

Churches fine tune message, methods to draw in skeptics

The more public presence of atheists and agnostics in U.S. society has compelled churches of all kinds to create new ministries catering to the questions and doubts of such skeptics, reports the *New York Times* (March 4). Both the growing assertiveness of atheists, as shown by the “new atheism,” and the growing rate of non-affiliated (though not necessarily atheist) Americans, especially among young adults, are fueling this trend, writes Samuel G. Freedman. A leader in providing a ministry to skeptics is Tim Keller, pastor of the New York megachurch Redeemer Presbyterian. The church hosts weekly sessions called the WS Café—which is a reference to Upper West Side, one of the neighborhoods of the multi-campus church—where doubters are welcome, with participants discussing and questioning the basic premises not only of Christianity but theism itself. This approach is unusual in the history of American missions and evangelism since traditionally the “Christian evangelist seeking converts was at least dealing with listeners who embraced the concept of a divine being involved in the world,” Freedman writes. Keller has written books on atheist challenges to the faith, periodically teaches adult-ed classes on “Questioning Christianity,” and sometimes holds question-and-answer sessions with attendees after Redeemer’s worship services.

Freedman focuses on Redeemer, where Keller has made a concerted effort to confront secularism (requiring his ministers to read such scholarly tomes as Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*), but it is not difficult to find similar ministries in congregations seeking to reach out to the nones and skeptics, even outside of Keller’s far-flung network of urban churches. Apologetics, or defense of the faith, has long been a staple of most evangelical churches, but it seems that to a greater extent today, such ministries are being fine-tuned to address the concerns of agnostics and atheists. On the charismatic side of things, *Ministry Today* magazine (March/April) reports on the work of Rice Brooks, co-



founder of Bethel World Outreach, a multi-site church in Tennessee. Broocks was the guiding force behind the evangelical sleeper hit film *God's Not Dead* (and the just-released *God's Not Dead 2*), which pits an atheist professor against a Christian student. Broocks also launched an evangelism app, The God Test, which permits lay evangelists to “poll” atheists with a series of questions that can lead to further discussions about the faith.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is a move toward “radical hospitality” in mainline churches, which allows unbelievers and even non-theists to celebrate communion. This trend may especially be the case in more recently founded congregations that don't have a membership structure. In a study of new mainline church plants, **RW**'s editor found a degree of participation in these churches by non-believers beyond the practice of inclusive communion, such as providing music and taking part in services. Although it is uncertain if these non-theists gradually take to the faith of their adopted congregations, there was little overt attempt to evangelize these skeptical churchgoers.

What is the ‘Trump effect’ on evangelicals

The significant evangelical support for Donald Trump has thrown pollsters, pundits, professors, and professing evangelicals themselves into spasms of introspection and bewilderment. Trump's significant lead among evangelicals compared with more sympathetic candidates, such as Ted Cruz and John Kasich, has been the most puzzling. Writing in *Politico* magazine (March 13), Boston University religion professor Stephen Prothero offers the bluntest diagnosis: “America's evangelicals just aren't all that evangelical anymore.” He argues that prominent evangelicals, such as Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist Convention, are themselves making that case as they try to draw a clear line between voting for Trump and espousing evangelical beliefs and values. In a recent interview, Moore lamented how so many of his coreligionists “have been willing to look the other way when the word ‘evangelical’ has been co-opted by heretics and lunatics...as long as they were on the right side of the culture war.” Prothero sees the movement toward Trump emerging from the rise of evangelical partisanship in the 1980s, only now the patriotic element is overshadowing the part about biblical values.

Meanwhile, in the conservative ecumenical magazine *First Things* (April), R. R. Reno views the evangelical defection to Trump as a protest vote over the failure of the Republican Party and the leadership class in general to support their values, such as religious liberty: “This parallels the experience of the working class. Our leadership class regards them as economic (and political) dead weight as well, though



for different reasons.” Other analysts have been careful to parse the evangelical support for Trump. For instance, in the New Christian Right bastion of Lynchburg, Va., Trump came in fourth during Super Tuesday (although he did win a large portion of the white evangelical vote in South Carolina). In a blog of *First Things* magazine (March 5), Darren Patrick Guerra writes that when looking at exit polls on Super Tuesday, 64 percent of evangelicals in all southern states voted for

