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**ISR in Focus/ Jeff Levin on the prevalence of healing prayer**

*With this issue, we are pleased to introduce an occasional feature giving space for ISR scholars to discuss their current research on contemporary religion. For this month, we contacted Dr. Jeff Levin, University Professor of Epidemiology and Population Health and Director of the Program on Religion and Population Health at Baylor, about his current research on the prevalence of healing prayer among Americans.*

**In a recent study based on an analysis of the Baylor Religion Survey, you find that Americans engaging in healing prayer are very widespread-- almost three-quarters of Americans have prayed for the healing of others, and over half have participated in prayer groups. Do you think there has been a steady percentage of Americans engaging in these practices all along, or has it grown in recent years?**



Possibly both, but it's hard to say. Based on data from a few national health surveys since the 1990s, use of spiritual healers seems to be on the uptick. This isn't the same thing, of course, as personally praying for one's own healing or for others, but it suggests perhaps a rise in interest in making use of spiritual resources for purposes of healing. This would track with the rising popularity of complementary medicine as a form of primary care, and with continued interest in nonconventional expressions of spirituality. At the same time, the lifetime prevalence numbers are so high that it's hard to imagine this all just emerged, out of nowhere, in the recent past.

**You also find unexpectedly that over a quarter of Americans have experienced or have engaged in the "laying on of hands" in healing prayer. Could the growth of small groups and charismatic and Pentecostal churches in the past few decades have spread these types of practices to more people?**

Maybe, to a modest extent, but I don't believe this accounts for its ubiquity. I'm doing some follow-up analyses, for a medical journal audience, and without divulging the numbers—still a work in progress—the data suggest that healing prayer, including laying-on-of-hands, is widespread and highly prevalent across almost all major religions, Christian denominations, and different categories of religious identity or theology. So this isn't just a phenomenon observed in,

say, Pentecostals or charismatics or the few New-Agers still around. These folks, even added together, can't come close to accounting for the proportion of this country that's involved in this.

**More than socio-demographic factors, you find that it is the respondents' claim to experience a personal and loving relationship with God that leads to high rates of healing prayer. Why is that?**

This was interesting and unexpected. I tested several hypothesized predictors, including the usual array of



religious constructs, and this was the one consistent predictor. I suspect it has something to do with the psychodynamics or other properties of love or loving—e.g., that the experience of feeling loved by God could mobilize psycho-physiological resources that are salutogenic, or that communal healing prayer could reduce loneliness or fear and provide hope, which may also be capable of healing. Who knows? But, either way, these sorts of mechanisms might reinforce participation.

**While your research doesn't deal directly with the controversial question of efficacy, you do conclude that there must be some level of efficacy involved in these high rates of healing prayer; can you explain that?**

Well, I can't prove or disprove it—this wasn't one of those controversial randomized controlled clinical trials of prayer, just a population survey. But the persistence and widespread use suggest that folks are getting something meaningful from the experience, whether actual “healing”—and that's a multifaceted concept right there that we could discuss at length—or some other sense of comfort in the face of acute or chronic physical challenge, and whether from the act of healing prayer itself, or as a sequela of the cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal gains from participating with other people in such a meaningful and perceived-as-holy activity.

**You write that the high rates of healing prayer suggest "ongoing religious activity beneath the surface...that is not typically captured by simple religious affiliation questions in social surveys or opinion polls." Has this trend just been overlooked by researchers and pollsters, or not seen as significant?**

I suspect both. Healing prayer is probably tacitly thought of as marginal or fringe—even akin to snake handling—because of its presumed association with TV faith healers and the like. But, as these findings suggest, it's far from marginal. Healing prayer is “normative” religious experience for Americans, if anything is, even if it doesn't cross the radar of secular and religiously disaffected cultural elites.

**Any future plans to expand on this research, and, if so, in what directions?**

Two things. The current follow-up analysis that I mentioned earlier. Also, I plan to look at other health-related or health-directed practices not typically assessed in national population surveys of

religion, but which are available in the Baylor Survey, e.g., the prevalence of mediation in this country, overall and by subtypes. I wonder if we'll observe unexpectedly high rates there, too.

### ***Amoris Laetitia*—signaling flexibility or uncertainty and disunity in global Catholicism?**

Both critics and supporters have recognized that Pope Francis's new document *Amoris Laetitia* stands out from previous papal pronouncements for its flexible approach on such matters as the reception of church sacraments among the divorced and remarried. But what, if anything, will this document change in the relationship between the Vatican and world Catholicism on contested pastoral issues? *The Economist* (April 10) notes the "generous tone" of the papal letter (it is not a full-blown encyclical); even as it lays down traditional teachings likely to make conservatives happy (affirming the ban on contraception and disapproval of gay marriage), it takes a more tolerant tone in regard to those living in "irregular situations" (such as unapproved remarriages and gay Catholics), saying that such individuals should receive the church's assistance, including participation in the sacraments in some cases. Thus, the document is suited to a world church seeking moral rules but also recognizing that they may have to be bent in widely differing contexts. In the *New York Times* (April 11), Lamin Sanneh, a Yale scholar of global Catholicism, agrees: the document "signals a cautious but important shift" to the "devolution of power to the local church." Sanneh even argues that "by design there is a crack in the door" left by the document that may allow further liberalization on the issues involving gay and divorced Catholics.



