own cycle of rebirth. Pride-themed trivia nights and Black History Month playlists have given way to tech moguls feting President Trump, decrying the snowflakery of their young workers and crusading for a return to a bygone era of higher birthrates.

This political flip has prompted some skepticism about the new religiosity in the tech community, with even some Christian thinkers questioning whether some of it might be more self-serving than sincere. “When you look at the Bible, it’s all about supporting the poor, helping the other, inviting the stranger in,” said Anne Foerst, a theologian and

computer scientist at St. Bonaventure University in New York and the author of the book “God in the Machine.”

“There’s a certain attitude with some evangelicals that when you accept Jesus as your savior you are saved,” she continued. “Then you don’t have to worry — about drone building, rejecting foreigners, rejecting wokeness, all that sort of stuff.”

But many Bay Area clergy make the case that theology and Scripture offer something vital to people whose technological work touches on white-hot ethical and existential questions.

“We really feel a burden to help people consider how the model of Christ might help them think about how they change technology,” said Paul Taylor, an Oracle employee turned pastor who leads the Bay Area Center for Faith, Work & Tech, another group helping to bring religion to technologists. “How do they think about technology for the sake of the good of the world, for the sake of people who might not have a voice?”

With ACTS 17, Ms. Stephens’s mission seems more tactical, less pointed. Start-up and tech workers are used to kneeling before the powers of venture capital and Big Tech. Why not get them bowing also to God?

Token Christians

If an A.I. model were to conjure an image of a Silicon Valley power couple, it might resemble Mr. and Ms. Stephens. They live in a scenic corner of San Francisco where they enjoy gathering the “kings and queens” of local culture; both took topics that had consumed them and spun them into start-up endeavors, in Ms. Stephens’s case that being religious belief.

Mr. Stephens grew up as the grandson of a Southern Baptist pastor in a small Ohio town. Ms. Stephens was raised in a Roman Catholic family in the suburbs of Philadelphia, with a father who restored and renovated churches.

The two met at Georgetown University and bonded over the role that faith played in their lives. They took long walks during which they talked about the Bible and the differences in their religious practice — why Ms. Stephens prayed to the Virgin Mary, for instance, and Mr. Stephens directly to God.

After college, Mr. Stephens worked as a computational linguist for U.S. intelligence services and Ms. Stephens as a pediatric intensive care unit nurse. In 2008, Mr. Stephens got an offer to join Palantir, now a data analytics behemoth.

Mr. Stephens ascended into the ranks of the tech elite. In 2013, he was invited by Mr. Thiel, who financed Palantir, to become a principal at his venture firm, Founders Fund, and moved with his family to San Francisco. He helped start Anduril, which makes

autonomous drones and underwater vessels and is set to receive a round of funding valuing it at [\\$28 billion](#). (Founders Fund has backed Anduril since its start.) Ms. Stephens started a digital health care company. Along the way, they had two sons, “the munchkins,” as Mr. Stephens called them.

Throughout this period, they held on to their faith, which sometimes set them apart in the Bay Area social scene. It was their first time living somewhere where churchgoing wasn’t the norm, Ms. Stephens recalled, and where they sometimes felt like the token Christians in the room.

That desire to share their beliefs planted the seed for ACTS 17. Each event the nonprofit holds will feature a conversation with some high-profile person whom the audience might not know as a Christian. The talks so far have drawn devoted, lapsed and non-Christian audiences. Tickets go for \$50, and attendees are recruited by word of mouth and on social media.

“After an ACTS 17 event, all we would like is for folks in attendance to take a next step in their faith journey,” Ms. Stephens said. “Maybe they’d never heard of Jesus, and a next step is reading the Bible.”

It is a gentle introduction to Jesus, without the Styrofoam coffee cups and humdrum sermons that some nonbelievers associate with church. In October, the talk with Dr. Collins was themed “Code & Cosmos,” and aptly named cocktails (Mango-Orange Cosmos) were provided. There were selfies. There were name tags. There was the echo of bygone buoyant tech happy hours, when the rosé was on tap and the cheese boards were bountiful. And for the 20-somethings and 30-somethings in attendance, the potential for advancement as well as enlightenment. As the ACTS 17 website promised in pitch deck-ese: “These intimate gatherings promote engaging discussions and valuable connections that can enhance your career.”

The idea that people go to ACTS 17 jostling for connection to its speakers and founders doesn’t worry Ms. Stephens. “Maybe they show up to initially hear from a speaker and network,” she said. “Then the surprise and delight is — ‘Oh, I also, in this environment, get to explore matters of faith.’”

In November, ACTS 17 hosted two events in the United Arab Emirates. Ms. Stephens explained that after her San Francisco events, she had received invitations to take ACTS 17 to other American cities, but she said entrepreneurs in the Emirates had been more persistent (and Mr. Stephens had a longstanding professional interest in the Middle East). So the couple flew to Abu Dhabi and Dubai and gave two talks: one on how Christian faith can steer career planning, another on how God shapes their views of artificial intelligence and defense.

In Abu Dhabi, a member of the audience asked Mr. Stephens after the event what he thought about the social stigma around working in defense technology. As recently as 2018, Google [faced](#) protests from thousands of employees over its efforts to use artificial intelligence to help the Pentagon target drone attacks.