someone other than Trump: “Indeed, a majority (51 percent) voted collectively for either Rubio or Cruz instead of Trump.” When evangelical voters are asked questions about the importance of religious faith or “shared values” of their preferred candidates, Trump tends to rate very low, and Ted Cruz rates highest. Meanwhile, in his Religion News Service blog *Spiritual Politics* (March 29), Mark Silk boils down the appeal of Trump to evangelicals to one word: immigration: “On Trump’s signature issue, evangelicals stand out as the only religious grouping in America of which a majority (53 percent) believe that immigrants ‘threaten traditional American customs and values.’ Just 32 percent of them believe that ‘newcomers from other countries benefit the U.S.’” The Public Religion Research Institute survey Silk cites differentiates younger evangelicals from older ones: The former splits on immigrants 55 percent (benefit) to 33 percent (threat) while the latter tilts 57 percent (threat) to 23 percent (benefit). “This sheds significant light on why Trump does better among older than younger Republicans generally,” Silk concludes. In his blog *Corner of Church and State* (March 24), political scientist Tobin Grant agrees with Silk but goes one step further to argue that surveys show that much of the evangelical support for Trump is based on shared racist views. But he concludes, “The good news for evangelical leaders is that there is a major difference between those who attend church and those who don’t. Evangelicals who rarely or never attend church are bully on Trump, giving Trump 22 points higher than those who attend frequently and 26 percent points more than those who attend weekly.”

(*Politico*, <http://www.politico.com>; *First Things*, <http://www.firstthings.com>; *Spiritual Politics*, <http://marksilk.religionnews.com>; *Corner of Church and State*, <http://tobingrant.religionnews.com>)

The de-churching of black political activism

Black church leaders have been largely supportive of the Black Lives Matters movement, but many young African-American activists are not necessarily returning the respect, reports Emma Green in *The Atlantic* (March 22). While the black church has long been foundational in civil rights and social justice efforts in the African-American community, it has not been central in the Black Lives Matter movement that emerged after recent widespread protests against police brutality. In Baltimore, which has become a center of the movement, Green finds that, if anything, “religious leaders seem to be playing supporting roles in the most recent wave of activism.” This trend may partly reflect the disaffection for institutional religion among a growing number of young Americans, although research has shown that blacks in the millennial generation have retained higher rates of affiliation than their counterparts among other races. Green also sees the marginal church involvement in Black Lives Matter as coming from religious leaders themselves as they confront an unfamiliar wave of black nationalist activism.

In contrast to forming the backbone of civil rights leadership as in the past, church leaders interested in Black Lives Matter are being forced to “readjust.” “How do you become part of something you don’t lead?” asks Rev. Jamal Bryant, a prominent Baltimore leader in the protests against police in Baltimore. The clergy disconnect may be because much of the movement espouses a black nationalism that seeks to build an alternative to “the system,” which is often seen as including established black churches. The national Black Lives Matters movement and its local chapters are also strongly pro-gay rights, a cause which many black pastors oppose. But Green traces the young activist disaffection to their frustration with deteriorating conditions in their neighborhoods even after eight years under a black president. Green adds that these activists are “also experimenting with what new forms of religiosity and spirituality—often framed in political language—might look like.” One activist says she hears her friends identity as “spiritual but not religious... You’ll hear them say, ‘I want a relationship with the Creator,’ but they don’t feel the need to manifest that relationship within the church space.” But the lack of a church foundation with its resources in place “may actually hobble some of the activist work,” Green concludes.



(*The Atlantic*, <http://www.theatlantic.com>)

Seattle—ground zero for church planting?

Although the Seattle area has been billed as the most secular city and region in the U.S., its reputation for technological innovation has carried over to church planting, writes Kathryn Robinson in *Seattle Met* magazine (March 23). She cites the research of Christopher James of Dubuque Theological Seminary, who realized “between spin-offs, branches of multisite churches, and, later, independents that took over the Mars Hill [megachurch] properties after its collapse,” that there is considerable church planting activity in Seattle, with a 2015 real estate study finding that the city has the second-highest number of religious institutions per capita in the nation. James found a “whopping 105 new churches” started in supposedly “post-Christian Seattle” since 2000. In fact, the “post-Christian” factor may be behind the establishment and growth of new churches as the city’s evangelical church planters’ “identity thrives on a sense of embattlement,” and perhaps also on the way the region is a clean slate without a dominant religion (a tendency also found in other parts of the Pacific Northwest or “Cascadia” region; see the report on religious innovation in Vancouver in the Feb. **RW**).