While not all of the conservative Catholic media criticized the document, *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat took particular aim at the way *Amoris Laetitia* represents a weakening of papal leadership and church unity. In his column in the *Sunday New York Times* (April 10), Douthat argues that Francis has embraced an unofficial "truce" that has long existed in Roman Catholicism: the

Vatican's consistent teaching has reassured conservatives that the church is still essentially unchanging, while the "flexibility and soft heterodoxy of many pastors and parishes and Catholic institutions enables liberal Catholics to feel reasonably at home while they wait for Rome to 'evolve' in their direction." The pope's letter in effect endorses this truce, saying that the tension and separation between doctrine and practice is "clearly a hoped-for source of renewal, revival and revitalization." He concludes that the "new truce may be even shakier than the old one. In effectively licensing innovation rather than merely tolerating it...it promises to heighten the church's contradictions rather than contain them. ...Francis doubtless intends this language as a bridge between the church's factions, just dogmatic enough for conservatives but perpetually open to more liberal interpretations," but it is not likely to offer a "center" that will permanently hold together a "deeply divided church."



## The rise of the “wishful Amish” and Anabaptist fandom

Although actually joining the Amish and other “plain” Anabaptist groups may be “one of the rarest religious experiences in America,” interest in these groups is growing, approaching almost a state of fandom on the Internet, reports the online magazine *Atlas Obscura* (March 29). The emergence of what author Kelsey Osgood refers to as “wishful Amish” is evident in their dedicated Internet forums “on which they write with the feverishness of the unrequited lover about their long-held desire to get close to the aloof objects of their spiritual desire. Many say they’ve wanted to become Amish for ‘as long as [they] could remember,’ though most of them say they have only seen Amish people on a few occasions, and don’t know much, if anything at all, about Amish theology.” Many of the wishful Amish never make the step of visiting, let alone converting, to the Amish, yet there is an “intrepid bunch of spiritual seekers who manage to go the distance.” Some of these converts have even become “celebrities” among the wishful bystanders, such as Marlene Miller, author of the memoir *Called to Be Amish*. Osgood adds that there are some Amish communities that are more receptive to converts than others; the settlements in Unity, Maine, and Oakland, Maryland, are traditionally more welcoming to seekers than the more established ones in Lancaster County in Pennsylvania and Holmes, Wayne, and Guernsey Counties in Ohio. Still, Osgood finds that the converts often feel like misfits in a culture of “effortless identity” honed by centuries of habit and devotion.

In the current issue of the *Review of Religious Research* (March), sociologist Cory Anderson looks more closely at these wishful Amish and other Anabaptist “seekers” and finds a range of factors drawing them. Anderson collected his data from seeker inquiries on a website about plain Anabaptists that he created, drawing together 1,074 responses. As for the



demographics of the respondents, Anderson found young women to be the largest subgroup, as well as evangelicals (particularly Baptists and non-denominational Christians). Among the most common drawing points for the women was not so much domesticity but the Amish/Mennonite stress on femininity (as expressed in dress) and the high degree of “family control” given to couples who want to socialize their offspring effectively. Other appealing factors included Anabaptist conservatism and “primitivism,” as in regard to use of technology. Anderson notes that while the

“fundamentalists” among the respondents may be viewing the Amish through their own Christian right perspective, most of the seekers value the strong sense of Christian devotion they see in this tradition. Anderson concludes that the Anabaptist seeker trend may point to something beyond nostalgia and wishful thinking; just as the Anabaptists drew a large wave of members in the early 1900s, a similar phenomenon fanned by tumultuous change may have emerged at the other end of the century.

(*Atlas Obscura*, <http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/can-an-outsider-ever-truly-become-amish>; *Review of Religious Research*, <http://link.springer.com/journal/13644>)

## Satanic Temple’s risky secularist activism

Since its founding in 2013, the Satanic Temple movement has gained considerable publicity in its drive for strict church separation and de-Christianization, but its political effectiveness is uncertain, and it is just as likely to provoke a backlash, writes sociologist Joseph Laycock in the web magazine *The Conversation* (April 19). In its latest publicity campaign, the Satanic Temple linked up with the producers of popular period horror film *The Witch*, collaborating on a four city tour, called the Sabbath Cycle, where the screenings were followed by politically driven satanic rituals. Such sensational “stunts” are used to raise political awareness about what its leaders see as the dangers of conservative Christian influence in public life. But Laycock finds that some members insist that while the movement is atheistic, the group has adopted quasi-religious values, concerns, and symbols (such as Satan as a symbol of rebellion). The movement has also gained a steady following, now having 17 chapters in the U.S. and Europe, claiming an estimated 100,000 members—a number derived from membership cards purchased and other lines of online support. Laycock finds that the members tend to come from conservative Christian backgrounds and see their veneration of Satan as representing moral autonomy and personal responsibility.



