

Vol. 32, No. 1**November 2016****FEATURE STORY:****Christian nationalism—both gaining and losing ground?**

There is much talk about the growth of “Christian nationalism” even as surveys and journalists report the decline of “white Christian America,” but several papers presented at the late October meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Atlanta suggest that any such phenomenon is far from a monolithic or accelerating force in society. Sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Christopher Scheitle presented a paper showing that while Christian nationalism, which they define as a position linking the importance of being Christian to being American, had shown growth between 1996 and 2004, the subsequent period up to 2014 had seen decline in this ideology. Using data from the General Social Survey in 1996, 2004, and 2014, the researchers found that 30 percent of Americans held this position in 1996, while 48 percent did in 2004, but then the rate dropped back to 33 percent in 2014. They looked at other variables that seek to maintain boundaries for true Americans, such as the importance of speaking English, and did find



that this sentiment followed the same episodic pattern. Whitehead and Scheitle argue that the role of patriotism and attachment to America was stronger in 2004, which was closer to 9/11, than in the earlier and later periods. Although they didn't have data for the last two years, they speculated that these rates may be increasing again.

Associated with the reports on the rise of Christian nationalism is the conflict over the role of religion in the American public square. In their presentation, sociologists Jack Delehanty, Penny Edgell, and Evan Stewart of the University of Minnesota noted that recent surveys have shown that the majority of Americans want more religion in public life. But they found that this desire for more public religion does not mean the same thing as a straight nationalist agenda marked by such concerns as school prayer, religious laws in the government, belief that the president should be Christian, and that to be American it is important to be religious. Delehanty, Edgell, and Stewart categorized Americans into four groups of strong secularists (representing the non-affiliated and including about 14 percent of Americans), passive secularists (also the non-affiliated and Jews and representing 24 percent), moderates (Catholics and mainline Protestants, at 35 percent), and religious nationalists (conservative Protestants at 25 percent). Using the American Mosaic Survey conducted between 2003 and 2014, the researchers found that even those considered Christian nationalists did not line up strongly for a measure such as school prayer.

The moderates had their doubts about whether being a good American means being religious and whether the president should be Christian. But even those favoring religious nationalism lined up more on the "symbolic" issues, such as linking being American with being religious and that the president should be Christian, rather than on issues needing special accommodation, such as school prayer, suggesting that even for religious nationalists, separation of church and state matters. Another paper in this session, by Troy Gibson and Mike Lavender, both of the University of Mississippi, argued that the majority consensus of allowing religious expression in the public square is changing, as "exclusive" religions face more rejection while inclusive religions are welcomed. Traditionally, strict church-state separationists and those calling for more accommodation of religion have shared similar ground in that government should not discriminate between religious groups. The political scientists looked over the last decade at case law on the state and federal level and policy changes in higher education and corporations according to the criteria of direct language, inconclusive decisions, as well as what they called "coded language" that may hint at future legal decisions. They found that legal elites are moving closer to the French position of "laicite," where the state regulates and polices religion. As seen in cases such as *Christian Legal Society v. Martinez* (2011), the Supreme Court has jettisoned religious freedom arguments in favor of those where religion is subordinated by the state, according to Gibson and Lavender.

ARTICLES:

Interactive and Virtual Bibles enhancing communal, experiential sides of faith

New advances in the digitalization of the Bible, especially through recent social media and virtual reality technologies, are likely to accent the experiential and group-based nature of Scripture reading, according to an article in the Jesuit magazine *America* (October 17). The development of virtual reality (VR) is already being adapted to experiencing the Bible in a new way through Bible

VR, one of the first companies to bring the technology and Scripture together. By inserting a smartphone into a \$15 Google Cardboard headset, a user can suddenly become a “first-century stable hand in Bethlehem, quietly sweeping in the corner while Joseph and a very pregnant Mary negotiate for a place to sleep.” Founder Pearry Teo said Bible VR makes users feel like they are part of the Bible story. Bible VR includes virtual prayer spaces and tours of Bible-related historical sites for adults and filmed re-enactments of Bible stories aimed particularly at children. The software is a work in progress; the sensation of taking part in a scene such as the crucifixion was so intense that it had people crying and fogging up screens of their phones. Teo and others working in VR say the technology represents a shift from “producing and consuming information to producing and consuming experience,” thus highlighting the “transformative” effect of the Bible for believers, writes Betsy Shirley.