James finds four categories of new churches in the Seattle region: “creative spin-offs from progressive mainline congregations;” conservative churches using the evangelistic methods of Mars Hill; other ethnic evangelicals and charismatics who focus on the “spirituality of worship;” and, finally, “a group spanning the theological spectrum and bringing church to neighborhood Third Places.” The two conservative groups make up 55 percent of Seattle church starts, though the city’s evangelicals defy stereotypes in terms of their embrace of political and social issues. James sees the Third Place congregations as the most innovative, as they support their neighborhoods through such ministries as a church/drop-in “living room” for the homeless, a church arts venue, and a café with the alter ego of spin-off congregation of a prominent Presbyterian church.



(*Seattle Met*, <http://www.seattlemet.com>)

Demographers take on the ‘big questions’ beyond birth and death

A late March conference on religious demography at the Pew Research Center in Washington, attended by **RW**, suggests that this field is expanding and finally engaging secular-minded demographers. Demography as a discipline has largely focused on tracking the changes surrounding fertility rates and patterns of migration and mortality throughout the world, but a glance at the Pew conference program showed a wide range of subjects under study—from many studies employing sophisticated methods dealing with the relationship between health outcomes and religion to the religious gender gap and the role of intermarriage in the rise of the “nones.” Although Pew’s Conrad Hackett pointed out that the American Population Conference meeting nearby in Washington did not include any sessions on religion, participants remained upbeat about demographers’ openness to questions involving religion, even if in a broad sense. During the concluding session, panelists were asked if demography has answered any of the “big questions” about religion. David Voas of University College, London, responded that the fact that we now have increasingly accurate estimates of the size of religious groups in the U.S. and the rest of the world is itself a major achievement; “even a few years ago, the figures were wildly inaccurate,” he added.

Christopher Ellison of the University of Texas at San Antonio noted that there has been great progress in understanding the positive associations between religion and beneficial physical and mental health outcomes, although he cautioned that there is still uncertainty about religion’s causal role in such associations. He added that there are a minority of cases where the religion-health relationship is not necessarily positive, meaning much work remains to be done in this field. Jenny Trinitapoli of Penn State University said that among the most significant advancements in religious

demography is growing understanding of the relationship between religion and fertility differentials, marriage, and childbearing. “There’s no such thing as, for example, ‘Catholic fertility,’” as was once thought, she said, meaning that religion is only one factor among an array of contexts and variables in understanding different fertility patterns.

As for the future, the researchers pointed both to major challenges and technological advances that may provide some answers to the big questions. Ellison said that as demographers increasingly work with biologists, it will become easier to identify biomarkers and genetic factors that may finally help answer the causal questions about religion and health. As for challenges, Voas pointed to the “gaping hole” of China’s religious demography, especially with the upcoming changes to its one-child policy, as well as keeping track of Europe’s shifting religious demographic



footprints during its current upheavals over migration. Austrian researchers Michaela Potancokova and Marcin Stonawski expanded on that issue in a presentation on the new migration in Europe. They find that European fears over rapid Muslim growth during the great migration are exaggerated, with somewhat more than half of the migrants coming from Muslim countries and others coming from areas such as the Baltic region and Russia. The Muslim growth is greatest in Germany, Sweden, and Austria but least in France. The current migrant population is 1.3 million, but the flow will be slowing (with other migrants being rejected or returning to their countries), leaving about a 5.6 percent proportion of Muslims continent-wide.

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **A high rate of suicide in states with significant Mormon populations has led researchers to speculate that there may be a connection between Mormon attitudes about homosexuality and such a phenomenon.** There have been anecdotal claims that the Latter Day Saints' strict teachings against homosexuality could have a role in suicidal behavior, but in the independent Mormon blog *Rational Faiths* (March 9), researcher Benjamin Knoll presents a statistical analysis



of suicide rates among Mormons and possible factors relating to these deaths. Knoll finds that in 2014, a higher proportion of Mormons in a state was associated with a higher level of suicide among those age 15-19 in that state. This association did not exist in 2009, the first year available in the data on suicidal behavior from the Centers for Disease Control. It has been the 2010-2015 period when Mormons were most active in opposition to gay rights, such as same-sex marriage.

The researcher finds that even after controlling for a host of demographic factors, such as serious mental illness, the high rate of American Indian youth suicide in these states, state density, and gun ownership, the proportion of Mormons in a state is associated with higher levels of youth suicide. Mormon prevalence in U.S. states doubles youth suicide rates in a similar way that gun ownership quadruples them. But Knoll acknowledges that his findings do not necessarily imply a direct link between being Mormon and suicide, especially since the CDC does not report the sexual orientation of those committing suicide. Critics of Knoll's research point out that non-Mormon Oregon in this region had a higher youth suicide rate than the high Mormon population states.