The group has launched a wide range of actions, most recently citing various state laws based on the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to demand accommodations for Satanists, such as recently claiming exemptions from laws dictating a waiting period before having an abortion. But Laycock notes that the Satanic Temple’s campaign is leading to a backlash; conservative news sites, such as Breitbart.com, have given the group heavy coverage, using their extreme rhetoric as fodder for anti-abortion activists. Conservatives claim the Satanic Temple proves what they have always said about their opponents being demonic. Meantime, more unchurched and secular populations may

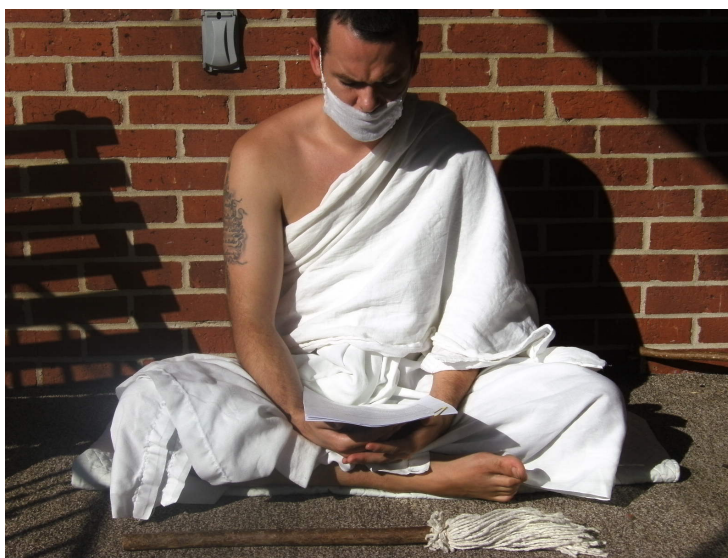
be indifferent to join such causes, though the more diverse generation represented by millennials may be more open to the movement's critique, Laycock concludes.

(*The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com>)

## **Jainism—an old religion appeals to modern science and academia with competing agendas**

Appeals to science and academia are being put to use in Jainism both by reformers who challenge religious authorities and by supporters of traditional views, with the authority of science being “paradoxically challenged by references to science and academia,” writes Knut Aukland (University of Bergen, Norway) in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (March). Looking for sources of legitimacy in secular knowledge can be found both in new religious movements and in older religions. In the case of Jainism, Aukland pays attention both to (interrelated) “scientization” and “academization.” Scientization refers to an appeal to modern science by proponents of a religion, especially in the field of natural science. Academization describes at the same time the establishment of institutions modeled on academia, the creation of ties with academia, and the invitation for academic appraisals by members of a religion, sometimes connected to humanities (especially history, archaeology, and philology). While it is not surprising to see contemporary Jain (or other) believers claim that their religion is “scientific,” Aukland’s research suggests that this should be seen as more than rhetoric: it leads to deeper changes with a reformulation, reinterpretation, and re-imagination of one’s religion.

The fact that Jain canonical writings are considered as authoritative and show a systematic tendency may encourage such an approach since the scriptures are seen as compatible with modern science. The founding figures of Jainism are thus described as “scientists” or “ascetic-scientists;” ancient saints are alleged to have become aware of quantum mechanics long before modern science was born, for instance. Such views have become widespread among Jains, even those who do not engage with modern science. There are also occasional references to alternative science. As early as the 1920s, Indian universities were approached for establishing positions in the newly invented field of “Jainology” (a goal reached three decades later). At a later point, Jains also launched their own academic institutions. Efforts toward scientization and academization have consequences: one can observe a switch from an emphasis on rituals to a more reflective approach of religion. “For some advocates of scientization, being a Jain becomes an



intellectual endeavor,” writes Aukland. While mere claims of Jainism as being scientific do not involve deep changes, discipline-specific appeals lead to reinterpretations; bringing Jainism in dialogue with modern science means extracting doctrines out of their traditional surroundings in a quest for new relevance. The philosophical parts of Jain scriptures are given preference over ritual and mythological parts. Some advocates of scientization feel that they could reach “pristine Jainism,” which is seen as rational. Moreover, since Jain monastics are usually not trained in modern science and academia, those developments offer a potential challenge to their authority or lead to the perceived need to include science in the curriculum of Jain monks. But Aukland also mentions conservative reactions (even polemics against the heliocentric cosmos or the theory that the Earth is round in an attempt to defend traditional cosmography). Not unlike some Christians in the U.S., such circles also appeal to science and academia in their fight against modern science, thus showing “how scientization and academization do not point in one simple direction, but feed into different theological projects, traditional or novel,” Aukland concludes.

