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FEATURE STORY:

Religion still invisible in contemporary art galleries, though gaining admission to museums

While religious concepts and imagery remains off-limits in many contemporary art galleries, religious artifacts are beginning to find more of a reception in the world's museums. In the Catholic magazine *Commonweal* (March 10), Daniel Grant writes, "Sincere expressions of spirituality or religious faith are largely absent from art galleries, except the ones that various churches and synagogues around the United States maintain or the museums of religiously affiliated colleges and universities. Instead, religion appears—when it does appear—as an object of scorn and suspicion." Grant cites exhibitions at the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, which included a painting by Mark Ryden showing a little girl in a Communion dress sawing into a piece of ham that bears the Latin inscription that translates into the "Mystical Body of Christ." In 2015 the Milwaukee Art Museum acquired the controversial portrait by Niki Johnson of Pope Benedict XVI, "Eggs Benedict," which was created with 17,000 multi-colored condoms. Grant traces much of the disdain and dismissal of religion to the art school and Master of Fine Arts programs, where students are actively discouraged from creating work that addresses spirituality, ritual, and faith, especially if it concerns Christianity. Art historian and critic James Elkins says that student artists are trained to concentrate on "criticality in relation to existing power structures," be they received ideas, capitalism, or the church.

While much contemporary art focuses on identity, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, and religion is one element of identity, those other identity markers are more fluid and open to interpretation, whereas religion is "more set in time and less open to reconsideration, certainly less tolerant of difference," Grant writes. By the time these artists reach the commercial art world, "they know to keep their beliefs quiet or face rejection." Grant concludes, "What does seem unnerving is the fear that many art-gallery and museum directors have about offending visitors, even when many of those museum officials bravely defend—on grounds of free expression—artwork that might force parents to cover their young children's eyes." The new book *Religion in Museums* (Bloomsbury, \$26.96), edited by Gretchen Buggein, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, makes a similar critique, though some of the contributors see signs of greater openness to religious themes surrounding art and artifacts. In the Foreword, Sally Promey of Yale University notes that the new interest in religion "roughly coincides with the dismantling of secularization theory," which had led museums to see religion as a "vestigial organ or appendage, a relic of the past, or a

token of presumably less advanced civilizations. ...That Sister Corita Kent can be resurrected in 2015–16 as a Pop artist, with art historians paying scant attention, beyond the merely descriptive, to the substance of her religious convictions and practice, however, provides a recent example that demonstrates how tough it is to shake fundamental ingrained cultural hierarchies and biases.”

But Promley adds, “Sometimes objects resist the sort of cultural elevations so-called secular museums seek to enforce. ...Slippage between museum exhibition and religious practice occurs fairly often.” This conflation happens when exhibits become actual sites of devotion, as when the Smithsonian Folklife Festival’s showcase of Tibetan Buddhism had monks demonstrating the making of a mandala and an observant follower left an offering and engaged in Buddhist devotions. In fact, “Wherever religious objects are displayed, in both sacred and secular museum spaces, people pray, make offerings, and devotionally touch objects,” the editors write in the Introduction. Art journalist Tom Freudenheim writes that even with the growth of museums run by various religions, they may not represent themselves accurately. The various Jewish museums move between pride and victimhood, “while artifacts associated with Jewish rituals (individual, family,



and communal) are as disassociated from belief, spirituality and ritual validation in a Jewish museum as are the Christian objects in most art museums, buried in their cleansed generic narratives.” In the book’s Afterword, the editors conclude that much of the progress that has been made by religion in museums has been the achievement of learning staff. These professionals guide and explain the background and meanings of religious objects, often with the help of interactive

and digital media. They add, “One of the huge challenges museums face is to help people who have never had any contact with religion understand what it is that motivates religious people: what ‘devout’ feels like inside.”

(*Commonweal*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/>)

ARTICLES:

Trump presidency reviving religious left or just liberal clergy?