(*Rational Faiths*, <http://rationalfaiths.com>)

● **A recent survey reports that only about half of Italians consider themselves Catholic.** Published in the Italian newspaper *L'Unita* (March 29), the findings, based on a survey of 1,500, throw into question the idea that Italy is a "Catholic" country. The Italian web site *ADN Kronos* (March 29) reports that aside from the 50 percent identifying themselves as Catholic, 13 percent called themselves "Christian," according to the the poll conducted by the Italian research firm SWG. Four percent said they were Orthodox or Protestant, two percent Buddhist, one percent Jewish, and another one percent Muslim. An unexpected 20 percent said they were atheists.



(*ADN Kronos* (in Italian): http://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/cronaca/2016/03/29/solo-meta-degli-italiani-dice-cattolico_3QrbAImZsSqfhi3ch3gBZJ.html)

● **Declines in religious belief and practice in Europe has led more strongly to the growth of values related to personal autonomy and individualism rather than on matters concerning self interest, such as lying and cheating, according to a study in the journal *Politics and Religion* (March).** Ingrid Storm of the University of Manchester analyzed attitudes of personal autonomy and self-interest in four waves of the European Values Study from 1981–2008. She found that values associated with contested (especially in Europe) issues of personal autonomy, such as abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality, fell at both the individual and country levels of decline of religiosity. But there was only a small negative association with the second factor concerning self-interest, including cheating, lying, and stealing, contrasted with social norms and laws. The changes in autonomy values were due more to cohort change than self-interest values, which appear to decline over the life course as people age but do not show much change over time from one cohort to the next. But Storm finds that individual religiosity has stronger negative associations with both values of autonomy and self-interest in countries with high levels of average religiosity and in societies where confidence in public authorities is low. The latter pattern may indicate that the social and moral influence of religiosity may be less important when secular authorities are perceived to be effective and trustworthy.



(*Politics and Religion*,
<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayIssue?jid=RAP&tab=currentissue>)

GENERAL ARTICLES

Media shapes the message on religion in Europe

It comes as little surprise that recent research conducted in several European countries shows that Islam holds by far the top position when it comes to the amount of secular media reports dealing with religion: media attention is naturally drawn toward conflicts and tensions. Besides confirming such trends through quantitative research, a recent international conference on religion and media that took place in Paris on March 23–24 and that **RW** attended has also highlighted the role of media as players in current debates and in constructing our perception of religious realities, as stressed by Jean-Paul Willaime (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris).

The conference was organized by doctoral students of the Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcités at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). Scholars from several countries reported on their observations of the evolution in media reporting on religion. Mia Lövheim (University of Uppsala, Sweden) shared results of her research on the Swedish print media from 1980–2010. The general thread is a perception of a resurgence of religion. From being originally an international topic, Islam evolves more and more into a national issue over the years. At the same time, there is a switch from information to debate, with an increase of religion topics in editorial pages. While tolerance is praised, comments also stress tensions between respect for religious freedom and aspects of religions such as Islam seen as not compatible with Swedish culture (e.g. going against gender equality). Media increasingly contribute to set the political agenda, becoming an arena for renegotiation of values, identities, and relations in society. Several other speakers stressed the role played by media in selecting stories seen as newsworthy. “Maybe media are not telling us what we should think, but at least they are telling us about what we should think,” said GSRL director Philippe Portier.



Lövheim sees the media becoming the main source of information on religion as religious influence declines in Scandinavian countries. Stewart Hoover (Center for Media, Religion and Culture, University of Colorado) emphasizes the loss of control over symbols and the vanishing frontier between what is sacred/private and what is public in the age of media. Similarly, Willaime explains that it has become impossible to keep communication under control and inside institutions. Yet since the public sphere becomes more and more a media sphere, there is also a struggle for visibility, i.e. the need to be present in the media in order to have an impact. According to Hoover, it would be wrong to think that new media will make traditional media insignificant: the former are remaining in a central place in a changing environment.