*(Journal of the American Academy of Religion, <https://www.aarweb.org/publications/journal-american-academy-religion>)*



## CURRENT RESEARCH

● **University of Notre Dame researchers find that the rise in the non-affiliated, or “nones,” in the U.S. may be related to the strong in-group ties that non-affiliated individuals may form at the onset of young adulthood, especially in a religious environment.** In the current issue of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (December), researchers Brandon Sepulvado, Michael Penta, David Hachen, and Omar Lizardo study the in-group ties (known as homophily) of 200 Catholics, nones, and other-affiliated Notre Dame students through tracking their smart phone use, as well as surveying them on their attitudes and beliefs. The effect of in-group ties was especially significant for the nones, showing that the unaffiliated individuals are less likely to connect to persons who claim a religious affiliation. The in-group ties were present for the other-affiliated students, but not as strong as in the case of the nones. Sepulvado and colleagues conclude that “nones are disproportionately more likely to connect to other nones and much less likely than chance to connect to affiliated students.” This likelihood may especially be the case in a context in which religious identification is salient. They argue that their research is important because it showed the formation of in-group ties in a “new setting at a point in the life course likely to generate long-standing relationships.”



(*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*,  
[http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1468-5906](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1468-5906))

● **A study of students, parents, and teachers at Muslim high schools in the U.S. finds a close identification with American society and an appreciation of such institutions for encouraging critical reflection on matters of faith and society.** Charles L. Glenn of Boston University reports on a study he conducted of seven Muslim high schools in different regions of the country (representing one in four Islamic high schools in the U.S.; most Islamic schools are at the elementary level), specifically looking at the relationship between schooling and the formation of moral sensibilities among the young. In *First Things* magazine (April), Glenn writes that the students he and his colleagues interviewed often spoke about intergenerational tensions about how to practice Islam, with the clash often over the importance of retaining ethnic traditions and cultural practices of their country of origin. The students were more likely to value practicing a purer and more authentic version of their religion.



Rather than just practicing rote learning, these schools openly dealt with what a student called “real life Islam” and its connection to ethics and morals. Glenn writes that the shared worldview of these schools (like other religious schools) provides a “margin of safety for discussions on a deeper level than is often possible in public schools.” The researchers also found among students an “almost complete lack of interest in the



‘homeland’.... Indeed, more than one parent expressed frustration that their children were becoming ‘just like the Americans.’” Glenn and the other researchers found that the school staff made a concerted effort to shield their students from the “siren song of jihadism,” with the Islamic-studies classes themselves “serving as a prophylactic against becoming a mujahid (or jihadist).” He concludes that his team found “nothing to fear from the influence of Islamic schools on the ability of Muslim youth to make positive contributions to American society.” Even if they challenge certain aspects of society, they stand in the long tradition of “principled reform based on religious convictions.” (*First Things*, <http://www.firstthings.com>)

● **Diversity in congregations may depress church attendance, at least on a temporary basis, according to an article in the current issue of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (December).** Sociologists Kevin Dougherty, Brandon Martinez, and Gerardo Marti examined church attendance rates in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which since its formation



in 1988 has made a concerted effort to diversify its white, Northern European membership. Since 1993 the diversity in the typical ELCA congregation has doubled, although attendance has declined by 22 percent. After controlling for several other factors, Dougherty, Martinez, and Marti find that that congregations that became more diverse had fewer people attend, while churches that became more homogeneous were more likely to grow. The researchers note

that those congregations that were already diverse in 1993 did not decline. They also find that the decline was strongest in the 1990s. Those churches that are more homogeneous are now declining fastest, perhaps related to divisions over gay rights that have shaken the ELCA in the last decade.

● **The continuing growth of megachurches is partly due to their allowance of a the flexible participation of volunteers, tending to attract busy dual-earner high income couples, writes Duke University sociologist David Eagle in the *Christian Century* (April 13).** It is not strictly the wealthy suburban character of megachurches that draw these high income couples (making over \$100,000); citing the National Congregations Study, Eagle notes that “when comparisons are made between congregations across urban and suburban areas, this relationship holds up.” Megachurches don’t make many demands on families pulled in various directions, which may also account for their appeal. In his research, Eagle finds that large-church attenders are “significantly less likely to attend weekly worship than are their small-church counterparts”—a pattern which holds across denominations. The megachurches’ loosening bonds may be counterbalanced by ways megachurches often assume a larger public role and cultural influence in their areas, as seen in 2008 when the Saddleback Church hosted a presidential forum with the candidates.