The election of U.S. President Donald Trump has mobilized the leaders and clergy of mainline and liberal Catholic churches, though it remains to be seen if the members of these churches can be stirred to action to the same extent. Reports indicate that the religious left is being rejuvenated over protests against Trump on such issues as immigration, healthcare, religious freedom pertaining to the travel ban on several Muslim nations, and cuts on domestic and foreign spending. A report from *Reuters* (March 27) was particularly upbeat about the prospect of a religious left revival as an emerging “force in U.S. politics.” Reporter Scott Malone reports on the growth of congregations and clergy volunteering to provide sanctuary to undocumented immigrants and testify before Congress on a wide range of social issues. The number of churches volunteering to offer sanctuary doubled to 800 in 45 of the 50 states after the election. Leaders of Faith in Public Life, a progressive public policy organization, were surprised to see 300 clergy show up at a January rally to protest the appointment of Jeff Sessions as U.S. Attorney General. Malone links this upsurge in activism to such previous efforts as “Moral Mondays,” credited with aiding last year’s election defeat of North Carolina’s Republican Governor Pat McCrory.



New alliances and coalitions between different religious groups have also developed, especially on questions of the growth of anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment. The Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, which brings together Muslim and Jewish women, has tripled its number of U.S. chapters to nearly 170 since November, according to its founder Sheryl Olitsky. Malone acknowledges that the real strength of the new religious left will be determined by its ability to turn out voters for the mid-term elections in 2018. Since evangelicals have been more effective in mobilizing their lay members on political action than mainline churches, issues that bridge both groups may have more traction. *The Economist* (March 17) touches on one such issue in the form of Trump’s proposed cuts to foreign aid. While liberal and conservative churches have clashed over how best to aid the poor and the level and kind of government support for faith-based organizations, the plan to slash the foreign aid budget has moved church leaders from across a broad ideological and theological spectrum to oppose such a measure.

More than 100 church leaders and dignitaries wrote to Congressional leaders to oppose such cuts, including Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Hispanic Pentecostal leader Samuel Rodriguez, both of whom participated in the president's inauguration ceremony. The statement comes at a time when humanitarian agencies are warning of a looming, acute emergency in at least four countries (Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia, and Nigeria), where millions are at risk of possible starvation. The signatories represented mainline, evangelical, and Catholic churches, though there is always the question of whether members line up with such statements. Surveys have found that conservative Christians are far more opposed to government anti-poverty programs compared to action by voluntary groups. But the way in which the White House announced the cuts, omitting any references to alternative ways of helping the world's poor and stressing its "America first" agenda, may generate more opposition, at least among "many Christian leaders...with first-hand knowledge of the humanitarian tragedies unfolding in certain parts of the world."

(Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-religion-idUSKBN16Y114>)

"Holy trinity" of hip-hop injecting redemption and rejoicing into songs

"Rap got religious in 2016. Its beats and bars were baptized by holy lyricism and Gospel samples," writes Zac Davis in the Jesuit magazine *America* (March 6). Kanye West started the trend, which is also in evidence among such rap artists as Chance the Rapper and Kendrick Lamar. Davis writes, "For much of the 2000s, rap music garnered mainstream attention and a fair amount of radio play. But it had been significantly sanitized for popular consumption..." After West went through a period of personal crises and expressed such emotions over these hardships in his songs, it became more common for rap artists to use emotions in their work. "And with emotions, religious feelings would surely follow," Davis adds. "West became hip-hop's Christ figure, taking the ugliness of suffering, diving deeply into it, and from there allowing for a resurrection and reunion with the divine." Lamar, the "second person of hip-hop's holy trinity," has "sent music bloggers scrambling to explain his theology of hope and justice. The hook to his song 'Alright,'" which can be heard at Black Lives Matter protests, is "anchored in eschatological trust in the arc of God's justice (... 'But if God got us, then we gon' be alright')."



Davis writes that Lamar "speaks to a generation that has largely given up on organized religion" by stressing that he is no better than anyone else and "never sounds preachy." He adds that while "West and Lamar's music focuses heavily on sin and redemption, Chance the Rapper fills out hip-hop's bend toward religion with an injection of rejoicing." His song "'Blessings (Reprise)'" looks hopefully toward a Christian utopia," while "celebrat[ing]

his relationship with God ('I speak to God in public, I speak to God in public / He keep my rhymes in couplets...'). One reviewer writes, "In an age overloaded with irony, Chance's belief in God,

religion, and the capacity for social change are presented so earnestly that they come off as rebellious.” Davis concludes that while “big networks and record labels are often hesitant to engage taboo subjects like religion, rappers need labels less and less thanks to streaming services like Spotify and TIDAL.”