Waldensians face new challenges in pluralistic and ecumenical Italy

The Waldensian Church, considered the oldest Protestant body in the world, is facing a mixed picture of growing urban churches and declining rural ones in its home country of Italy. The Waldensians started out as a perfectionist and egalitarian sect in the Middle Ages that merged with the Reformation in the 15th century, becoming first a Calvinist and then an ecumenical church body (for instance, merging with the Italian Methodists). The *Lutheran Forum* magazine (Spring) reports that Waldensian growth patterns fall into three categories: first, in its traditional heartland in the Piedmont region of Italy, these congregations face a religious life close to the standard of secularized Europe; less than 10 percent of the Protestant population attends Sunday services and participate in the life of the church. Secondly, congregations of 100–500 members in large metropolitan areas experience higher regular attendance (up to 50 percent of their members) and show a lively cultural and spiritual life. “The congregation is seen not only as a worshipping religious community but also as a kind of embassy for the Protestant tradition in the town. The pastor...is often called to speak at public, academic, and ecumenical events,” writes Waldensian theologian Fulvio Ferrario. These congregations are more likely to draw former Catholics and agnostics, as well as new immigrants from South America, Africa, and Asia.



The third pattern concerns the sharply declining small rural churches, which due to secularization and migration to cities appear to have the least promising future. Because Protestantism is still an unknown entity to many Italians, the Waldensian Church, with only about 25,000 members in Italy, “plays a role out of proportion to its numbers. Its diaconal and cultural activities are thriving, its ecumenical engagement as well,” Ferrario writes. But on the whole, its form of Protestantism “appears quite complex, dialectical and difficult for large numbers of people to understand and share...[while] evangelical movements and Pentecostal churches grow by presenting a simpler reading of the Christian message, which seems to have a strong appeal, and not only among immigrants.” Much may rest on whether immigrants and their children will adapt to a form of Protestantism quite different from familiar forms (for instance on the issue of women in the ministry). Meanwhile, Pope Francis’s recent visit to a congregation in Turin last year, where he asked for forgiveness for past actions against Waldensians, may be a sign that both communions are ready to engage in greater dialogue and joint action on social issues, as already seen in the church joining with Catholic organizations on the migration crisis.

(*Lutheran Forum*, 6059 Elk Creek Rd., Delhi, NY 13753)

Church taxes in Germany generate considerable income and mainline decline

Since 2010, the number of people leaving mainline churches in Germany has continued to rise, writes Sylvie Toscer-Angot in *Eurel* (Feb.), an academic website based in Strasbourg, France, that provides updates on sociological and legal developments in the field of religion in European countries. Leaving one of the mainline churches represents a purely administrative move in Germany; one simply needs to request to have one's affiliation removed from the civil register. Once done, the former Catholic or Protestant no longer has to pay a percentage of his or her income to churches. These taxes (*Kirchensteuer*) are collected by taxation services on behalf of churches as well as a few minor religious groups such as Jews, against an administrative fee varying between 2 to 4.5 percent of the amount collected. Church taxes represent 8 to 9 percent of a taxpayer's income taxes. In 2014, mainline churches were thus able to receive more than 10 billion euros (5.7 billion euros for the Catholic Church and 5.07 billion euros for the Protestant Church), above the previous peak of 2007. Church sources estimate that church taxes represent approximately half of the total income of the mainline Protestant Church in Germany (EKD, Evangelical Church in Germany). Despite the growing number of people giving up church membership, the amount collected by churches had been rising from 2011 to 2014 as a consequence of a relatively prosperous economic situation in the country (*Der Spiegel*, Dec 3, 2015). In addition to income, earnings on capital are taxable, too (above 801 euros for single people or 1,602 euros for couples).



Since 2015, the tax amount is directly withdrawn from one's bank based on information shared by tax authorities. Many have resented this cooperation between churches and banks. This resentment is probably a reason why a peak in church exits was reached in 2014, just before the introduction of this new tax-collecting method; 217,000 people left the Roman Catholic Church and 270,000 left the Protestant Church, compared to 118,000 and 138,000 respectively in 2012. According to Toscer-Angot, however, while the issue of church taxes partly paid automatically from bank accounts has contributed to accelerate the move toward leaving churches, this small exodus should be seen primarily as an indicator of a declining attachment to historical Christian churches among a growing part of German population.

(<http://www.eurel.info/spip.php?article2761> – additional data has been provided by an article by Hanno Mussler on church taxes, published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Aug 16, 2014). For a short, but more detailed, factual description of the *Kirchensteuer* system in Germany, Jens Petersen, "The system of church tax in Germany" (<http://www.steuer-forum-kirche.de/church-tax-short.pdf>).

The ‘French connection’ in rising Sunni Islamic militancy

The terrorist attacks in Paris and more recently in Brussels are leading investigators to look at the Francophone factor in the spread of Sunni Islamic extremism in the world, write William McCants and Christopher Meserole in the Brookings Institution blog *Order from Chaos* (March 25). The researchers looked at the number of Sunni foreign fighters from various countries (to places such as the Islamic State), as well as the number of attacks carried out from within these nations, and found that the best predictor of foreign fighter radicalization was whether the country was Francophone, that is, whether French was its national language. McCants and Meserole add that by studying the proportion of radicals in a Muslim population rather than just the numbers of these individuals, Belgium alone “produces far more foreign fighters than either the United Kingdom or Saudi Arabia.”