(*Christian Century*, <http://www.christiancentury.org>)

● **Mosque attendance is not necessarily related to political disengagement of Muslim immigrant groups from society and may even increase civic involvement, at least in the case of the Netherlands, according to a study in the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (Volume 39, No. 5).** In Europe, religious observance among Muslims has more often been viewed as a barrier rather than a bridge to political involvement. Researchers Fenella Fleischmann, Borja Martinovic, and Magdalena Bohm examined direct and indirect effects of the frequency of religious service attendance in such areas as organizational participation, political trust, and voting intentions among a nationwide sample of Turkish and Moroccan minorities in the Netherlands.



The researchers found differences among the Turkish and the Moroccan Dutch Muslims. The Turks attending mosques were more likely to become involved in civic life outside of their ethnic group and to report higher voting rates than non-attenders. The Moroccan mosque attenders did report more civic involvement than the non-attenders, but such involvement did not stimulate

voting, although there was a weak increase of political trust.

(*Ethnic and Racial Studies*, <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rers20#.Vyd6ZqT2aM8>)



● **A Pew Research Center study finds that highly religious Americans are both different from and very much like their neighbors: they tend to volunteer more and are happier, but they are no more likely to exercise, recycle, or make consumer choices considered socially conscious.** The study finds that nearly half of those Americans claiming to pray and attend religious services regularly are more likely to gather with their extended families (compared to 3-in-10 of the less religious); two-thirds of the highly religious have donated money, time, or goods to help the poor compared to 41 percent who are less religious. Forty percent of the highly religious reported being “very happy” compared to 29 percent of the less religious. But in areas of interpersonal interactions (such as expressing anger), attention to health, fitness, and social and environmental consciousness, both the highly religious and less religious appeared very similar to each other.



(This report can be downloaded at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/04/12/religion-in-everyday-life>)

● **The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) has moved from a relatively apolitical church body to one both strongly Republican and more activist in a relatively short period of time.** *The Forum Letter* (April), a Lutheran newsletter, notes that a recent Pew Center poll finds that the LCMS is now one of the “most Republican” of denominations, with 59 percent of members identifying with the GOP, 27 percent with the Democrats, and 14 percent independent or other. The LCMS follows the Southern Baptist Convention, the Church of the Nazarene, and the Latter Day Saints as the most Republican church bodies. A study in the *Review of Religious Research* (March) traces the recent history of how LCMS pastors in particular have not only become more Republican but also more activist, a trend which may have influenced the laity.



Researchers Jeff Walz and Steve Montreal analyzed data from the Cooperative Clergy Survey from 2001 to 2009 and found that in the early years of the new millennium, LCMS pastors were conservative, but their “two kingdom” theology (that the church should focus on the gospel rather than politics) kept them from engaging in activism. While still eschewing preaching politics in church,

by 2009 clergy were considerably more active in such areas as praying publicly for political candidates, urging their congregations to vote, and participating in a protest march. Walz and Montreal write that the distinct nature of the 2008 elections may have been a factor in this change, but they note that in 2010 the LCMS elected a strongly conservative president, solidifying the rightward shift. They conclude that “The new breed of LCMS clergy that may be emerging is younger and even more theologically and politically conservative.”

(*Forum Letter*, ALPB, P.O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753-0327)

● **Twenty-two percent of the Swiss population say that they do not have a religion, but only 12 percent state that they are atheists, according to a recent survey.** Conducted from March to December 2014 by the Federal Statistical Office (FSO) on a representative sample (more than 16,000 interviews), the survey confirms deep changes in the religious structure of the Swiss population: in 1960, more than 98 percent of residents were either Reformed or Roman Catholics. Today, Roman Catholics make 38 percent, Reformed 26 percent, Muslims 5 percent, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox 2.2 percent, and evangelicals (not counting those within the Reformed Church) 1.7 percent. Beside religious diversification, the increase of unaffiliated people has been the most important change in Swiss religious landscape. The survey did more than record affiliation: it also paid attention to personal beliefs and practices. Nearly one in two people (46 percent) say that they believe in a single God and one in four in a higher power of some form. Forty-one percent of the population has attended a religious service between one and five times during the past year—mostly for social purposes, such as weddings or funerals.