The most popular Bible app, the YouVersion Bible, likewise changes how one experiences the biblical text, though more in the direction of group participation, Shirley adds. Having the app on smartphones makes it possible to see what one’s friends are reading and to share verses straight back to social media accounts. “In some ways, it’s bringing back this concept of reading the Bible in community,” says director Brian Russell. The YouVersion team is already exploring the possible uses of voice technology and artificial intelligence in new versions. “What would it look like if I could talk to the Bible and the Bible could talk to me?” he adds. While on the subject of audio, the 40-year-old audio Bible firm Faith Comes by Hearing is now able to go beyond the restriction of requiring a written translation of the Bible to produce an audio version. In partnership with the Seed Company and Pioneer Bible Translators, the company recently developed Render, a software program that allows the Bible to be translated by an entirely oral process. This technology allows oral communicators to be active participants in translating the Bible into their mother tongue, not requiring people to become literate or change their culture to access the Bible, says Jonathan Huguenin of Faith Comes by Hearing.

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

Sunbirds and Midwesterners as the new Amish?

The rapid growth of Amish communities are leading Amish to settle in unusual places, though it seems more likely that they will be heading toward upper Midwestern states in the near future according to sociologists at the recent meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Atlanta, which **RW** attended. Cory Anderson of Truman State University and Rachel Bacon of Penn State University presented a paper on the movement of Amish communities in recent years,

finding that they tended to settle in small farming communities outside metropolitan areas of low or declining populations, usually in topographies of rolling hills, which have cheaper land prices than flat farming lands. Using census results with county-level data and Amish community listings, the researchers forecasted that new communities are most likely to continue moving away from the more congested heartland of Pennsylvania and Ohio and be established in northern Wisconsin and Michigan along with parts of Iowa and even Washington state.

One place the researchers didn't expect an Amish community to take root and grow was in Sarasota, Florida. But in another paper, Italian scholar Andrea Borella found that wealthier Amish and a more "wild" set of younger members have been migrating to the Florida community of Pinecrest in recent years and living distinctly non-Amish lifestyles. Instead of the horse and buggies, the Amish at



Pinecrest ride bicycles, play shuffleboard, and even go to the beach in modern bathing suits and bikinis. Borella finds that these Amish see the community as a way to live a more liberal lifestyle at least some of the year. But Amish up north see Pinecrest—which has recently experienced a split between a more evangelical-style congregation with contemporary worship and a more traditional church—as a strange and unorthodox community. Commenting on the paper, Anderson said Pinecrest may function as a “place set aside for deviance to occur in the Amish community;” he noted that even when they are experimenting with an alternative lifestyle, Amish tend to do it together. Some of the younger residents may be on “rumspringa”—a period when teenagers are allowed to interact with the outside world before they make a commitment to the church—and many are not yet baptized.

Cardinal appointments suggest leftward drift in American church leadership

The appointment of new U.S. cardinals by Pope Francis is likely to tilt the American church toward a more conciliatory stance on contested social issues reports *America* magazine (October 9). The decision by the pope to name Archbishop Blaise Cupich of Chicago and Archbishop Joseph Tobin of Indianapolis could have significant impact on the church, writes Michael O'Loughlin. Cupich is a “key Francis ally on proposed reforms that supporters say could make the church more welcoming to disaffected Catholics. Archbishop Tobin’s openness toward expanded



opportunities for women in the church and his support for resettling Syrian refugees, even over objections from G.O.P. vice presidential hopeful Gov. Mike Pence, put him squarely in line with the pope's agenda."

O'Loughlin adds that the pope was aware of Tobin's management of the controversial oversight of nuns ordered by Pope Benedict XVI and how his stance angered church hardliners for urging greater restraint in the investigation on doctrinal issues. The fact that the pope passed over Philadelphia's Archbishop Charles Chaput, Los Angeles's Archbishop Jose Gomez, and Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore—three archdioceses traditionally led by cardinals—may say as much as the appointments. These three church leaders have been more confrontational on culture war issues, such as abortion and gay rights, as well as resisting, or being more likely to resist, some of Pope Francis's efforts at reform, such as opening communion to divorced and remarried Catholics. O'Loughlin concludes that the "picks show Francis wants the church in America to be more focused on issues like immigration, the role of women in the church and the need to bypass traditional centers of power" to find leaders in sync with his style and message.

