

## Peloton makes toning your glutes feel spiritual. But should Jesus be part of the experience?

By **Michelle Boorstein**

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A dental hygienist and mom of little kids, Michelle Schaeffer was looking for at-home exercise options during the pandemic — a stress reliever “healthier than drinking.” She was thrilled in November to discover Peloton, the touch screen stationary bike company that has exploded during quarantine with celebrity spin teachers who mix tough coaching, self-help, hipness and rabbinic wisdom, all fed through the mantra of “One Peloton” — One community, bettering each other, working for something bigger than themselves.

The more complex reality came fast.

A few weeks into riding, Schaeffer, 34, posted a suggestion on the 395,000-member Peloton Facebook page. Riders there frequently rave about the soaring emotions and meaning they get from the teachers’ words combined with the physical intensity. Posts about crying during rides are common. Wouldn’t Christian music — maybe gospel — be even better, Schaeffer wondered, even more intense? Responses were rapid.

“Just stop. Please don’t turn Peloton into another political/grievance battle. Drop it,” wrote one. “Perhaps you could find your Christian ... whatever ... at church?” wrote another. Comments about how user fees shouldn’t go toward “religious propaganda” were mixed in with “yaaas!”

On the messaging site Reddit, pandemic riders debated a different user’s warning about the religiosity of Peloton’s “Sundays with Love.” The spiritual-style ride centers each week on a different value like “accountability” or “selflessness,” led by former theology student and Brooklyn Nets host Ally Love. Was Love “Christian as in ‘Jesus is savior stuff?’ ” posters asked, or “the benign ‘God loves everyone, love is everywhere’ ” stuff?

With hundreds of thousands of new riders streaming into Peloton’s virtual community during the pandemic, it has become a prime testing ground for certain questions: How does a modern-day meaning-making community work? And is there room for old-school religion?

Americans in recent decades have been rapidly ditching religious services and looking for spiritual uplift, meaning and transcendent community through experiences like yoga and spin classes, political activism and cooking — more and more of it online. Entrepreneurs like Peloton chief executive John Foley see similarities between stirring hearts and minds with lofty sermons and elevating heart rates while furiously pedaling to Lizzo.

“The stuff that happened on Sunday morning at church or synagogue is still important to human beings. It’s still something humans want. But they’re not getting as much of it from organized religion. People want fitness and they want something else — instructor-led, group fitness classes, replete with the candles on the altar and someone talking to you from a pulpit for 45 minutes — the parallels are uncanny. In the ’70s or ’80s, you’d have a cross or Star of David around

your neck. Now you have a SoulCycle tank top. That's your identity, that's your community, that's your religion," Foley told a group in 2017, citing another online biking community.

The pandemic has put America's shift into virtual community-making into overdrive. Peloton has taken advantage of that, adding 620,000 paying subscribers between January and September 2020, while seeing its value shoot up to \$50 billion, compared to \$7 billion in September 2019. (For context, Planet Fitness — another fitness company — has 15 times as many subscribers and is valued at \$7 billion.)

Simeon Siegel, a senior analyst at BMO Capital Markets who focuses on retail and e-commerce, attributes Peloton's success in part to its ability, primarily through its instructors, to tap into things religion does well: emotion and belief.

"Peloton has created celebrity out of energetic preacher-types who are conveying stories of good will, of inclusivity, to people coming for exercise, but finding they want the message just as much," Siegel said. The core motto of Peloton's teachers, he said, can be boiled down to "enhancing your life to enhance others."

The New York City-based company, which began in 2012, is best known for selling stationary bikes and treadmills that come with screens that stream classes and sell for \$1,800-\$2,400 and \$2,400-\$3,000, respectively. There are 1 million Peloton subscribers and another 2 million who use the Peloton app, which offers classes in running as well as yoga, strength and stretching.

But the biking instructors are Peloton's stars, some of whom have dramatic, inspiring stories. They include Love, who was hit by a car at age 9 and told she'd never be a runner or an athlete. Another is Robin Arzón, a company vice president and former lawyer who became an ultra-marathoner after surviving a shooting and kidnapping at a Manhattan bar.