Only 10.2 percent of the Swiss population attend religious services weekly—13.6 percent among Roman Catholics, 7.2 percent among Reformed, 11.6 percent among Muslims. In strong contrast, 72.3 percent of evangelical Christians report weekly attendance. Both for Roman Catholics and Reformed, weekly attendance is especially low in the age range from 15 to 34, fewer than 6 percent. Some 85 percent of evangelicals pray daily; among Roman Catholic, Reformed, and

Muslims, around 30 percent report praying daily (one or several times) or nearly daily. For the first time, a reliable survey asked a representative sample of the resident population of Switzerland about their views regarding evolution (i.e., if they consider “the theory of evolution of species as the most consistent explanation regarding the origins of mankind”). Nearly 19 percent of all people interviewed “don’t know.” Fifty-three percent of Roman Catholics, 54 percent of Reformed, and 69 percent of unaffiliated embrace the theory of evolution as the most consistent explanation, but only 14 percent of evangelical Christians and 26 percent of Muslims. Only 16.3 percent among Roman Catholics and 13.2 percent among Reformed report that their religious beliefs play a more



or less important role in their sexual life, compared with 64.6 percent among evangelicals and 42 percent among Muslims.

(The report along with statistical tables is available in all three Swiss national languages: French [<http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/fr/index/news/publikationen.html?publicationID=7007>], German [<http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/news/publikationen.html?publicationID=7004>], and Italian [<http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/it/index/news/publikationen.html?publicationID=7008>].)

## GENERAL ARTICLES

### Cuba's Catholics create capitalist culture

The Catholic Church may not be a strong force in challenging the Castro regime in Cuba, but it is increasingly serving as an incubator of capitalism and entrepreneurialism, writes Tim Padgett in the Jesuit magazine *America* (April 25). The Catholic Church has made a strong comeback in Cuban society since Pope John Paul first visited the country back in 1998. But because the “church still does not have the popular support to challenge the Castro regime on a political level, it has carved out a niche in the economic sphere. It is vying with Communism by teaching Cubans capitalism,” Padgett writes. The church is playing this role with the blessing of Cuba’s president, Raul Castro, who realizes that the Cuban Marxist apparatus is ill-equipped to instruct people in the art of businesses start-ups. More than half a million Cubans are self-employed business owners, and many are trained in leadership classes by church projects such as Cuba Emprende, which offers courses in various aspects of small business entrepreneurship.

Such classes also involve classes in business ethics, which even non-Catholics value for injecting a moral framework into the daily economic struggle, Padgett writes. This growing acceptance doesn’t mean that Catholic business programs find approval from the all or most of the Communist leaders. In 2011, when the church partnered with a Spanish university to offer MBA degrees, the program was shut down two years later because its popularity was troubling to the government. Still, the church projects see the momentum going their way. President Obama’s project to normalize relations with Cuba and influence democratic change depends on these new kinds of dissidents “whose economic independence undermines communist control. During his recent Havana visit, he patronized one such privately owned restaurant and “gave a shout-out to Cuba Emprende in his speech on Monday of Holy Week.”

(*America*, <http://americamagazine.org/>)



## Alawite base weakening for Assad and Syrian regime

The Alawite sect in Syria is seeking to reform its identity and is distancing itself from the regime of Bashar al-Assad, reports *BBC News* (April 3). The Alawites emerged in the 10<sup>th</sup> century in Iraq and were similar to other Shia Muslims in claiming that Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, was his rightful successor. But the Alawites purportedly claimed that Ali was a manifestation of God, which Syria's Sunni Muslims deemed heretical, but the sect has kept many of its beliefs in secrecy to avoid persecution. In a document obtained by the BBC, Alawite community and religious leaders stated that they want to "shine a light" on the movement after a long period of secrecy and claim a religious identity as a third model "of and within Islam," apart from the Shia tradition. The eight-page document also calls for a secular system in Syria where Christianity, Islam, and other religions are equal.



Although Alawites have dominated Syria's government and security services under the Assad regime, the statement says the legitimacy of his rule "can only be considered according to the criteria of democracy and fundamental rights." These changes reflect a broader shift of the Alawites away from the Assad regime, according to a report from the Middle East Media Research Institute, known as *MEMRI* (Feb. 4). The report notes the formation last November in Istanbul of "Upcoming Syria," the first Alawi movement to oppose the Assad regime. "The new movement aspires to collaborate with the Syrian revolution so as to secure...Alawi safety and their part in the future social and governmental makeup of the country," as well as form a new cadre of leaders in the sect who are independent from the regime. At the same time, there have been reports that Alawi officials have been in touch with neighboring countries such as Turkey and Israel in an attempt to gain guarantees for the safety of the sect in the period after Assad.