Even more than a country’s wealth and level of education, it is the French political culture and its aggressive secularism that is the most significant factor in producing Islamist violence, according to the researchers. France and Belgium are the only two European countries to ban the full veil in their public schools. They are also the only two nations in Western Europe to fail to gain the highest rating for democracy. The “Francophone effect” is actually strongest in countries that are the most developed, with high standards of healthcare and literacy. McCants and Meserole conclude that when combining cities with pockets of high youth unemployment, such as Paris and Brussels, plus the “strident French approach to secularism, Sunni radicalism is more appealing.”

(*Order from Chaos*, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos>)

Saudi Reforms in the Muslim world meet resistance, facing schisms?

Saudi leaders have been attempting to introduce reforms and exercise more control on the forms of Islam they have been funding, especially in the wake of terrorism striking close to home, as well as falling oil prices, but such efforts may have polarizing effects, writes Yves Gonzalez-Quijano (University of Lyon, France) in his blog, *Culture et politique arabes* (March 2 and 11). In early March, as they were leaving the Western Mindanao University compound in the Philippines, Saudi Muslim preacher A’id Al-Qarni, along with a religious attaché of the Embassy of Saudi Arabia, were shot in an attempted assassination. While this attack had a large impact in the Arabic-speaking world (1 million tweets commented on the incident, and Al-Qarni has 12 million followers on Twitter), and the Saudi King sent a special plane for bringing the wounded cleric back home, it remained nearly unnoticed in Western media. This reveals the ignorance in the West about religious developments among leaders in Saudi Arabia, Gonzalez-Quijano writes.

There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia and its successful export of Wahhabi Islam have left a lasting mark on Arab minds and identities. The dominant intellectual models inherited from the 19th century Arab Renaissance (*nahda*) have been replaced with other, religiously-based references. In North African Maghreb countries, the Malikite school of jurisprudence used to be considered as fully orthodox, but zealots in Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, or Libya now claim that it is not “pure” and strict enough and want to see it replaced with Wahhabi interpretations, based on teachings coming from the Gulf area. A real “religious market” has grown, with Muslim clerical “stars” preaching on an international travel circuit — as illustrated by the attempt on the life of Al-Qarni while he was visiting Muslim areas of the Philippines. The views promoted by those popular clerics have been relayed for decades now by many local authors and preachers in each area, leading to a slow transformation of the understanding of Islam.

In a lecture given at the Institute of South Asian Studies and reprinted in Singapore’s *Straits Times* newspaper (March 13), scholar James M. Dorsey concurs with Gonzalez-Quijano’s assessment. He remembers his first visit to Saudi Arabia 40 years ago and his initial conclusion that the Saudi ruling family couldn’t last. Dorsey remains convinced that it cannot last but admits that it has greater resilience than expected due to “the Faustian bargain they made with the Wahhabis.” The campaign to spread the Wahhabi worldview



“is central to Saudi soft power policy and the Al Saud’s survival strategy,” Dorsey said. By the 1980s, it had established Salafism “as an integral part of the global community of Muslims.” Even a number of non-Wahhabi Muslims has integrated some concepts from Wahhabism. But Saudi reforms may be difficult to achieve within the constraints of Wahhabi religious doctrines, and the genie may be out of the bottle: the Wahhabis and the Saud family are nearing a crunch point that might spark more militant splits, with an impact on Muslim communities worldwide.

(*Culture et politique arabes* - <http://cpa.hypotheses.org>; *The Straits Times*, <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/creating-frankenstein-the-saudi-export-of-wahhabism>)

Soccer both a target and tool in jihadists' arsenal

Under the Islamic State (IS) as well as Al Qaeda, soccer stadiums have re-emerged as preferred jihadist targets, but, at the same time, the game has become a potent tool in their recruitment efforts, according to a study in the *American Behavioral Scientist* (online version, March 2). Last month's bombing at a soccer stadium in Iraq by IS was just one in a series of attacks against soccer matches by jihadists stretching back to Al Qaeda's plans to strike the 1998 World Cup. Scholar James M. Dorsey writes, "Many jihadists see soccer as an infidel invasion designed to distract the faithful from fulfilling their religious obligations. Yet others are soccer fans or former, failed or disaffected players who see the sport as an effective recruitment and bonding tool." Jihadists such as Osama Bin Laden were advocates of the game, seeing it as fulfilling Islamic precepts of maintaining a healthy body, though they were not hesitant to target stadiums with violence. Self-declared IS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (once a talented soccer player himself) has banned the game in its territory but uses soccer in IS recruiting videos.

