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## FEATURE STORY:

*ISR in Focus/ Paul Froese on Meaning and Purpose*

*Religion Watch recently interviewed ISR fellow and Baylor University sociologist Paul Froese about his new book, **On Purpose: How We Create the Meaning of Life** (Oxford University Press, \$27.95).*

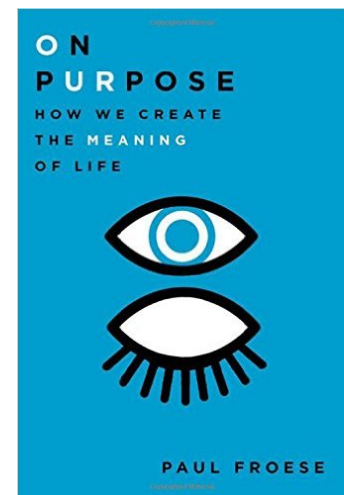
**RW:** *You have previously studied and written about religious repression in Russia and people's images of God. Was it a challenge to write on such a vast subject as life's meaning and purpose, especially for a sociologist?*

**Froese:** Writing a book on purpose was the hardest thing I have ever done because the breadth of the topic is infinite. That said, approaching the topic as a sociologist provided ballast. While in the weeds of endless philosophical complexity, I was always led back to the foundation of community and social context in determining each individual's system of values and meaning.

Each chapter delves into a different layer of meaning and begins with a question for the reader— it is intended to set the stage for the discussion that follows. They are 1) our shared assumptions about purpose, 2) the possibility of meaninglessness, 3) the ways in which people discover themselves, 4) the moral certitude some people feel, 5) the effects of social time, and 6) the limits of power in deciding our purposes.

**RW:** *Early on in the book, you discuss findings showing that secular countries have a lower rate of people claiming that life is meaningful but that such a deficit is distributed more toward the deprived in these societies. Can you explain that?*

**Froese:** Although religion is undeniably the source of meaning and purpose for most people in the world, it is not secularism per se which robs people of a sense of purpose. Rather it is the fact that modernity produced a plurality of existential choices, one of which is the possibility that



everything is meaningless. This possibility looms most precariously for those who live in isolation within wealthier countries, which tend to be more secular.

People in poverty within less modernized countries may live lives of untold desperation, but they are more likely to persist within a larger religious culture imbued with meaning. They may not be happy, but they feel purposeful. In contrast, the disadvantaged within wealthy countries suffer from not only relative deprivation but also existential deprivation. They persist within cultures that provide little meaning to those who are not successful; they feel left behind and useless within societies which derive their meaning from economic success and technological progress.

**RW:** *Yet in a secular country such as the Netherlands, you find that there is both a low rate of meaning and purpose but also that the Dutch are the least bored people in the world. On the other hand, people in the ex-communist region of the Caucasus, such as Georgia, are the most bored. So is it the case that well-off secular people have high levels of meaning?*

**Froese:** Well-off people, whether they are religious or secular, tend to express a clear purpose in life. This is because well-off people tend to live in communities that re-affirm their self-worth and significance to a larger purpose. Believers and non-believers alike seek to make sense of existence, particularly their own. Both tend to position the self in reference to something bigger than the self. The difference is that religious believers understand the self in relation to a decidedly supernatural realm. Secular individuals also envision transcendent concepts, like goodness and justice, but with no supernatural source. Still, both provide a sense of meaning.

A much deeper difference than our standard religious-secular differences is the extent to which people live within supportive communities. Religions tend to provide such communities, but secular cultures have them too. It is individuals who live within non-supportive communities who are most likely to suffer from existential despair. While conceptually distinct, boredom, depression, and despair are all influenced by one's connection to community. In certain regions of the world, a positive connection to community is simply harder to foster. The results are higher levels of boredom, depression, and despair.

**RW:** *How do Americans rate on these measures? And what relation does it have to the moderately high levels of U.S. religiosity?*

**Froese:** Religiosity is always related to higher levels of purpose for two reasons. First, religions tend to provide community; this is the most basic need in developing a satisfying purpose of life. Only with community can someone feel significant. Second, religions provide very specific and detailed systems of moral meaning. The fact that the United States is more religious than many other post-industrial countries explains why Americans are more likely to say they know their life purpose.