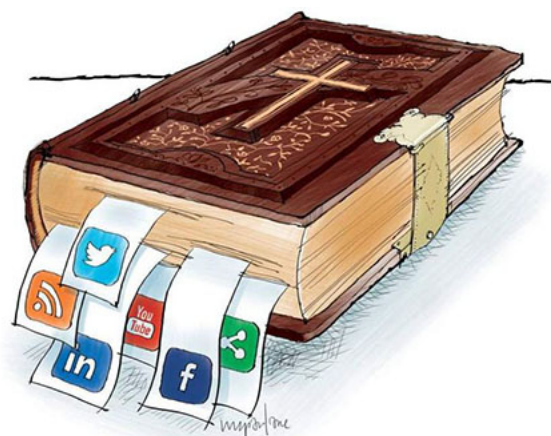
(*MEMRI*, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print8989.htm>)

## Findings & Footnotes

■ The report *Religion, Media, and the Digital Turn*, published by the Religion and the Public Sphere Program of the Social Science Research Council, provides an in-depth examination of the way the digitalization of religious scholarship changes the message and the audience of such research. While not exactly a new development (the authors note that digital religious scholarship can be traced back to the late 1940s when Jesuit Roberto Busa convinced IBM to give him access to the company's punch card technology to create a concordance of all of St. Thomas Aquinas's writings), religion has more recently lagged behind other fields in the humanities in digitalization. That disparity is changing as a loose network of academics, journalists, and other professionals have emerged that seek to harness technology to study religion and the role that technology plays in religious faith and practice. The report shows how the digitalization of religious scholarship has tended to blur the lines between popular (and journalistic) and scholarly interest and participation.

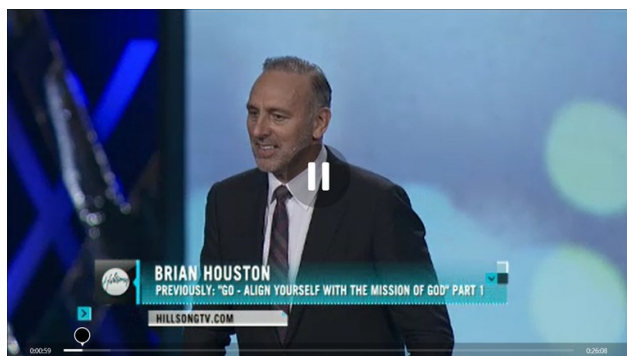
Just as religion scholars have taken to blogs, showcasing their research and analysis to peers and wider readerships, it is not uncommon for unschooled laypeople to participate in scholarly deliberations (as seen in the case of an IT professional in suburban Detroit becoming a key figure in the debate over the authenticity of a controversial sixth-century text known as the Gospel of Jesus's Wife). The report also looks at the new ways scholars are studying religion online, such as through Facebook and Twitter analysis, as well as how e-journals, e-books, podcasts, and more ambiguous endeavors often just called "projects," are challenging older print mediums and their protocols of peer review and approval. The report concludes with

a very useful listing of digital projects and publications in the study of religion. The report can be downloaded at: <http://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/religion-media-and-the-digital-turn/>



■ "Technologies of religious life" is the theme of the current issue of *Crosscurrents* (March), a journal of the Association of Religion and Intellectual Life. The articles cover a wide range of religions and how they interact with technology, from Sufi transmission of songs through to how African religious

traditions change when they are propagated online. In the case of the latter, having a website and Facebook page serves to legitimize African religious practitioners as "authentically African" to their followers while overriding traditional authorities and creating a transnational following. Especially noteworthy is Miranda Klaver's article on how the global Hillsong megachurch network creates "sermonic events," where real-time video casting of sermons have become an acceptable substitute for live preaching, which creates unity



throughout the network and also assists in church planting efforts. For more information on this issue, visit: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cros.2015.65.issue-4/issuetoc>



■ The current issue of *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* (March) is devoted to the work and findings of the Religion and Diversity Project, a seven-year study of religious pluralism and its social effects in Canadian society and abroad. The findings of the \$2.5-million project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and based at the University of Ottawa, have been disseminated in several books and in scholarly and popular publications. Especially noteworthy is an article summing up the preliminary findings on religious identity in Canada, which derive from a unique survey method that blended qualitative and quantitative approaches and focuses less on institutional practices and beliefs.



Among the findings is that while the standard ways of being religious are still dominant in Canada, there is a not insignificant population of people practicing their religions in eclectic and marginal ways, as well as a larger number of non-religious than previous research has tended to show. An interview with project director Lori Beaman confirms the latter point, as she notes that her team had not initially considered the growth of the non-religious and “nones” in their research plans and had to adjust accordingly. Another article provides practical guidance on disseminating scholarly research to a popular audience. For more information on this issue,