There have even been jihadist attempts to transform soccer, as in the case of a controversial 2005 Internet ruling from Saudi Arabia that called for the Muslim version of the game to forsake uniforms, ordering players to spit on anyone scoring a goal, and that fouls and disputes be adjudicated on the basis of the Sharia. But most importantly, soccer teams and clubs have served as informal networks creating strong bonds of trust among potential jihadist recruits. Scott Atran of the University of Michigan says that being a member of an "action-oriented group of friends," such as "soccer buddies," is a reliable predictor of whether or not someone joins the jihad. There have been a number of European players from immigrant backgrounds who have radicalized,



including five East Londoners of Portuguese descent who are believed to have produced IS's gruesome videos of beheadings. Add to that the long-time European, and particularly French, fears about immigrant soccer violence, and it is not difficult to see how the lines can blur in many minds between soccer fandom and jihadists. A successful attack against a match in Europe "would go a long way to achieve IS's goals of polarizing communities, exacerbating social tensions, and driving the marginalized further into the margins," Dorsey adds.

(*American Behavioral Scientist*, <http://abs.sagepub.com/>)

The politics of managing majority and minority religions in the Caucasus

Twenty five years after the end of the USSR, it is clearer how religious minorities in the Caucasus region have adjusted to environments in which new national identities have succeeded the Soviet common identity and how such pluralism is “managed” by majorities in power. Each country of the Caucasus has a clear majority religious group: Shia Islam in Azerbaijan (around 62.8 percent of the population), Orthodox Christianity in Georgia (around 82 percent), and Armenian Apostolic Christianity in Armenia (around 92 percent). The February issue of the Swiss-based *Caucasus Analytical Digest* pays special attention to how religious minorities are interacting with majority faith in the area. In Azerbaijan, Slavic-Orthodox Christians make up around 1.5 percent of the population, primarily located in and around the capital, Baku. Once a “dominant minority” until the end of the USSR, many Orthodox left following independence in 1991, though they were not specifically targeted, writes Bruno De Cordier (University of Ghent). But at this point, a majority of those remaining intend to stay. The level of regular religious practice among Orthodox Christians in Azerbaijan is low (3.7 percent weekly attendance), but many consider Orthodoxy a crucial part of their Russian identity. A significant part of that population (around one-sixth) follows other churches, especially the newer Protestant or charismatic-Pentecostal denominations, although their growth has stabilized in the past few years.

In Georgia, Muslims are a minority (4.6 Shia and 5.2 percent Sunni). Consisting of specific ethnic groups (including Adjarians of Georgian ethnicity as a legacy of Ottoman times), they settled in rural areas and are still not “perceived to be full members of the Georgian nation,” writes Inga Popovaite (University of Iowa), since Georgian Orthodox Christianity tends to be seen as fundamental to Georgian national identity. Among Muslims of Azeri origins (both Shia and Sunni), the largest segment of Muslims in Georgia, there is a religious



revival, with more young than old people visiting mosques. While old people are usually attached to Sufism, younger generations are being drawn to Salafism, popularized by refugees from the Chechen Wars of the 1990s. Moreover, young Azeris who have trained abroad are running institutions (Shia as well as Sunni) funded from abroad (Iran, Iraq, and Turkey). The case of Adjarians is peculiar due to their Georgian ethnicity: a significant trend has been for parts of that population to “revert” to the Georgian Orthodox faith of their forefathers—thus Islam is rather in retreat in Adjara.

Despite the strong link between Orthodox Christianity and Georgian identity, Popovaite adds that things are changing for Muslims in Georgia: not only have they recently started to receive some state funding (that the Georgian Orthodox Church has enjoyed for a longer time), but a representative Administration of Georgian Muslims has been established in 2011, and a State Agency for Religious Issues has been created by the current administration for ensuring religious freedom and non-discrimination, although it has not yet gained public prominence. Educational

efforts are also being developed for the benefit of minority groups. It remains to be seen if the influential Georgian Orthodox Church will also adjust to a more inclusive narrative, Popovaite concludes.