**RW:** *You don't seem to see the world becoming more disenchanting or secular as much as that people are becoming "self-enchanted." Can you explain that?*

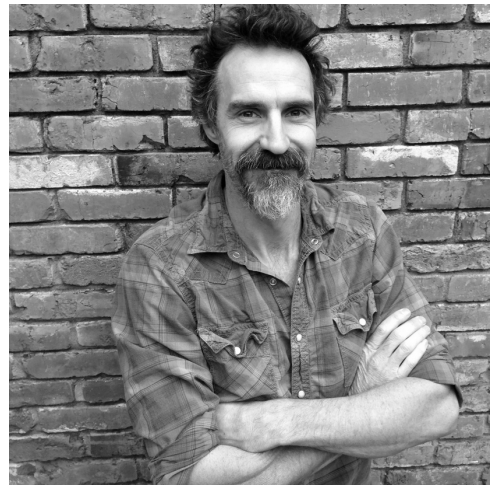
**Froese:** Modernity certainly undermines a lot of the magical and religious beliefs of the past. Modern educated people tend not to be fearful of a demon-haunted world; we also are less

bewitched by the same forms of mysticism that enchanted our ancestors. That said, enchantment lives on but in new forms. In the book, I discuss the emergence of the language of psychology that now pervades both secular and religious worldviews. Within this perspective, the self is rendered mysterious in the same ways that the material world had previously inspired mysticism. We now search for demons and revelations within self-discovery.

Religionists discover God within the self. Secularists discover their True nature within the self. My term “self-enchantment” refers to the feeling that one can understand the self and that the self is ultimately good and therapeutic. It is the way that the modern individuals re-enchant the world, by finding a connection to eternal goodness within.

**RW:** *You place a good deal of emphasis on organized religion providing meaning for people through group loyalty and emotions. With the growing numbers of non-affiliated or “nones” in the U.S., do you just see self-enchantment becoming more prevalent?*

**Froese:** Self-enchantment has both religious and secular forms. It is the feeling of personal moral goodness and can be fostered by both religious and secular communities. I think the growth of the “nones” reflects the fact that non-affiliation is more socially and morally acceptable in the United States. It does not predict the demise of religious group activity but indicates the desire for some Americans to explore their spirituality outside of organized religion. It is the product of individualism, not necessarily secularism.



Still, I think it marks a decline in religious group authority. Within the modern setting, the self is given ultimate authority to determine the moral goodness of institutions and individuals. This authority liberates one from the strictures of organized religion but also places the responsibility of self-enchantment on the individual.

**RW:** *Another interesting finding is that you see conservatives and liberals having a different view of the "truth" and purpose. Even those conservatives who do not rate highly in religiosity tend to hold to a "capital T" approach to Truth compared to liberals. How do you see those differences between liberals and conservatives being played out in the current presidential campaigns?*

**Froese:** Conservative and liberal identities in the United States have taken on the quality of an ethnicity. One’s politics are no longer one’s policy preferences but rather one’s membership in a distinct group that has cultural, social, and religious boundaries. I found that conservatives are more likely to feel that there are core moral Truths that must apply to everyone. Liberals, in contrast, tend to feel that individual disagreements about moral Truth are inevitable and unresolvable. The result is a different understanding of what the “good society” is and what the purpose of government is.

This is playing out dramatically in the current presidential race. Donald Trump clearly relies on his gut feelings about Truth and is unafraid to assert divisive and uninformed rhetoric in service to his deeper sense of righteousness. In contrast, Hillary Clinton wants to appeal to all perspectives and tends to come off as morally ambiguous.

## ARTICLES:

### **Passing the pro-Israel torch to younger and Hispanic evangelicals**

A new breed of pro-Israel activism is emerging that is drawing Hispanic and younger evangelicals into its fold as well as using social media to spread the Christian Zionist message, according to *Charisma* magazine (September). These groups are responding to reports of growing anti-Semitic incidents and seeking to lead “more people to stand for Israel in new ways,” writes Shawn A Akers. The Hispanic Israel Leadership Coalition (HILC), the Fellowship of Israel Related Ministries (FIRM), and United With Israel have emerged in the past few years with new pro-Israel strategies. HILC was started to raise the awareness among Hispanic evangelicals and charismatics of the “critical intersection and America’s future and activate Hispanics as the pro-Israel, pro-Jewish demographic,” Akers writes. The coalition has held pro-Israel rallies at the U.N. in New York as well as in Miami and Los Angeles. HILC President Mario Bramnick admits that some in the Hispanic community gravitate toward the “Palestinian narrative,” but the group is producing educational materials adapted to the Latino community as well as literature to reach Muslims.

Meanwhile FIRM focuses on reaching younger Christians with the pro-Israel message, particularly pastors. Currently FIRM has a network of 40 pro-Israel ministries in the U.S. and Israel. The group held its first conference in Colorado in 2015, drawing more than 1,700. United With Israel bases much of its activism on the Internet and social media, Akers adds. The group was founded in 2011 by American Jewish software developer Michael Gerbitz and is based in Israel. In five years, UWI’s social media efforts have “won more than 3.6 million Facebook likes and nearly 40,000 followers as well as about 2,000 YouTube subscribers.” Its followers have also been active trying to remove “anti-Semitic videos from YouTube,” according to Akers.