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

Jewish culture remixed and rebranded

Jewish culture is being re-branded and marketed to secular Jews, intermarried couples, and non-Jews, reports *Bloomberg Businessweek* (March 28). While there has “long been a mainstream taste for Jewish humor and food...the [recent] fervor is something new,” writes Jennifer Miller. Pioneering such marketing of a wide range of Jewish experiences and culture is the lifestyle company Arq, which “serves as a portal for interfaith couples, their friends, and their families to find ‘relevant, inclusive aesthetically elevated’ information and products,” including holiday-planning guides that may include a traditional Shabbat dinner alongside “interviews with Jewish entrepreneurs, as well as chefs who cook up artisanal halvah and horseradish.” There are now secular dinner and dating platforms drawing on Jewish clichés (the opinionated mother) and companies that offer trips to secular professionals to Israel. Most of these companies are less than three years old.

Miller notes that while as a rule Jews don’t proselytize to non-Jews, some in the cultural-marketing world “have decided that enlarging the tent is the best way to keep young Jews inside it.” The social dining app OneTable, which brings people from all religious backgrounds to celebrate inclusive Shabbat meals, finds that 10 to 15 percent of OneTable guests are not Jewish. “But through technology, we’re seeding hundreds of new communities,” says executive director Aliza Kline. Some of these marketers are taking a page from the branding of Buddhist and other eastern religious practices, comparing a non-Jew finding inspiration in the Sabbath to the millions of non-Buddhists who practice yoga or go on meditation retreats to India. “It’s the latest way that ancient traditions are meeting modern life,” says a “Jew-ish” travel company founder.



CURRENT RESEARCH

● **The use of vouchers in religious schooling may reveal both “good news” and “bad news” for churches, according to a recent study.** The paper, presented at the recent meeting of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture, is one of the first studies to look at the effects of vouchers on religious life, using data from ten years of Catholic parish finances in Milwaukee, a city with one of the most extensive voucher programs in the U.S. Researchers Daniel Hungerman (University of Notre Dame), Kevin Rinz (U.S. Census Bureau), and Jay Frymark (St. Joseph Parish) found that voucher expansion significantly lowered the probability of parish closures and mergers. At the same time, the authors find that Catholic parishes operating schools in their sample saw a decline in religious activity and a shift away from non-school religious expenditures (in such areas as religious staff salaries, mission support, and church maintenance), and a decline in religious revenue, when vouchers expand.

“Put differently, our numbers suggest that, within our sample alone, the Milwaukee voucher program has led over time to a decline in non-educational church revenue of \$60 million,” Hungerman, Rinz, and Frymark write. The authors note that the renewed promotion of vouchers by the Trump administration may mean that they will play a critical role in determining the role of American religion. But the effect of vouchers on religion “depends upon whether one characterizes religion by the prevalence of churches or by the activities within churches.”



● **Evangelicals and other conservative Christians have increasingly claimed that they are facing discrimination, but how valid is that concern?** A recent article in *The Atlantic* magazine (March 10) reports that a recent poll from the Public Religion Research Institute shows that 57 percent of white evangelicals think they suffer more discrimination than Muslims. Only 44 percent say there is a lot of anti-Muslim discrimination. A recent reader poll in the Catholic magazine *America* (March 20) finds that the concern about Christian discrimination resonates among more liberal believers as well. When asked about which religious group is discriminated against the most, 80 percent of the readers selected Muslim. But more readers identified a prominent threat to the liberty of Christians (10 percent) compared to Jews (5 percent), even though reports of rising anti-Semitism have been in the news. Writing in the online Christian magazine *The Stream* (March

19), sociologist George Yancey argues that both anti-Muslim and anti-Christian discrimination exist, although far less research has been conducted on the latter phenomenon.