A segment of American Hindus lean toward Trump

Although roughly half of Indian-Americans are registered Democrats, a sizeable segment of the Hindu diaspora in the U.K. and U.S. have embraced much of Republican candidate Donald Trump's agenda reports the online academic blog "The Conversation" (October 26). The Hindu right organization Hindu Sena (Hindu Army) in India went so far as to perform a havan puja (religious offering) for Trump last summer because of his views on combatting "Islamic terrorism." But more recently, a larger Hindus for Trump movement has emerged in the U.S. At a Republican Hindu Coalition event in New Jersey, Trump stressed the values of entrepreneurial success, hard work, and education—values upheld by the rising Indian-American middle class, writes Eviane Cheng Leidig.

Trump's praise of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his drive to root out corruption and embrace capitalism further endeared the candidate to his Hindu audience. But it is Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric that has stirred the greatest interest among conservative American Hindus. There are even similar proposals by Hindu nationalists to build a wall along the India-



Bangladesh border as they view poor Bangladeshi immigrants as India's "Mexican problem." Leidig concludes that anti-Muslim prejudice on the subcontinent has carried over to the Indian community in the U.S. post-9/11, although "younger generations of American Hindus are

challenging this divide and attempting to build solidarity across all forms of racial and religious discrimination.”

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

Alternative spiritualities and the rise of mobile leaders

The geographic and spiritual mobility of leaders of New Age and alternative religious groups as well as the hybridization of symbolic references are shaping the practices and discourses of such groups write Swiss researchers Manéli Farahmand and Sybille Rouiller in an article published in the newly-released issue of the online journal *New Diversities* (18:1), published by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. “Religion and Superdiversity” is the topic of this issue, published in October and freely accessible. The two researchers base their observations on ethnographic research on Mexican neo-Mayanism and French Celtic neo-shamanism, paying special attention to the meaning of tools used during rituals. These movements cultivate both specificities linked to an indigenous claim (Mayan or Celtic, in the two case studies) and a shared dynamic derived from New Age culture that serves as a platform for hybridization. Mobile spiritual leaders as well as their followers travel and meet each other. Despite the emphasis on specific ancestral roots, they borrow from other traditions, seeing them as sources of enrichment.

They incorporate such experiences in their spiritual quests in order to give them added legitimacy. This practice leads to ongoing rearrangements. Objects used during rituals come from different countries and different spiritual traditions, illustrating positioning in both local and global contexts. Borrowing is not random, but it is related to the journeys of those involved



as well as to common alternative spiritual references. Photographs of the Mayan and Celtic groups taken at the Spiritual Planetary Summit in Mexico in 2012 and observed by the two scholars show them wearing very similar outfits. While each has its own spiritual path, they share global objectives and ideals as expressed by their participation at international New Age community events.

(*New Diversities*, <http://newdiversities.mmg.mpg.de/>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **If an individual switches his or her denomination once in his or her early years, he or she is more likely to do so again according to a study by Buster Smith of Catawba College and Chris Scheitle of West Virginia University presented at the late October meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Atlanta, which RW attended.** Using the General Social Survey for 2010, 2012, and 2014, the researchers studied the rate of Americans switching between religious groups. They found that those who switch their affiliation by age 16 are far more likely to do so again in subsequent years. Jews and Catholics had high stability, while non-denominational Protestants showed much more movement between churches. African-American Protestants and the non-affiliated were in the middle range of switching. In looking at variables that may affect switching, Smith and Scheitle were somewhat surprised to find that age and gender did not matter, but they did find that divorce and sexual orientation had significant effect for those switching more often.



● **The surprise of this election season may be that there are not many surprises in the patterns of support for the candidates among faith groups, according to scholars speaking at a special session on the 2016 elections held at the late October meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Atlanta, which RW attended.** Greg Smith of the Pew Research Center noted that surveys have shown more stability than change: evangelicals have become more conservative and Republican, even with their support for a candidate such as Donald



Trump. From August to October, the support for Trump went from 63 to 75 percent. The non-affiliated are about as strongly Democratic as they were in previous elections, as are the African-American. Even mainline Protestants remain in the middling range in their support for the GOP; 55 percent supported the Republicans in 2012, while 50 percent support Trump. Catholics remain divided, as they have been in past years.

The biggest change has been among the Mormons, with Republican support down eight percent since just 2015 (let alone the high support for fellow Mormon Mitt Romney in 2012).