(*Charisma*, 600 Rhinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746)



## Brazilian churches in U.S. assimilating and recruiting through English

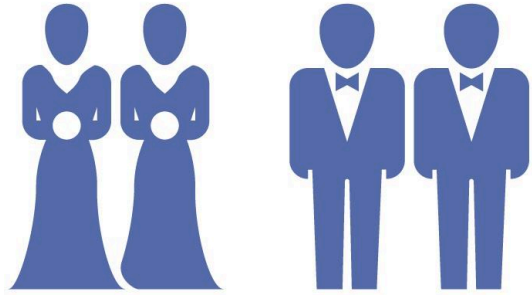
While Brazilian-American evangelicals are following the trajectory of other ethnic groups through their 1.5 (those who immigrated to the U.S. while still children) and 2<sup>nd</sup> generations assimilating and moving into the evangelical mainstream, Brazilian spiritualist groups are becoming multi-cultural and English-speaking even before the second generation comes of age, according to research presented at the Seattle meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in late August. Rodrigo Serraro of the University of South Florida conducted a comparative study of the intergenerational transition in Brazilian evangelical and Afro-Brazilian spiritualist churches in Florida and found significant differences. The Brazilian evangelical churches are relying on their 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation members and leaders to make the successful transition to assimilate to the evangelical mainstream.

In the congregations Serraro studied, the use of English can be a source of conflict, with the first generation resisting it while youth groups of these churches embrace English. He found that the use of English was accompanied by the culture of American evangelicalism—including using contemporary music—for the second generation. Second generation Brazilian churches and ministries are increasingly stressing evangelism directed at Americans rather than just Brazilians. For the spiritualists, the use of English is very important even for the first generation members (because they are more recent arrivals in the U.S., there are not many second generation spiritualists yet), with 95 percent of these churches having at least one English service. This was not the case even ten years ago, but since then using English has become seen as a way to spread spiritualist teachings. The use of English is often targeted to Americans who have Brazilian spiritualist spouses, according to Serraro. But the spiritualists have not assimilated in other ways—they expect American converts to integrate into Brazilian culture, such as in styles of music and food.



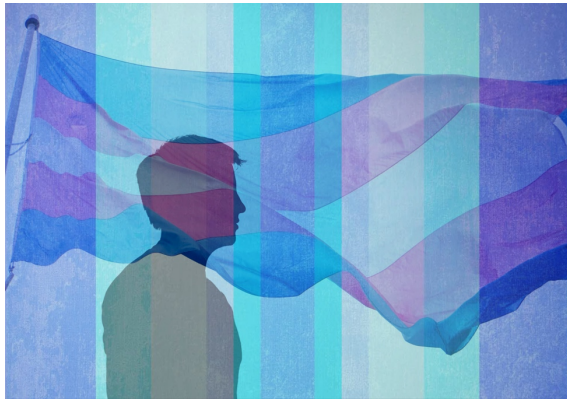
## CURRENT RESEARCH

● **Even though there have been over 100,000 gay weddings since the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage last year, these ceremonies are still relatively rare events for most clergy.** Only 11 percent of Protestant senior pastors are being asked to perform such ceremonies, according to a survey by Lifeway Research. As might be expected, more liberal, mainline clergy were three times more likely to have been asked to conduct a same-sex marriage than their evangelical counterparts. Those pastors 55 and older (14 percent) are twice as likely to have been asked to perform these ceremonies than younger ones. Baptist pastors (1 percent) are the least likely to say they were asked to conduct same-sex weddings, while Presbyterian/Reformed pastors (26 percent) are the most likely. The survey of 1,000 Protestant clergy also looked at the roles of LGBT people in churches and found that 34 percent of the pastors said that such members were excluded from such service, while 30 percent said that they could serve in any capacity in the church.



(Lifeway Research, <http://lifewayresearch.com/2016/08/18/same-sex-church-weddings-lgbt-serving-in-church/>)

● **A new survey of transgender people finds that they are strongly unaffiliated yet rate high in spirituality.** J. E. Summerau and Ryan Cragun of the University of Tampa and Lain A. B. Mathers of the University of Illinois at Chicago presented the preliminary study at the late August



conference of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Seattle, which **RW** attended. The researchers conducted a survey of 405 transgender people and found 13 percent identifying as Christian, 35 percent as non-religious, 28.4 percent no response, 9.1 percent as Pagan, and 6.2 percent as Muslim. As for upbringing 42.5 percent were raised in Christian homes. Summerau, Cragun, and Mathers find that even if their rate of religious belonging is low, the respondents reported high rates of spirituality.