(*Caucasus Analytical Digest* - <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/cad.html>)

Findings & Footnotes

- The *Muslim World* devotes its January issue to the growth of fissures and sectarianism in Islamic societies generated by the Arab Spring. While the divide between Sunni and Shia forms of Islam is the most obvious source of widening schism in the Middle East and North Africa, contributors also look at more recent clashes within and between purist Wahhabi and more extremist Islamic movements, and the conflicts between Muslims, non-Muslim (Christian and Druze), and secular groups and actors in Turkey, Egypt, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Lebanon. Even as the sources of division and sectarianism run deep, the Arab Spring's tendency to legitimize stirrings toward direct democracy and majority rule is widely viewed as triggering the crisis. The contributors are less united in explaining why sectarianism is such a potent transnational force even in Islamic societies not directly involved in the Arab uprisings. The introduction to the issue notes that prominent political scientists and historians still discard the role of sectarian disputes in driving the current imbroglio, yet the rising tide of preachers, pundits, and other "sectarian entrepreneurs" who have the ear of politicians and governments frame their political claims "with repeated references to age-old theological disputes and scores to be settled." For more information on this issue, visit:



<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/muwo.2016.106.issue-1/issuetoc>

- There has been no shortage of books and studies critiquing Islamic restrictions on the social and religious activities of women, most often involving the various symbolic and political meanings of head coverings and clothing. The new book *Women, Leadership, and Mosques* (Brill, \$213), edited by Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach, stands out in providing a detailed examination of women actually involved in leadership roles in the largely conservative, day-to-day world of Islam. In the Introduction, Kalmbach discusses how there is something of a tradeoff regarding women and Islamic institutions: they can stand outside and explicitly critique gender norms in Islamic societies and institutions, but it is likely they will draw an audience of those who already welcome that message. This book shows that women who choose the less overt route of working within existing Islamic

structures, thereby expanding their influence within communities that may reject female leadership, face different challenges.

Some of the expressions of women's leadership are quite unique, as shown in the chapters on women-only mosques in China and Turkey's recent policy of appointing government approved women preachers in mosques and surrounding communities alongside male colleagues. More often, female Muslim leaders face people—men and women—who resist their roles as leaders and scholars, have to build “audiences from scratch” in communities where women do not normally attend the mosque, and compete with long-standing organizations that have gained the allegiance of women. In return, they may get more respect from their male colleagues and official and unofficial constituencies. A case study in this struggle is the chapter on Saudi Arabia, where the state's policy of exclusion and segregation has actually facilitated the rise of female preachers in new parallel female religious spaces (both physical and virtual). Other chapters include studies on women preachers in a wide variety of countries (from India to Morocco), women's leadership in Quranic circles and on the Internet in Saudi Arabia, a women's revival movement in Syria, and women's activism on leadership roles in American Islamic groups.

On/File: A continuing record of new movements, groups, people, and events impacting today's religion

The Brooklyn, NY, based **Pop-up Shabbat** is the latest in an ongoing trend of dinner-based congregations, but in this case the Jewish communal meal is not free and forms only one part of its operation. Building on the Silicon Valley business model of developing “engaged community, high quality content and commercial products,” Pop-Up Shabbat was started by Danya Cheskis-Gold, who sought to create an inclusive community outside traditional synagogues, denominations, or rabbis where participants did not feel obligated to commit theologically. Cheskis-Gold calls the gatherings “Jew-ish” in that they are not formally Jewish (with two of the co-founding team being non-Jews). Each gathering requires a ticket for admission, lasts 3–4 hours, and mixes socializing, music, and family-style dining with elements of the Shabbat tradition (including a blessing), usually in partnership with local food and beverage outlets. Alongside Pop-Up Shabbat, Cheskis-Gold publishes a community newsletter called “The Ish” and is working on a commercial offer to complete her strategy. (Source: *Studying Congregations* blog, March 28)



The **Marrakesh Declaration** has been hailed as a breakthrough statement on Muslim support for religious freedom and condemnation of terrorism. Western and Arab Christians have lauded the declaration, signed by a group of Muslim scholars in Morocco this January, as a first step in moderate Islam addressing radicalization and discrimination against religious minorities. The declaration makes use of Islamic sources to condemn extremism, grounding its call in the Charter



of Medina, Muhammad's A.D. 622 agreement with Jews and Christians to live together and respect their religious rites. The declaration calls on politicians and clerics to reinforce the concept of citizenship and asks educators to address extremist messages in school curriculum. Both Christian and Muslim leaders agree that a mechanism

for spreading the declaration's message is crucial, particularly to imams and pastors who are the gateway to their communities. (Source: *Christianity Today*, April)