The teachers vary in their style, music choice and the way in which they encourage the riders. In general, taking a Peloton class is like simultaneously having a hyper-fit, in-your-face gym trainer pushing you to the max, while also listening to a mega-pastor or Ted Talk life coach urging you to stare your life's purpose in the face. Demands quickly flip from how high to crank your hill to how honest you're willing to be with yourself to how thankful you are. There are frequent, if general, references to forces bigger than one's self.

For many, the combination is spiritually intoxicating.

"Alex's ride this morning was for me like a religious experience. When he played P. DIDDY's song and talked about missing his Grandma, I literally started bawling and immediately thought of the love of my life looking down at me and being proud," one user posted on Facebook about teacher Alex Toussaint, a former spin studio maintenance worker who tells riders he begins every day playing "Love Yourz" by rapper J. Cole, a song whose chorus is "No such thing as a life that's better than yours." He tells riders on his hip-hop and Club Bangers rides to dedicate the day to someone who lost a loved one during the pandemic but wasn't able to properly say goodbye. He insists they be thankful for waking up that day: "Put some respect in your d--- name!"

Thousands of people are often on the live rides — sometimes tens of thousands. The bikes' computers are built for interaction, with the ability to virtually high five, video chat or adopt a hashtag to tell other riders you're part of #PelotonMoms (235,000 members), #PelotonDads (85,634) or #BlackLivesMatter (210,000).

Peloton tries to keep its brand and its teachers away from partisan politics, which this past year tainted everything from mask requirements to voter access. Last month, the company made news when it joined other companies in banning #StopTheSteal on its app, the Verge reported. Perhaps its biggest controversy came in December 2019 over an ad about a husband who gives his wife a Peloton bike; the ad was lambasted as sexist and the company's stock tumbled by 9 percent.

Catering to riders looking for more explicitly upbeat and spiritual rides, Peloton launched "Sundays with Love" in fall

2019, a weekly series advertised with images of Love, on the bike, in purple — a color that represents both royalty and is the color in which Jesus was crucified. A wispy, spirit-like version of herself falls away from her body as her outstretched arm and eyes point upward. The classes are sermon-like, with scripture-sounding narratives and expressions familiar to churchgoers about “moments of grace,” calls to “surrender yourself” and lots of references to letting go of judgment and accepting what is.

Love studied theology as an undergraduate at the Catholic school Fordham University and talks regularly of her faith. She was quoted in a 2019 New York Times profile as saying she attends Redeemer Church, a popular conservative Presbyterian congregation in Lower Manhattan. Her soundtracks include many secular songs with names like “Hallelujah,” “Higher Love,” and “Hey Soul Sister” and a light sprinkle of songs from overtly Christian artists including Tauren Wells and Steven Curtis Chapman.

“Sundays with Love” quickly became popular, leading to a passionate following but also division that continues on social media.

Some riders say the series should be classified as Christian, while more conservative Christians say Love’s theology is too fuzzy. She tells riders to call the class “church,” “mosque,” “temple” or whatever feels right.

Nick Stoker, 41, a London businessman, triggered hundreds of comments on the Peloton Reddit page in April when he posted that he took a “Sundays with Love” ride and thought he was getting pandemic-era “spiritual inspiration and uplifting music,” but actually got something more about God and Christianity. The ride should have been labeled as Christian, he argued.

“I don’t want my children listening to these sort of messages. I also feel upset for all the Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and Jedis that don’t have Peloton programming options available to them — this community is all about bringing people of all sizes and types together, why are we dividing people by religion?”

Mike Stell, 49, joined last winter and — not aware of Love’s rides — asked on the main Peloton Facebook page if there were any rides featuring contemporary Christian music. A slew of riders warned him he was about to get attacked —and that Peloton would remove any of the negative comments later.

“I will warn you about things that trigger everyone on the main page,” wrote a Hawaii doctor. Among them: “Asking for Christian rides — a holy war ensues.”