In new research he has conducted, Yancey finds that there is a “negative framing” of “fundamentalist” Christians in the media. He found that when media personnel are presented with identical situations involving Muslims and Christians, they express more concern over hatred against the former than the latter. Yancey writes that a similar percentage of people discriminate against Christians and Muslims, though anti-Muslim discrimination tends to take place among older white males who are politically conservative while anti-Christian sentiment is held by those who are white, male, highly educated, and politically progressive. The effects of such bias and discrimination are also different: conservative white males may be more likely to engage in violence than wealthy educated progressives. Thus Muslims may suffer more damaging bias than evangelical Christians, be more at risk of religious-based violence, and have a harder time finding entry-level occupational positions. But Yancey concludes, “It’s also more reasonable to argue that evangelical Christians experience more damaging bias than Muslims. They face prejudice from the powerful cultural centers of our society.”

(*The Stream*, <https://stream.org>)



● Although there is real and perceived bias against evangelical students in American universities, those tensions can be defused through these Christians’ greater participation in campus life, although schools with highly divisive environments may have more negative outcomes, according to a recent study. In his blog *Ahead of the Trend* (March 20), David Briggs cites an analysis of a survey of 11,400 non-evangelical college students over three years that finds that other Christians have a fairly favorable view of evangelicals. Non-believers and Muslims, Buddhists, and Jews, however, were less likely to say that evangelicals were moral and tolerant and made contributions to society. The Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey found that even evangelicals’ harshest critics were more favorable when they had classroom and more informal discussions with such believers and participated in interfaith

activities on campus. In universities and colleges experiencing more divisions where students felt that their views were silenced and there were fewer efforts to encourage productive exchanges, there were more anti-evangelical attitudes. In any event, atheist students showed the most negative attitudes toward evangelicals; only 29 percent were highly appreciative of evangelicals—the same percentage of evangelicals feeling the same about evangelicals.



● **The Buddhist vote is miniscule compared to Christians, but the last election shows how American Buddhists have become increasingly distinct in recent years.** In one way, Buddhists resemble the growing non-affiliated population in their Democratic voting patterns, writes Miles D. Williams in the *Religion in Public* blog (March 17). In analyzing data from the 2016 Common Content Dataset, published by Harvard Dataverse, Williams finds that while representing just 0.9 percent of the sample, Buddhists comprise a growing number of consistent Democratic voters among the nones and religious minorities. Trump did the best among evangelicals, but as one moves to religious minorities (i.e., Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists), Clinton was the overwhelming favorite. But there are some differences with Buddhists; their support for Green Party candidate Jill Stein was the highest of all religious groups, standing at almost 10 percent. Yet Buddhists were also second after Jews among non-Christians to cast their vote for Donald Trump. Although a significant majority of Buddhists voted for Hillary Clinton (63.3 percent), the share of Buddhists who voted for the Democratic candidate was the lowest among non-Christians. In parsing the Buddhist vote according to its different denominations, Williams finds it was the Zen Buddhists who cast the largest vote for Stein. The cleavage between Asian



and White Buddhists is found even in politics, with Trump receiving a substantial share (though not the majority) of Asian votes, while white, largely convert Buddhists went for Clinton and Stein.

(*Religion in Public*, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2017/03/17/the-buddhist-vote-in-2016>)

● **A recent survey find that three out of four Canadians believe immigrants should be tested for “anti-Canadian” values, with 23 percent believing that Muslims should be banned from the country.** The poll, carried out by the CROP polling firm for Radio-Canada, had a large representation from Quebec (67 percent) and takes place during a time when politicians have called for testing immigrants on their appreciation of Canadian values. The *Montreal Gazette* (March 13) reports that despite most Canadians welcoming Syrian refugees (60 percent of Canadians, and 58 percent of Quebec residents in particular), the 23 percent who favored a Muslim ban rose to the level of 32 percent in Quebec. In asking Quebecers about which groups were the most integrated into Canadian society, Muslim immigrants polled at 42 percent, with Jewish immigrants receiving a rating of 72 percent. A slight majority (51 percent) of Canadians said that the presence of Muslims threatened their sense of security—a figure that increased to 57 percent in Quebec.