Ed Stetzer of Wheaton College drove home the message that evangelical support for Trump is not just at the level of nominal believers (as widely believed last spring) but found among the most active, with about 45 percent of evangelicals supporting the candidate. But there has been a movement of evangelical clergy away from Trump, a pattern more clearly seen among those whom Stetzer calls “evangelical insiders.” Citing a survey by the conservative evangelical magazine *World*, these 100 “insiders” deemed influential in the evangelical world are far from a representative sample, but since the magazine tilts right of the evangelical center, such a tendency among evangelical opinion leaders away from Trump may be significant.

● **Reports suggest the gap between evangelical leaders and laypeople on the issue of accepting and resettling Syrian refugees has widened during this election season.** The evangelical attitudes about Syrian refugees have been disputed as some conservative Christian leaders and politicians have called for restrictions against such immigration out of concern for the influence of terrorism, while evangelical refugee organizations have been active in such resettlement efforts [see Oct. RW for more on this subject]. A presentation by Randall Reed of Appalachian State University on evangelical attitudes about Syrian refugees on social media at the late October meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion suggests that evangelical laypeople may be more open to such immigration than the leadership. Using a method known as sentiment analysis, Reed tried to gauge the emotions of visitors to Facebook through their comments and other reactions (“likes” or just “amens”) to posts by evangelical leader Franklin Graham on the refugee crisis.



Reed studied 28 posts and 68,000 comments from 2015-2016 on the page and found that as the election season neared, laypeople’s responses to Graham’s increasing criticisms and attacks on U.S. policy of welcome to such refugees tended to move in the opposite direction. By 2016 the number of “likes” and other signs of agreement had significantly declined compared to the average responses on other issues. This trend might mean a growing level of distrust toward leaders and a split between opinion leaders and followers, at least in the case of such a prominent leader as Franklin Graham.

● **Congregations are continuing to leave the Presbyterian Church (USA), with the most likely departing candidates being churches from the suburbs in Northeast and Western states and those showing growth, according to a study by Perry Chang of the denomination's research office.** Chang, who presented a paper at the recent meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, found that the larger congregations are part of the latest wave leaving the denomination, a trend which started after the PCUSA approved gay ordination in 2011 and began conducting same-sex marriages in 2014. Using U.S. Congregational Life surveys and annual statistics from regional presbyteries, Chang also found that those congregations with high numbers of young people have also been more likely to leave. Those congregations with predominantly older members are the least likely to leave the denomination. Chang also found that the conservative attitudes of worshippers were the most likely predictor in leaving the denomination.



● **Are more micro-level mechanisms contributing to bipartisan progressive shifts in opinion surrounding moral issues such as gay rights rather than a large-scale “culture war” between secular and religious Americans?** That is the view presented by Delia Balddassarri, a sociologist at New York University, at a seminar run by INCITE (Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Practice) at Columbia University in late October, which **RW** attended. In looking at how gay rights became a less-polarized moral issue for both parties, she argued that the acceptance of gay rights can be explained by the desegregation of gay people in our social networks—gays are loosely diffused among different social networks with non-gay people. Furthermore, gay people were able to disclose their sexual identities selectively in their social network. Someone would feel more comfortable in exposing his or her homosexuality, in the expectation of more tolerance, to family or extended family members who may or may not have a bias against gay people than to non-family members. And many families found out about gay people within immediate or extended families, which helped them to conceptualize homosexuality as a less important moral issue.



Along this line, selective disclosure of sexual identity by measuring either positive or negative attitudes towards gay people through conversation with others allowed people to join social networks of people who have a similar view of homosexuality. Thus, this diffused social network of gay people contributed to making gay rights non-polarizing moral issues of Democratic and Republican Party members. Given the fact that most evangelicals, for instance, have not changed their views on homosexuality, Balddassarri's argument doesn't seem to reflect the reality of diverse religious groups with distinct moral values. But she maintains, as she wrote in an *American Journal of Sociology* article in 2014, that cultural wars are limited conflicts fought on narrow policy fronts under special political leadership.—By K.T. Chun, a New Jersey-based writer who teaches sociology at Berkeley College

● **Roman Catholics make up 17.7 percent of the world population (1.27 billion people) and are experiencing an increase everywhere—with Africa coming out at the top.** It is only in Europe that the number of Roman Catholics is decreasing, according to Vatican statistical data released by the news agency *Fides* (October 21) on World Mission Day. The information is based on data that was current at the end of year 2014. There are more than 5,200 bishops, with nearly 4,000 of them serving as diocesan bishops. The number of priests (more than 415,000, including both diocesan priests and members of religious orders) is on the increase, especially in Africa and in Asia, while there is a constant decline in Europe (less 2,500 priests in 2014, nearly 2,000 of them being diocesan priests). The number of seminarians is decreasing everywhere, except in Africa.