● **Despite commitments to social “diversity” and students’ self-exploration, a study of campus culture found that an elite American college tended to stifle such religious exploration and expression and encourage students to keep their beliefs hidden, as much by their classmates as their professors.** Kateri Boucher and Jaime Kucinkas presented a paper at the recent Association for the Sociology of Religion meeting in Seattle, which was based on interviews with faculty, students, and administrators. Boucher and Kucinkas found a “stark discrepancy” between students’ public and private expressions of religiosity and spirituality. Most campus community members held that the campus atmosphere was not particularly religious or spiritual. Yet three-fifths of the randomly selected respondents identified as spiritual, religious, or

both (and three-fourths of the non-religious reported having spiritual experiences). Researchers also found that 75 percent of the graduating seniors reported a specific religious affiliation.

A sense of stigma religious students felt both in the classroom and out fed this division between private and public, leading them to keep their faiths hidden or private. In fact, it was the party scene on campus where religious students felt the most marginalized, alienated, and judged. In academic life, both religious and non-religious students felt pressure to be an “engaged” member of the prestigious college where the assumption was that there was an implicit conflict between religious faith and scientific rationality. In their concerns, most religious students didn’t feel supported by administrators, despite a mission statement supporting pluralism and self-discovery.



● **Non-Catholic clergy have seen a significant growth in their incomes, according to a recent study of clergy compensation.** In his blog *Ahead of the Trend*, David Briggs cites a study by sociologists Cyrus Schleifer and Mark Chaves based on Current Population Survey data from 1976 to 2013 showing that in their inflation-adjusted wages, non-Catholic clergy earned \$4.37 more per hour in 2013 than they did in 1983. Such an increase is more than double the wage hike of the average worker with a college degree; clergy are gaining ground financially faster than more than nine in ten Americans with degrees. Briggs notes that it is difficult to compare wages between clergy and non-clergy because the former profession includes such benefits as housing allowances or church provided housing.



There is considerable variation in the earning levels of clergy based on the locale and size of the congregation, with Catholic clergy earning half as much as other ministers and pastors. Briggs adds that Current Population data from 1983 to 2002—a period when occupational measures allowed more comparisons—showed that non-Catholic clergy earned 32 percent less than other Americans with college degrees. The 35 highest-income occupations in the U.S., from

investment bankers to physicians to engineers, are running away from everyone else. But excluding those professions, the income gap between clergy and other college-educated Americans is shrinking.

(*Ahead of the Trend*, <http://blogs.thearda.com/trend/>)

● **Religion does seem to matter when it comes to citizens' views of the use of force by police, according to a study by Quintin Williams of Loyola University.** In a presentation at the meeting

of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Seattle, Williams analyzed the 2014 General Social Survey specifically on questions of whether respondents approve of a number of police actions, including striking a citizen in custody, force being used on a suspect escaping custody, and harassment during



questioning in cases dealing with murder and less serious crimes. Williams found that Black Protestants, Catholics, and other members of minority religions are less likely to support such actions while mainline Protestants and Jews were more likely to approve of them. Yet in cases of murder, it was the Catholics, non-whites, and minority religions that were more likely to approve of such uses of force by police. Williams found that those who proselytize others were also more likely to approve of such use of force (in both murder and other crimes).

● **Pagan groups have raised their public profile in recent years, but members still feel stigmatized and harassed for their beliefs and practices, writes sociologist Gwendolyn Reece in the current issue of the Neopagan studies journal *The Pomegranate* (18.1, 2016).** In a survey of 3,318 members of Pagan groups, few (0.7 percent or 22 people) reported having been the victim of a violent hate crime due to their Pagan identity. Yet the reported fear of violent hate crimes, as detected in perceptions of risk, is far greater, with 31.9 percent (1,060) believing it likely or very likely that they might experience such a crime as a result of their Pagan identity. Reece notes that this high prevalence of fear of violent hate crime is likely related to the more common frequency of receiving threats or being intimidated in public, which was reported as a past experience by 22.6 percent (749) of the respondents, combined with the likely effect of stories of harassment being shared among the Pagan communities.

Fears about harassment from law enforcement were fairly prevalent, with 29.4 percent (974) of the sample considering it likely or very likely that they will face some form of harassment by such officials. Receiving threats or being intimidated by members of a former religion or current non-Pagan faith was reported by 21.9 percent (725) of the participants. Of the 725 who have been the victims of threats or intimidation from a former or current non-Pagan religion, 25.9 percent (188)



departed from a fundamentalist or evangelical form of Christianity. Of the sample, 43.7 percent (1,450) of the participants said that they do not hide their religious practices from people, while 56.3 percent (1,868) hide their practices in at least some areas of life.