“There are a lot of easier ways to build start-ups than what we’re doing at Anduril,” Mr. Stephens said during a Zoom follow-up conversation with people who had participated in the event. “We’re doing it because we believe it’s just and moral.”

He drew a parallel between his work and that of J. Robert Oppenheimer, who oversaw the creation of the atomic bomb and who famously recalled that after the first nuclear test, the words of scripture from the Bhagavad Gita came to him: “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”

“That was accepting the fate of the divine in the execution of justice,” Mr. Stephens added. “There’s no love of violence.”

Mr. Stephens told the Zoom audience that entrepreneurs often came to him for career advice when they felt they were “wandering in the desert,” lonely and spiritually unfulfilled. He suggests they adopt a matrix he created, which puts jobs into four categories: bad and easy (making mindless iPhone games), bad and hard (creating a new e-cigarette), easy and good (building encrypted messaging services), hard and good (“Colony on Mars”).

Anduril, according to Mr. Stephens, falls into that latter category: work that is complex and good, situated where God is pointing him, he said. (The company is forming a [consortium](#) with other technology groups to bid for defense contracts, and Mr. Stephens was previously under consideration for a role in Mr. Trump’s Pentagon.)

Ms. Stephens is quick to say ACTS 17 has “no political affiliation.” “There’s no agenda,” she said. “There’s no specific movement happening here. We are just creating a space for people to explore those big questions that they just aren’t finding solutions to in the current world, in the current social and societal order.”

She added that the group didn’t intend to discuss political issues, though she realizes they can’t be entirely avoided. “There’s nothing we guide the moderator to ask or not ask — everything is fair game,” she said. “We ask God to guide the moderators and speakers.”

Still politics, or at least a whiff of it, cannot be ignored when Mr. Thiel is part of the group’s origin story. An outspoken libertarian, Mr. Thiel was an early supporter of Mr. Trump in 2016, and Vice President JD Vance is among his acolytes. He seems also to recognize the strength that comes from an alliance between political and religious conservatives.

“The Reagan coalition was somehow the free market libertarians, the defense hawks and the social conservatives,” he told the economist Tyler Cowan in a [recent interview](#). “What does the millionaire, and the general and the priest — what do they actually have in common?”

He continued: “Yet the coalition worked incredibly well, and the answer I submit that they have in common is they’re anti-communist, and they have a common enemy.”

Imitation as a form of faith

It was the first Sunday of 2025 and Epic Church, in downtown San Francisco, was jammed. Mr. Stephens went downstairs to drop the couple’s 9- and 11-year-old sons at a children’s service. Ms. Stephens doled out hugs to other churchgoers. Then the two took their seats in the second row of the converted industrial space where Epic holds services.

Epic Church is nondenominational and got support from an evangelical Dallas-based network that places churches in “spiritually hard to reach” parts of the United States. Since it began weekly services in San Francisco in 2011, Epic has ballooned, drawing roughly 1,000 people — including some of the city’s poorest along with its tech wealth — every Sunday. It now has its own building: \$12 million of office space.

Ben Pilgreen, Epic’s pastor, preaches a message that has resonated with San Francisco locals: He believes that any job someone does — ad sales, software engineering, H.R. — can be sacred. It’s not just clergy doing the Lord’s work. This is an appealing notion to those members of his congregation who want to believe the time they’re pouring into their careers has a higher purpose.

“If you’ve been called to be a graphic designer,” Mr. Pilgreen said, “that’s a sacred vocation.”

Mr. Stephens and Ms. Stephens became members of the church shortly after moving to San Francisco. It was in the Epic community that they sharpened their own thinking of how Christian faith should inform their Silicon Valley endeavors. For four years, until the end of 2021, they hosted a Faith and Work group, which met Tuesday mornings and discussed ways religion was relevant to their professional lives. Mr. Thiel and Mr. Tan were some of the high-profile guests who dropped in. (The group is starting up again this year.)

This Stephens-led small group sometimes studied the work of René Girard, a literary theorist who has become Silicon Valley’s favorite theologian. Mr. Girard’s name is invoked by Mr. Thiel in podcast interviews, by Mr. Stephens at ACTS 17 events and by [Mr. Vance](#).

Mr. Girard, who died in 2015, was also a mentor to Mr. Thiel at Stanford. Mr. Girard's books offer a view of religion that fits tidily into the belief systems of Silicon Valley. He theorized that all desire is mimetic — we want what other people want — and one person who broke that cycle of rivalry was Jesus Christ. Interpreting his work, readers conclude that a way to transcend petty desires is to convert to Christianity and try to imitate Christ.

Some of his readers and critics, like the historian [John Ganz](#), say Mr. Girard frames religion as an antidote to the sorts of vices that are now exacerbated by social media: Is Instagram making you jealous of other people? No problem; keep scrolling, but remember you should only want to be like Christ.

Another explanation for Mr. Girard's growing influence is mimesis itself. People want to mimic Mr. Thiel. As Augustus Doricko, a Christian start-up founder, put it: "Peter Thiel could crown a circus clown his favorite philosopher and everyone would trip over themselves trying to get face time with the circus clown."

After the first ACTS 17 event, an attendee approached Ms. Stephens and said he was shaken by the profession of faith from Mr. Thiel, whom he called a professional "idol": If Mr. Thiel was worshiping Jesus, perhaps he should be doing the same.

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