● **Climate-related disasters shape religious preferences, but whether they strengthen religious identity depends on the frequency of such incidents and whether their victims are religious in the first place, according to a paper by Oscar Zapata of the University of Calgary.** At the recent conference of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture, Zapata presented a paper using Canadian data from the International Social Survey Program and the Public Safety Canada survey from 1992–2012, focusing on the rate of belief in God and the intensity of religious preferences (measured by congregational attendance) and disasters related to climatic patterns.

Zapata finds that when the number of disasters and their economic costs are considered, climate disasters increase the probability for the average person to be non-religious, suggesting “an erosion of religious preferences. In contrast, human losses of climate disasters intensify religious preferences among religious people.” The researcher notes that climate disasters have an effect on religious preferences not only when events happen locally (such as in the province where respondents live) but also when disasters happen in other provinces.



● **Political and government support of churches in Sweden make them less likely to oppose such a measure as same-sex marriages than more independent congregations, even if conservative members may be against such policies, according to a study presented at the recent meeting of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture.** In his paper, Uppsala University economist Niklas Bengtsson notes that economists going back to Adam Smith have argued that secular states can induce or even “bribe” churches to adopt less strict beliefs and practices. But it is difficult to test this idea, because it may also be the case that liberal churches are more likely to draw government funding. Bengtsson’s study circumvents this problem by focusing on the same-sex marriage conflict (a measure endorsed by the national church since 2005) and studying parishes that receive funding based on centuries-old property assignments where they cannot sell, trade, or change their property shares.

Using a data set of 1,477 Church of Sweden parishes that shows the level of subsidies church properties received (the church is no longer an official state institution, although individual church properties can receive external revenue from the government), the study finds that priests serving in income-protected parishes that draw revenue from state-sponsored property rather than from member payments are less likely to oppose same-sex marriage publicly. In contrast, Bengtsson finds no evidence that the private beliefs of local church members adjust to political subsidies. He concludes that his findings are relevant to other current religious conflicts, such as opposition to female priests and abortion, and even hints at the possibility of using subsidies to de-radicalize religious organizations more generally.



● **Recent claims that the Church of England is moribund and isolated from the British people may be exaggerated, writes Clive Field in the journal *Theology* (Vol. 120:2).** The recent popular book *That Was the Church That Was*, stirred controversy over its portrayal of a church that was out of touch with society and mainly preoccupied with maintaining its establishment status, leading to a steady decline since the late 1980s. The leadership of successive Archbishops of Canterbury was also seen as a significant factor in the church's decline. Through examining a wide range of past and current surveys, Brown finds that the Church of England's decline is more long-standing, with most measures already at low ebb in 1986. Contrary to the book's view, the church's illiberal preoccupation with sexual issues and its establishment status did not have much negative impact on people's views of the institution. Aside from the church's delay in appointing women bishops and opposition to remarriage after divorce, other issues, including gay rights and the positions of various Archbishops of Canterbury, did not cause wide disillusion. Brown concludes that the "umbiblical cord attaching [the church] to the nation does not appear to have been severed just yet."



(*Theology*, <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/journal/theology>)

FEATURES:

British evangelical churches find new mission in gentrified neighborhoods

Urban and spiritual renewal are being joined by churches seeking to minister in gentrified areas of cities in the U.K., reports *The Guardian* (March 7). While urban planners and theorists have assumed that gentrification accompanies and even helps generate secularization, recent studies have suggested otherwise. The article notes that the growth that has taken place in evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal churches is often occurring in urban centers, and not only among immigrants. The city of Bristol has become a case study of such "spiritual gentrification." Joel Duddell writes that in Bristol, the "proliferation of local micro-breweries, vinyl revival record stores and pop-up greengrocers is mirrored in the rise of a new breed of grassroots congregation, attracting younger, trendier demographics with considerable success." The urban spiritual renewal in Bristol has unlikely origins. Last year, a South Carolina woman prophesied that Bristol was going to experience an "outpouring of healing"—despite the fact that she had never heard of the city, let alone visited it. The prophecy convinced a group of evangelicals in Bristol that their city

was going to become a healing center, and they went about organizing a conference that included the prominent American charismatic healer and teacher Randy Clark.