(*The Pomegranate*, <https://journals.equinoxpub.com/index.php/POM/issue/current>)

● **Recent statistics from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) confirm the two-decade long trend of evangelical Protestant seminaries drawing the largest share of students seeking training for church ministry.** Writing in the *Aquila Report* (August 4), Chelsen Vicari notes that the ATS figures only account for full-time seminary student enrollment, though that is the most stable measure of seminary size and thus “accurately represents institutional attainment.” The evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary ranks largest with 1,542 full-time students during the 2015-16 academic year, followed by Southern and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminaries, with 1,438 and 1,356 enrollments, respectively. While all of the ten largest seminaries are evangelical Protestant, half of those schools are affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Five of the six largest seminaries associated with the SBC are among the top ten



largest in the country. There has been little fluctuation among the list of the top ten schools—only Reformed Theological Seminary (of the evangelical Presbyterian Church in America), Princeton Seminary (Presbyterian Church, USA), and the United Methodist Church-affiliated Candler School of Theology fell off the list between the 1995–96 and 2015–16 academic years.

(*Aquila Report*, <http://theaquilareport.com>)

● **A new analysis of church planting research in Europe and particularly the Netherlands suggests that these new churches are significantly better at drawing the unchurched than established churches.** The theory that new churches attract non-Christians and other unchurched people more than established churches has been generally accepted in the U.S., but it has faced a harder sell in secularized Europe. But now with even older mainline churches investing in church planting in Europe, there is growing evidence of growth among new churches as compared to older ones, write Stefan Paas and Alrick Vos in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July). The researchers look at previous research in Germany and England and find that in the case of the

former, it was not clear that new churches did significantly better than established churches in drawing the unchurched. In England the results were better. What is called the Fresh Expressions movement of church plants does show effectiveness in reaching the unchurched and “de-churched” (those with some church background who had drifted away from attending): for every one person sent out to be part of a Fresh Expressions church, there are now two and a half more people, with attendees consisting of 25 percent long-time Christians, 35 percent de-churched, and 40 percent unchurched. The problem was that 40 percent of the attenders were less than 16, and there was no way to distinguish believers from attenders, since Anglicans just count the latter.



Paas and Vos analyze a study of church planting efforts in three Dutch denominations (which was initially conducted by Vos), arguing that this data is the most precise and reliable in evaluating church planting in Western Europe in that it compared new churches with established ones. They find that the church plants registered a conversion rate 4.7 times higher than that of established churches. The same pattern is seen in the de-churched or returnees. Even excluding the most successful church plants and comparing the remaining plants with the most successful older churches still produced a conversion rate 5.7 times higher. To test whether the number of newcomers is proportioned differently when new churches are planted, thus taking a bigger piece of the same pie, Vos controlled his data—though just for one denomination—on these variables and found that the church plants still increased the evangelistic returns of this church body. As for the reasons for this contrast between established and new churches, Vos found no significant difference between their theological stances. It is more likely that location (older churches are in areas of stable or declining population numbers), the stronger evangelistic focus of church plants, and the entrepreneurial style of church planters are factors in such growth. They conclude that while the figures do not indicate a great revival through church planting, they do show that “conversion church growth” is possible in Europe, providing “an antidote to the belief that we are facing a culture of inevitable decline.”

(*International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, <http://internationalbulletin.org/index.html>)

● **Religious nationalism is increasing in places as different as Canada and Russia, and its growth doesn’t seem to be weakened by increased levels of societal trust and happiness or social development and prosperity in the way that religiosity is, reports a recent study by David Barry of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.** Barry, who presented a paper at the recent Seattle meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, which **RW** attended, used data from the International Social Survey Program, national identity wave, (2013) and the World

Value Survey on institutional trust to look at the growth of religious nationalism. He found that while religiosity is stagnant in ex-communist countries—except in Russia—ethno-religious identity is increasing significantly. In countries where the marriage between religion and nationality has increased but religious identity has not, there were also robust rates of national development,



“ontological security”—or happiness— and feelings of certainty, pride, and trust, except for Hungary. Some secularization theorists often relate these measures of security and development with lower rates of religiosity, but it is the opposite in the case of religious nationalism, according to Barry. He also noted that similar increases were evident in countries as different as Canada and those in Central America.