visit: <http://bulletin.equinoxpub.com/>

■ Valentina Napolitano’s new book *Transnationalism and the Roman Catholic Churches. Migrant Hearts and the Atlantic Return* (Fordham University Press, \$28.00) is a sophisticated attempt to understand the different and somewhat contradictory roles the Catholic Church has played—and continues to play—in ministering to migrant Latin American minorities in Rome. Blending extensive ethnographic fieldwork and historical interpretations, Napolitano’s work shows many of the perplexities in the Catholic understanding of contemporary human mobility, cultural difference, and multicultural sharing and faith. The book takes on the affective and subjective experiences of Catholic migrants attempting to live their faith in contexts other than those of their native cultural milieu and their struggle in adapting to strange—and many times hostile—institutional customs and settings. For Napolitano, tensions between adaptation to the Roman mode of Catholic practices and the need many migrants have to sustain their own local practices are at the core of the Church’s ability to retain the faithful. These tensions emerge also in processes of the infantilization of migrants by priests. Moreover, the complex relationship is especially difficult in Rome, where church authority and obedience are so important given the fact that the pope is the city’s bishop.

The book aims at illuminating the multiple exchanges and circulation of ideas, materialities, texts, and fantasies linking America, Europe, and the Mediterranean in what Napolitano calls an “Atlantic frame of analysis,” even though her ethnographic accounts tend to stress the importance migrants give to (their) local practices and the absence of institutional foundations to support them in



the Roman context. The book demonstrates the conflict the church faces while dealing with migration: its theological approach grounds migrants in a human rights discourse, granting them respect for their cultural differences and universalizing their Catholicism. Migrants, however, pose a challenge to the prevalent understanding of Catholic affects and practices in the European framework, since they tend to locate their subjectivity outside of the stiff margins provided by many of the Roman lay and religious organizations linked to the church itself. *Reviewed by Marisol Lopez-Menendez, a sociologist at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City and author of the forthcoming book, Miguel Pro: Martyrdom and Politics in 20th Century Mexico* (Rowman & Littlefield).

## On/File: A Continuing Record of Groups, Movements, Events, and People Shaping Contemporary Religion

1) The establishment of the **Multifaith Campus** at a mainline Protestant church on Long Island, New York, represents a novel experiment in different religions sharing the same worship space and using the experience as a source of interfaith education. The Brookville Reformed Church hosts the Muslim Reform Movement Organization, the New Synagogue of Long Island, and Interfaith Community of Long Island, which is an education program for interfaith families. These four congregations go beyond sharing costs in renting the sanctuary and fellowship hall. While not blending religions, the campus encourages mutual learning between the various traditions. There are other cases of Christians, Jews, and Muslims sharing spaces, such as the Tri-Faith Center in Omaha, Nebraska, and the House of One in Berlin, Germany. But Long Island's Multifaith Campus is more unusual because of the participation of the Interfaith Community—with approximately 100 members—in its various religious activities and services. As part of their education, the children of the community with one Christian and one Jewish parent (there are few interfaith families involving Muslims) are expected to attend at least one church service and one Shabbat service at the campus each month. The religious leaders on the campus also study together and officiate at life-cycle ceremonies for interfaith families, each involving themselves in their respective religious holy days and preaching in each other's congregations. (Source: *Washington Post*, April 14).



2) If it had taken place in Rome, it would have made headlines worldwide—the pope has stated that he lost faith and decided to leave the church and to marry. This pope, however, does not reside in Italy but in Spain: Gregory XVIII (Ginés Jesús Hernández Martínez) was crowned in 2011 in Palmar de Troya (Spain), headquarters of the **Palmarian Church**. Located in Andalusia, it had become a place of Marian apparitions in the late 1960s. Among the people it attracted, one Clemente Domínguez Gómez claimed to receive visions too and started a movement that came to break with the Roman Catholic Church. In 1976, along with close followers, he managed to receive episcopal consecration from a retired Vietnamese archbishop, which led to the excommunication of all involved and to a long series of consecrations of

Palmarian bishops. Following the death of Paul VI, Clemente was crowned Pope Gregory XVII by his followers. After he passed away, Peter II succeeded him (2005-2011), and then Gregory XVIII.

The Palmarian Church developed strong apocalyptic beliefs as well as several doctrines and practices of its own, including a revised, shorter Mass and its own Holy Palmarian Bible and Palmarian Creed. The movement spread across the world but grew increasingly closed and strict, enforcing strong regulations for the daily lives of Palmarian faithful (dress code, strong limitations to interaction with outsiders). As a consequence, the movement experienced schisms and lost many members; it may be down to 1,000 followers, around the huge basilica it built, says Magnus Lundberg of Uppsala University. In recent months, the ex-pope had attempted to introduce some liberal changes. The leader's apostasy comes as a huge blow to the movement. The Palmarian Secretary of State (a Swiss citizen, Markus Josef Odermatt) has become the new pope as Peter III and may continue with a liberalizing policy, according to Lundberg. At this point, little has filtered through regarding reactions inside the Palmarian Church, though Lundberg does not rule out either an exodus of members or the creation of splinter groups. (Source: *ABC de Sevilla*, April 30).