The Catholic Church Statistics 2016 with summary statistical tables can be downloaded from the URL: http://www.fides.org/en/attachments/view/file/STATISTICHE_2016ENGLISH.doc

● **Despite its origins in social concern for the deprived and its current avowed preferential option for the poor, there is little evidence that Methodism in Britain is ministering to the most disadvantaged communities, according to the blog *Counting Religion in Britain* (October).** The blog cites new research by Michael Hirst, who analyzed cross-sectional and longitudinal data for the distribution of Methodist personnel (ministers, members, and lay appointees), churches, and schools against a widely accepted 38-item index of neighborhood poverty in England. Hirst found that the immediate surroundings of most Methodist churches fall into the middle of the deprivation spectrum, while few Methodist schools serve areas of significant poverty. The study also found that ministers and lay appointees live predominantly in the least deprived neighborhoods and increasingly so.



(The study is available at:

https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/theologyandministry/TheologyandMinistry4_4.pdf)

GENERAL ARTICLES

Despite restrictions, women gaining place in former Soviet Union churches

Women are gaining a new place in churches in the former Soviet Union, often because of a lack of men involved, according to the *East-West Church & Ministry Report* (Fall). Protestant churches in the former Soviet Union have been among the most conservative, traditionally restricting the roles of women and requiring head coverings and segregated seating in churches. In an interview with the newsletter, Shirinai Dosova, a church leader and pastor in Moscow, estimates that 65 to 70 percent of women attend evangelical churches today, with many congregations lifting older restrictions of women, such as wearing head coverings and segregated seating. As far as women being ordained as pastors, the charismatic, Methodist, and Lutheran churches are the most accepting of this innovation, while Baptist and Pentecostal churches continue to resist such a change (though the Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia are the exception), even though such circles are more open to discussing women's issues.

But the stricter churches are increasingly allowing women in leadership roles outside of the pastorate, such as choir directors, Sunday school teachers, and deaconesses with significant influence, though the male leadership may try to hide that fact, writes Mary Raber of the Odessa Theological Seminary in Ukraine. One factor leading to greater roles for women has been Western Christian cable TV channels giving new visibility to such prominent women pastors and

evangelists as Joyce Meyer. Women are also increasingly on the Internet, where they are able to link up, learn about conferences, and find information to which they did not formerly have access. Other articles in this issue report that social conservatism still is dominant in Russian churches, often under the influence of Russian Orthodoxy and Islam, with women having limited rights within their families and many facing domestic violence. Even on such an issue as the high rate of prostitution,



churches have not spoken out in a clear voice, viewing it more as a sinful choice of women rather than a form of sexual slavery and oppression, writes Assembly of God missionary Nancy Raatz.

(*East-West Ministry Report*, <http://eastwestreport.org>)

Taoist and Buddhist groups taking lead in environmental activism in Asia

In Asia, Buddhist and Taoist groups and movements have emerged as important actors in environmental protection, although they are drawing considerable opposition from governments in China and even India, according to historian Prasenjit Duara. In an interview with the *New York Times* (October 17), Duara says that in the last decade or two, Buddhist environmental groups have supplemented the work of NGOs and international organizations such as the United Nations. In Taiwan, there are large-scale Buddhist groups that see their mission as “saving the environment,” while in China, Taoist environmental efforts include practitioners depicting Laozi as a “green god.” Duara adds that “some villagers seek to protect their local ecology through revived temple communities.”