#### ARTICLES:

### Catholicism’s quiet renewal in the UK?

Catholicism is experiencing something of a renewal in Great Britain, ranging from the Catholic vitality of the Anglo-Indians to a “new sense of purpose and mission, and indeed of vocation...among the ‘creative minority’ of Mass-going adults,” writes Stephen Bullivant in the London-based *Catholic Herald* (August 11). Bullivant reports on the opening of “new cathedrals, new centers of learning [and] new religious orders.... At the risk of tempting fate, I believe we’re seeing the first fruits of a true resurgence, perhaps even a resurrection...of British Catholicism.” He acknowledges that the statistics on Mass attendance continue to drop and the Brexit vote will likely mean that “our pews are unlikely to keep being topped up—as thus far they have been—by a steady stream of new Britons from more religious parts of Europe and the rest of the world...” But Bullivant points to the vitality of the British Syro-Malabar community originating in Kerala, India, who have recently been given their own cathedral, and a new Eparchy for Great Britain (a non-geographical diocese); they are able to turn out close to 3,000 to bi-weekly prayer and Mass rallies out of a population of 40,000 such Catholics.



Bullivant adds that there are also new or renewed Catholic educational establishments and religious orders emerging, including Glasgow’s Sisters of the Gospel of Life, the Canons of St. Ambrose and St. Charles in Carlisle, two new Oratories in York and Manchester (with another one starting up in Bournemouth), and three historic parishes “given serious new life by two traditionalist groups....” This and other activity has contributed to a modest but promising rallying of vocations, both male and female, in recent years, as well as “a steady stream of committed Catholic couples, not simply aware of but genuinely excited by the church’s full vision of marriage and family life.” Bullivant concludes that “periods of renewal always begin in the midst of crisis. The very recognition that something must be done, and urgently, is often what inspires and energizes.”

(*Catholic Herald*, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/>)

### **Drop-in services seeking to build new ties to Swedish church drop-outs**

From a lone pastor offering “drop-in” nuptials in 2008, these unscheduled types of services for weddings and baptisms have proliferated in the Church of Sweden today, possibly making new connections between parishes and inactive members, reports *The Christian Century* (August 3). When Pastor Jerker Alsterlund first perform unscheduled weddings at his church in the city of Vasteras, it raised considerable controversy in the Church of Sweden. But the practice has become more widespread, with such rituals now offered in every major city along with many smaller towns—popular enough that Alsterlund was given the Church of Sweden’s Innovator of the Year Award in 2013. Alsterlund and other church leaders now argue that the drop-in services have created new links between Sweden’s very large inactive membership and the church, creating service formats that reach beyond the parishes’ core members. The Church of Sweden has not collected statistics on how many of these services are conducted.



The article, which is reprinted from the *Christian Science Monitor*, recounts a recent drop-in service held in the cathedral in the city of Lund, as 45 couples gather on a Saturday afternoon to get married. Each couple gets a 20-minute premarital talk with one of the pastors, and then they choose two hymns and a song before they go to one of the altars with the pastor and the musician for their 20-minute ceremony. Drop-in baptisms take place in a similar manner, usually in more

intimate ceremonies than found in the social events surrounding more traditional baptism services. The innovations are a way to slow down the sharp declines the Church of Sweden has faced; last year, 63.2 percent of Sweden's 9.9 million residents belonged to the church, down from 86 percent in 1995. During the same time, annual service attendance has dropped from 9 million to 4 million. The Church of Sweden has not yet measured whether the services have resulted in the couples and families remaining involved with their parishes. Alsterlund says that from his observations, about three-quarters of the couples and families stay in touch with him, with many getting involved in their own parish. Sociologist Magdalena Nordin says that the drop-in nature of the services doesn't necessarily mean that participants take them less seriously. Some pastors argue that because the drop-in ceremonies are stripped of their social attributes, they focus couples' and families' attention on the Christian aspect of the rituals.

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

### **Why are Pentecostal Churches growing (in Sydney)?**

The growth and dynamism of Pentecostalism in Australia is attracting attention, especially in the Sydney area and New South Wales writes Paul Oslington, a professor of economics who is himself an Anglican but teaches at Alphacrucis College, the national college of the Australian Pentecostal movement, for the *Australian Broadcasting Company* (August 26). Sydney is home to both Hillsong Church and Christian City Church (C3), two of the fast-growing Pentecostal/charismatic movements. These days, Sydney Anglicans are singing Hillsong and C3 music, Oslington notes. Pentecostals/charismatics are on their way to represent "the new normal" in Sydney church life.