Stell, who works for a firm that sells vans for the disabled and is a drummer for his Arkansas church, said he and his wife have long found intense emotion — to the point of tears — in exercise, including CrossFit and now Peloton. “It’s the release of the exercise and inspiration all at once. It puts you in an emotional state,” he said.

He didn’t get a lot of negative responses to his request, but the ones he did “blew my mind. ... I’m not the one who will back down. If someone wants to challenge me, my faith — that’s our background, foundation. I’m not going to cower down.”

Stell said he pulled away from using the Peloton social pages and while he loves the Ally Love rides, he and his wife now often use their own soundtracks of ‘80s rock and put on one of the settings that’s a scenic ride instead of a person.

Casper ter Kuile, a Harvard Divinity School fellow who writes books about modern spirituality and how people are finding ritual and meaning in new ways, said Peloton is part a much bigger trend he calls “unbundling.” Within that, people are now browsing in a variety of places for the things they once got all at a congregation: worship, scripture, life

transitions and social justice among them.

As a result, he said, American religious life is very unstable, very individualized. “When religion is infusing these secular spaces, it troubles the concept of religion, but also troubles the strict secularity we’ve come to expect.”

Ter Kuile noted the irony of people — Peloton riders — challenging religious institutions while they are themselves part of an activity many see as cultlike. He says that’s more about institutional religion’s current branding problem. “They’d trust Peloton as a cult but not the Catholic Church as a religion,” he said. Gym brands, he added, often embrace the cult label with “a wry smile. Like: ‘Oh, it’s a cult but I *love* it.’ ”

Concern about backlash against religious Peloton riders is part of what has driven almost 10,000 people to join a separate Peloton Riders For Christ Facebook page.

It was on there that Melissa Pekar, 42, a military intelligence specialist from Maryland, posed a nervous question late in 2020: Did others who had added a religious hashtag to their name find fewer people high-fiving them?

To Pekar, Love is in that category of people who say they’re Christian but “accept behaviors that would be considered immoral,” be they Donald Trump or people who accept homosexuality. That’s why, to Pekar, “Sundays With Love” is more problematic than more secular teachers — so long as they don’t use too many swear words during the ride, she said in an interview.

When others responded that her hashtag was unlikely to have led to less high-fives, Pekar said, “it hit me: Jesus was crucified, Paul was killed, John was beheaded, so there has always been this anti-Christian sentiment. When I talk about anti-Christian shift, Ally Love is a prime example; it’s okay to talk about God a little bit, as long as you don’t get into any of the specific biblical beliefs.”

Peloton declined to comment for this story, as did Love’s spokeswoman. After her first “Sundays with Love” ended in February, there were rumors among her fans that the series was canceled due to debate about its spiritual content. In a video on her Facebook page watched by 17,000 people, Love denied it was being canceled.

“I just wanted to correct one thing. ... I never said any of that in a previous video. So I just want to clarify ... we’re always uniting because that’s what we do as one Peloton. Just know, we’re all in this together — the company, me, all of us — we’re all in this together. We’re all one Peloton.”

A second season of her rides began in October.

Josh Redd, a rider who is one of the volunteer moderators of the Christian page, said he wasn’t aware if the rumors Love’s show was threatened were accurate. Redd estimated that half of Peloton users are Christians, and many don’t have any issue with the lack of religious music. Disagreement over topics is to be expected in such a large group, he said, and “we do live in a broken world.”

In a mid-January class, purple lights streamed around the studio, and Love — in a purple sports bra and tights — spoke to her “Army of Love” of their “movement.” Sometimes she tells her classes of their responsibility to “gather, grow and give” — meaning learning and building things that are for the benefit of others. On this day she organized her class around “the mess, the message and the mountain” — metaphors for dealing with one’s issues and not allowing obstacles to control you.

When class ended, Love got off the dike and told her audience she wanted to apologize. “Sometimes I say higher love is up here,” she said, gesturing above. “But I gotta reframe that. Higher love is in here,” she placed her hand on her heart. “May the peace sign always acknowledge the unity on the leader board and the diversity that makes us the Army of Love. Go forth and continue to light the way.”

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