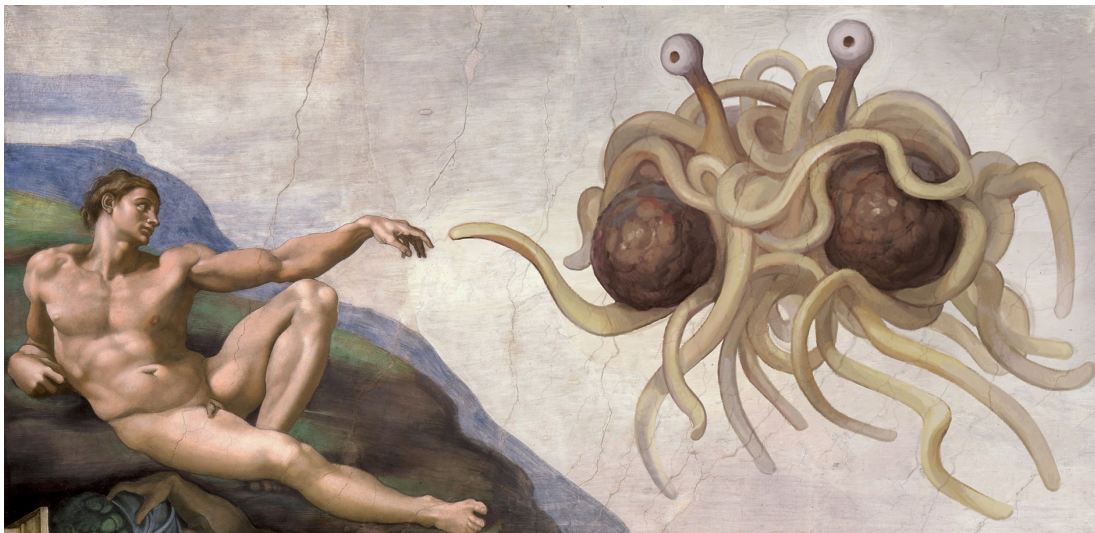
The Chinese state has attempted to crack down on these “social aspects” of religion engaged in challenging injustices but has not been successful. In Cambodia, people who live in the Prey Lang forest that is facing destruction by massive logging are demonstrating by painting their faces and staging ritual dramas using traditional ideas of avatars as well as images from the movie *Avatar* to publicize their cause. They have

developed surveillance systems of the forest and links to NGOs. In India under Nerendra Modi, environmental groups have also been targeted, as foreign NGOs are being banned, according to Duara. He argues that such groups offer transcendent ideals that provide activists with moral authority to do what they think is right. At the same time, these groups are part of traditions that allow for dialogue, and one “can accept other notions of how to achieve that transcendent state.”

When a parody religion becomes the real thing

The spoof religion known as the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster was started to parody creationists and challenge establishment churches in Europe but is now taking on the shape of a religion itself reports the *Atlantic* (October). The parody religion, also known as the Pastafarians, started in the U.S. amidst the battle over teaching evolution and creation in the public schools in 2005, arguing that one couldn't prove there wasn't a flying spaghetti monster, just as creationists argued that it couldn't be proven that a supernatural being hadn't created life. Since then, the semi-parodic Pastafarians have established Facebook pages throughout Europe and have waged and even won legal battles for the privileges enjoyed by other religions. But “along the way, something funny has happened to a movement founded in large part to critique organized religion; it's gotten organized and has taken on both the trappings and some of the social functions of a religion,” writes Kathy Gilsinan.

The flagship FSM church in Germany now features a weekly mass modeled on the Catholic celebration, but with noodles and beer in place of bread and wine. FSM officiants even conduct weddings in several countries, with New Zealand becoming the first country to recognize these marriages legally. FSM has its own iconography—a deity with spaghetti and two meatballs and a pair of eyes—as well as a Friday Sabbath (because “our god was faster than the other gods, and he finished with the creation of Earth earlier”), and participants donning pirate costumes and celebrating with beer. In Russia, “where the church is particularly active, eight Pastafarians were detained for holding an unauthorized ‘pasta procession,’” Gilsinan adds. Douglas Cowan, who studies parody religions, says that FSM's guiding idea is that “nothing is inherently sacred; it's sacred by virtue of the fact that people agree that it's sacred.”



Findings & Footnotes

■ The religious press, like the faith groups they represent, tended to move in predictable directions regarding their endorsements or support of this year's presidential candidates. But the way in which the candidacy of Donald Trump has fared in the evangelical press—if not so much rank-and-file evangelicals—does stand out. *Charisma* magazine may have even caught its own readers by surprise in the fervency of its support of Trump. Much of the October issue is one loud rallying cry for evangelicals and charismatics to line up for the controversial candidate, even if they may find him personally offensive, to turn back a Hillary Clinton presidency. In fact, the issue portrays Trump's shortcomings as the way God can work through disreputable leaders, as articles compared the candidate to the corrupt biblical figure of Cyrus. The reason *Charisma* cites Cyrus so often is because of a link between Trump being the 45th president and the 45th chapter in the book of Isaiah, which tells the story Cyrus. *Charisma* has increasingly embraced the Christian right in the last decade, and the magazine has been outspoken in anti-Islamic sentiment for quite a while, but it has also generally embraced the globalization of Pentecostalism and Hispanic charismatics, making its anti-immigrant stance more unexpected.