The fast development of Pentecostalism has been obvious for a decade: nine years ago, religious affairs journalist Linda Morris had been reporting on a “Pentecostal revolution in the suburbs” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, June 28, 2007). Although Sydney Anglicans are strongly committed to evangelism, Pentecostals have overtaken Anglicans as Australia’s second largest religious group by attendance, behind the Catholic Church. But Oslington observes that there are other features worth noticing, starting with the fact that Pentecostals are the most racially diverse group. More unexpectedly, they have also overtaken Anglicans in educational attainment (measured by the proportion of degree holders among participants). This trend makes usual rationalization about the root of Pentecostal growth hard to maintain.

Oslington attempts to identify some of the factors that might explain Pentecostal growth. He identifies “empowered, visionary leadership matched with the skills to achieve growth” as possibly the most important reasons. He mentions that Alphacrucis offers a Master of Leadership and Doctor of Ministry for experienced pastors, while “the combined Bachelor of Ministry/Bachelor of Business is now the degree of choice for aspiring Pentecostal pastors,” thus exemplifying the mindset of Pentecostal leaders. Moreover Pentecostals are not hampered by heavy control exercised by church authorities. Pentecostal services are conceived as opportunities to engage with God, taking into account bodily and emotional dimensions. An additional asset of Pentecostals is cultural adaptability such as in the cases of migrants and marginal groups.

(*Australian Broadcasting Corporation*,  
<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/08/26/4527401.htm>)

### **Islamic humanitarian NGOs complementing Turkish foreign policy?**

Islamic-oriented humanitarian NGOs have flourished in Turkey in recent years, but their “parallelism” to the foreign policy implementation process of the current Turkish (AKP) government potentially makes their status ambiguous as non-governmental entities. This ambiguity also places them at risk in relation to changing perceptions of Turkey in areas where they operate, write Nihat Çelik (Melikşah University, Kayseri, Turkey) and Emre İşeri (Yaşar University, Izmir, Turkey) in *Turkish Studies* (September). They base their research partly on interviews



with Islamic NGO participants. Established since the 1990s by the Islamic grassroots movement with the war in Bosnia and the sufferings of Bosnian Muslims as a catalyst, humanitarian NGOs “have become important implementers of Turkish foreign policy.” The coming to power of the

AKP (Justice and Development Party) boosted donations. Under the AKP, Turkey has developed foreign policy activism, including becoming an important international donor and humanitarian assistance contributor.

While Islamic humanitarian NGOs won't discriminate by religion, especially when dealing with natural disasters, their donors have a strong interest in the plight of Muslim people, and a strong Islamic identity shapes their approach, with an emphasis on "oppressed Muslims." Turkey is seen as natural protector of the Muslim *ummah*, while NGOs are aware that local people in countries where they operate identify them first as Turks, and thus they contribute to Turkish soft power. Especially in Africa, interaction and exchange of information with Turkish embassies is strong. "Naturally, sharing the same ideational values, serving the same cause and propagating the same discourse make their relations with government elites easier," the authors write. But the high level of parallelism carries a risk of politicizing the aid, they add, while making Turkish citizens not supportive of the AKP less likely to support such NGOs.

(*Turkish Studies*, <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ftur20/current>)

### **Soka Gakkai preparing for its post-charismatic stage**

While the strong significance of and veneration for its current leader, Daisaku Ikeda (b. 1928), is obvious to anybody reading Soka Gakkai publications, the lay Buddhist movement does not intend to transfer this status to a successor, writes Ulrich Dehn (University of Hamburg, Germany) in an overview of the movement published in the journal *Materialdienst der EZW* (August). With more than 8 million families in Japan and 1.5 million more members in 192 other countries (including 300,000 in the U.S.), Soka Gakkai is not only the largest religious movement of Japan but a large movement by international standards as well. From 1951 to 1991, it used to be a lay movement associated with the much smaller, monk-led Nichiren Shoshu, but then a break took place, making Soka Gakkai fully independent. Following the break, pilgrimage to the Nichiren Shoshu center Taisekiji was no longer possible; in its place, members often visit important places associated with Ikeda's life.



While Ikeda remains the president of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), Soka Gakkai itself has had other presidents since 1979 (currently Minoru Harada). The presidency is now meant to play an administrative role, and this structure is not planned to change once Ikeda passes from the scene. Ikeda and his two predecessors have been described since 2002 as *Sandai Kaicho* (i.e. three generations of presidents), thus leaving no place for a charismatic successor. But due to the crucial place attributed to Ikeda as a central figure, observers such as Dehn wonder how the future will look for Soka Gakkai when it will be deprived some day of its current charismatic leader.

(*Materialdienst der EZW*, Auguststrasse 80, 10117 Berlin, Germany – [www.ezw-berlin.de](http://www.ezw-berlin.de))

## Findings & Footnotes

■ The *Research on Religion* podcast, sponsored by Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion, recently marked its 300<sup>th</sup> episode. The podcast, founded in 2010 and hosted by Anthony Gill, a political science professor at the University of Washington, draws about 5,000 listeners to its interviews with both religion scholars and practitioners. The podcasts, which are geared to non-scholars as well as practitioners, have covered everything from the growth of cowboy churches to the relation of religion to quantum physics to a history of hymns in the U.S. In an interview with **RW**, Gill says that he most enjoys finding scholars off the grid and bringing their research to the public as well as interviewing "people on the ground," who are living out their faiths in interesting and compelling ways. The podcasts have also found their way on to university syllabi in places such as Duke University and Michigan State University. To listen to these podcasts, visit: <http://www.researchonreligion.org/>



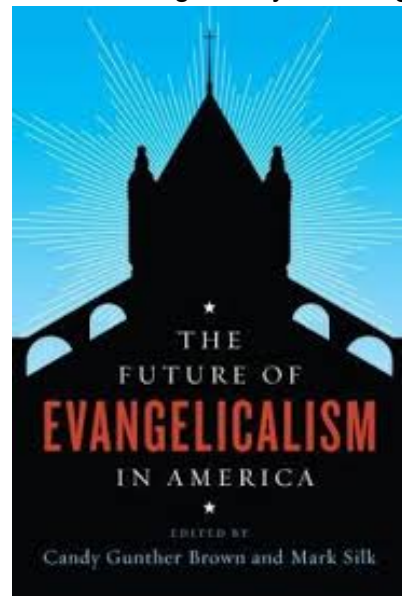
■ The summer issue of *Sunstone*, an independent Mormon magazine, might suggest that the Mormon history of polygamy (still in the living memory of older members) has had the unintended effect of making a segment of Mormons—at least on an unofficial basis—more open to alternative family and sexual arrangements. The issue starts with interesting historical accounts of polygamous Mormons (before the LDS church outlawed the practice) and continues with sketches of the “fundamentalist” Mormon groups that still practice polygamy, providing up-to-date information on their situation and rivalries with other polygamous Mormon groups (which have sometimes resulted in kidnappings and assassinations). Then the articles move on to include defenses of legalizing polygamy by LDS members as well as discussions by former fundamentalist and mainstream Mormons of polyamory (open marriage) and “progressive polygamy,” which attempts to separate “patriarchy” from polygamy, possibly including such arrangements as polygyny (having more than one husband) and same-sex group marriages. For



more information on this issue, write: Sunstone, 343 N. Third West, Salt Lake City, UT 84103-1215.



■ *The Future of Evangelicalism* (Columbia University Press, \$35), edited by Candy Gunther Brown and Mark Silk, covers a diverse range of topics—from “post-conservative” theology to recent turns in contemporary Christian music—suggesting that the evangelical community retains a basic unity while showing new divisions. The book is very good at blending history, sociology, and theology to show how many changes are more variations of central themes, such as the importance of the Bible, populism, and reflecting American therapeutic culture, rather than sharp divergences. But the contributors do highlight some changes that would rankle evangelical pioneers—the growing bond with Roman Catholics, a related interest in sacramental and contemplative forms of spirituality, and the popularity of “open theology” that questions biblical inerrancy and are sympathetic to interpretations that may challenge classic statements of faith. A chapter provides a concise history of the evangelical engagement with politics and the divide between older New Christian Right stalwarts and younger moderate evangelicals, though it doesn’t seem to have spotted a divisive yet appealing candidacy of Donald Trump among evangelicals. Other chapters cover the increasing relevance of race in evangelical churches, new “cosmopolitan” forms of evangelical philanthropy and missions, and the growth of non-denominational ministries and churches.



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

○ **The Robloxian Christians (TRC)** is unique for being both a virtual church drawing young people from around the world and for being founded by a teenager. Daniel Herron, 16, of Tacoma, Washington, started the church completely on his own, which is now “attended” by more than 4,500 members who gather at the virtual congregation to worship, pray, and connect with each other. While virtual churches are not new, few have been created by teenagers (actually Herron was a preteen—11—when he started it), and TRC actually morphed from a popular online video game platform for children and teenagers known as Roblox. Today a team of 15 young people who work in groups—via email, text, and in-game chat—and more than 140 volunteers who carry out the various ministries run TRC. TRC is non-denominational and holds worship on Sunday at 5 p.m., which allows both “real-world” churchgoers and non-churchgoers to attend. TRC also offers prayer times and occasional classes. With its emphasis on texting (or “talking” through avatars), TRC speaks the language of teens, but most of the participants interviewed say they like the sense of community and support they find on a site where appearance and other physical traits are not important. (*Faith and Leadership.com*, August 23).