Other evangelical magazines have been far more critical of Trump. Late in the election season (and after the “Access Hollywood” tape was released), *Christianity Today* editorialized against the candidate. The recent scandals also turned the more conservative Reformed *World* magazine (and “new Calvinist” leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention, such as Albert Mohler) squarely against Trump, leading Mark Silk to argue in his blog *Spiritual Politics* that Calvinists “believe that much of the world is unredeemed and unredeemable—including even Republican presidential candidates. And if that means withholding your support from them, so be it.”

■ Far from being two antagonistic fields, religion plays a prominent role in gaming culture with significant influence on collective imaginations, according to six scholars in a roundtable article published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (September). “Digital games are to the twenty-first century what films were to the twentieth century,” thus making them a mandatory field of research for scholars who want to understand contemporary culture (Gregory Price Grieve). This interest for a new field of



research also emerges with a new generation of scholars who have grown up with video games and recognize the connections between games and traditional subjects of religion (Rabia Gregory). One discovers, indeed, that video games are “awash with religious themes and contents” (Shanny Luft)—not only depicting temples and churches, or being about rabbis or Hindu deities, but also inventing myths, communities, rituals, and sacred spaces.

For instance, Luft writes, in *Bioshock Infinite* (2013), “the player must undergo baptism at the

hands of a fanatical prophet in order to progress through the story.” Rachel Wagner proposes a fourfold approach of *religion in gaming* (representations of religion), *religion as gaming* (similarities, for instance both having end goals with losers and winners), *gaming as religion* (implicit religious activity, sense of purpose and meaning for gamers, escape to an otherworldly space), and *gaming in religion* (religious board games, gaming divination practices). Luft adds that researchers tend to perceive religion and games as disparate, but they would be well advised to be aware if the people they study are playing games and also how the attitude to games has evolved in specific religious contexts (e.g. evangelicals). For more information on this issue, visit: <https://www.aarweb.org/publications/journal-american-academy-religion>.

■ *The Imminent Frame* religion blog of the Social Science Research Council features a special forum on the Black Lives Matter movement and how it relates to religion and secularism. Some observers have noted that the movement does not have the religious participation and involvement of the black church as compared to the civil rights movement. Most of the contributors acknowledge that the black church plays a marginal role in the formal movement and that only a minority of activists invoke the language or practices of their religious traditions. But they also note that the leadership and other participants invoke a quite syncretistic spirituality. As suggested by cofounder Alicia Garza’s hashtag “Love God Herself,” many of these spiritual currents draw on feminist, black, and LGBT liberationist theologies. Other articles in the forum observe that a distinct black secularism has emerged among participants that nevertheless draws on religious and spiritual themes, such as “beloved community” and the sacredness of lives. To download this forum, visit: <http://blogs.ssrc.org>.



■ New research from different countries suggests that explaining jihadism primarily through religious lenses may no longer match reality, especially since the Islamic State (IS) has become prominent. While other factors have always been acknowledged to play a role, researchers point both to crime and to nihilism as important dimensions of the Islamic radicals’ experience. While the presence of criminals in terrorist groups is not new, their mobilization through the Islamic State has made the phenomenon more pronounced, to the extent that former criminals make a majority of jihadists in many European countries, write Rajan Basra, Peter R. Neumann, and Claudia Brunner in the report *Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus*, published by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR, London). The authors stress, however, that this correlation does not mean an organizational merging of criminal and jihadist groups but rather a recruitment from the same pool of people, making possible a transfer of skills. For instance, it makes it quite possible that terrorist activities will be financed increasingly through crime. More than half of the people in the sample had been incarcerated before they became radicals. According to the study, the IS jihadist narrative matches personal needs and desires of criminals, making it possible either to find redemption through terrorist involvement (dreams

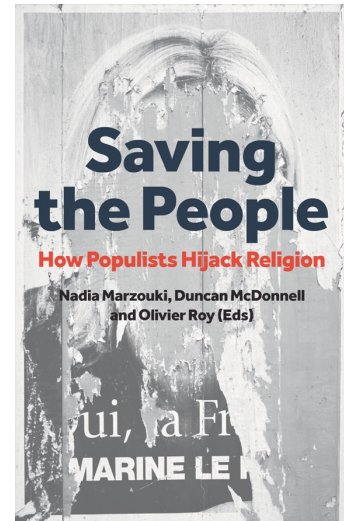


of doing something “pure”) or to continue forms of involvement in crime that become legitimized. “Being ‘pious’ is no guarantee that criminal behavior has stopped,” the authors write.

The French scholar Olivier Roy has also attempted to renew his interpretation of jihadist violence in his new book in French *Le Djihad et la Mort* (Seuil), to be published in English in March 2017 as *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State* (Hurst). Roy starts from the striking fact that most jihadist terrorists in the West do not attempt to escape death and on the contrary embrace it, even if it does not bring them closer to the realization of their stated goals. Based on a sample he has gathered, Roy observes that radicals who become terrorists are primarily born-again Muslims (or converts; about 25 percent of his sample), who previously had led a secular life and often had some criminal background. Roy has identified no common psychological, social, or economic pattern. New radicals become religious quite rapidly and outside of Islamic communal structures, not paying much attention to orthopraxy.

Roy agrees that the tendency of Salafis to create closed, parallel societies poses a real challenge for Western countries. Despite a number of shared references with Salafism, however, Roy does not see it as a primary entry point. The Islamic religious culture of new radicals is limited. While the IS is able to produce literature written by its own Islamic ideologists, it is not those texts that draw new jihadists, Roy claims, but “a radical *imaginaire*” that will use those texts as doctrinal proof for this mindset. They speak more about action than about religion, in contrast with Salafis. While they see themselves as the avengers of the Muslim Ummah, Roy considers jihadist terrorists as being in essence nihilists, fascinated by apocalyptic prospects and much more interested in dying than in living in a “true” Islamic society. The eschatological perspectives emphasized by the IS allow young radicals to make their individual destiny part of a much wider project. While Roy does not deny that Salafism represents a radicalization of Islam, he sees contemporary jihadism as being rather an Islamization of radicalism. French experts have hotly debated Roy’s theses.

■ *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (Oxford University Press, \$35), edited by Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy, is an important book on a phenomenon that we are only likely to hear more about in the coming years. There is much talk of religious nationalism tossed about in both the social and mainstream media, but at the outset, the editors make it clear that when it comes to religion, “populists speak of identity and churches speak of faith.” This tendency is seen in far right groups in Europe that hold up the notion of “Christian heritage” and identity underscoring an “idealized and a historical notion of a harmonious community life that existed before the elites and bad ‘others’ began to endanger the prosperity, rights and well-being of the good people.” That being said, it does appear that populist movements are increasingly using religion for mobilizing purposes. As might be expected, secular nations showed less religious populist movements and parties, so in France and England, religion is strictly an identity marker (“Christian Britain”), and in the former country, the far right National Front has increasingly de-emphasized Christian identity and has adopted secularist “laïcité” positions. The churches have criticized Geert Wilders’s Freedom Party in the Netherlands for its anti-immigrant stance (though he seeks support in the Christian heartland with his anti-Muslim rhetoric, most religious Dutch vote Christian Democratic), but he has drawn support from Jewish and conservative backers in the U.S. The situation is different in Eastern Europe and the U.S., with several of the contributions showing the complex interplay between populist sentiments and religion.



In Poland, the growth of populism is due in part to an “inward-looking and nation-centric brand of Catholicism,” writes Ben Stanley. But even here, it is difficult to draw a straight line between voter preferences and populist parties such as the Law and Justice Party (PiS). In Hungary, populists have attempted to appeal to and bridge pagan and Christian traditions in their attempt to construct the nation as a family and have been accused of anti-Semitism (overriding anti-Islam) in the process. Christianity has become a strong identity marker in Hungary since the recent great migration from the Middle East (refusing Muslim entry), and as the main churches (Calvinist, Catholic, and Lutheran) assume a greater public role, the two main populist parties find it in their interest to cooperate with religious institutions. A chapter on the Tea Party in the U.S. by Mazouki likewise shows how the movement both drew on Christian anti-Islamic themes and attracted Christian right supporters moving from the fringes to the mainstream and paving the way for Donald Trump (though the book was published too early to examine the Trump phenomenon). Olivier Roy concludes that populism seeks both to secularize the public sphere (out of opposition to Islam) while reviving Christian identity, but this strategy is more likely to secularize Europe further rather than extend Christian influence.