From that event, the interest in faith healing led to the conviction that God was moving “not just within the church, but also in the business sectors, social justice and the arts,” according to the website of Release 2016, the conference organizer. One of these participants’ first acts after the conference was to revamp the Elemental grocery in the gentrified neighborhood of Stokes Croft. The same group started the now 1,800-member strong community Woodlands and the spin-off congregation LoveBristol, which in turn runs a range of startups and social enterprises in the neighborhood, including a second-hand furniture shop and a vintage clothes store. Another growing charismatic church, E5 (the E stands for Elim, one of England’s largest Pentecostal denominations), hosts a wide range of social groups and functions. “They are openly pursuing their social community—modern urban dwellers—in the same way the socialist-Methodist miners of Wales had their rugby teams and choirs,” Duddell writes. Critics charge that all this church activity caters to the hipsters and yuppies that have sent property prices skyrocketing. But church members and leaders argue that they are reaching a wider demographic that includes the poor and homeless and immigrants, while the profits from their start-ups are channeled into charities. LoveBristol also sees its community houses as offering a viable solution to the rising cost of rent.



South Caucasus and the uses of religion as “soft power”

External powers have exercised an influence in the South Caucasus, a region with small countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) on one of the borders between Islam and Christianity, for centuries. Religion may be one of the channels serving such purposes and may thus be feared by political elites, though it is one among a range of other geopolitical, economic, and ethnic factors that are proving just as important. One could draw this conclusion at the end of a conference on “Religion and Soft Power in the Caucasus,” organized by the Tblisi’s Georgian Institute of Politics in mid-March that **RW** attended. Joseph Nye first used the concept of soft power in 1990 to describe the capability of an entity (e.g. a state) to wield influence without using hard power. While the concept has been criticized, it offers a heuristic tool for approaching various aspects that political analysis often ignores. Most attention at the conference was paid to Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

As emphasized by Hamed Kazenzadeh (University of Warsaw), Iran's policy towards the Caucasus is primarily a pragmatic one, with security interests taking priority over ideology. Christian Armenia is the most congenial neighbor, while the ethnic factor (Azeri ethnic population in Iran) and energy competition make Azerbaijan a country of concern. In Armenia, where there are at most 8,000 Muslims, Iran does not attempt to spread its religion but to emphasize the universal and cultural aspects of Shiism. The presence of an Armenian community in Iran, with some 200 churches and a parliamentary representation in Tehran, also serves as a bridge between both countries adds Tatevik Mkrtchyan (Yerevan State University). In Azerbaijan, on the other hand, the government is wary of the influence of Iranian clergy and literature on its Shiite population, and it takes every measure to prevent the emergence of an independent clergy, preferring to support the state-controlled Shi'a bureaucracy that does not enjoy a high level of public trust, reports Anar Valiyev (ADA University, Azerbaijan).

In Georgia, the local Orthodox Church maintains friendly relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, despite the brief 2008 war between the two countries that has frozen several other channels of influence, according to Salome Minesashvili (Free University, Berlin). In November 2016, the Georgian Patriarch visited Moscow for the fifth time since the 2008 war and stressed that "we need each other." Indeed, a good deal of Russian Orthodox literature is translated into Georgian, and both churches share an anti-Western and anti-globalization ideological discourse. But some sectors of the Georgian Church are more suspicious of such ties, especially considering the situation in Abkhazia (an area of Georgia that has seceded with Russian support and claims to be an independent country). And, notwithstanding criticism of the West, the Georgian Church is also supportive of Western integration, which is a foreign policy priority of Georgia. Thus Minesashvili concludes that ideological affinity with Russia cannot predict how the Georgian Church will behave since political interests are at stake as well. Its position, however, allows the Georgian Church to perceive itself as a mediator.

Regarding Turkey, it is active both in Georgia and in Azerbaijan, with

business as well as cultural, religious, and development interests; Georgia is the seventh largest recipient of Turkish support, although most goes to areas populated by Muslims (more than 10 percent of the Georgian population). In Azerbaijan, economic integration with Turkey is strong. According to Fuad Aliyev (ADA University, Baku), the feelings of "Turkic brotherhood" (with linguistic and ethnic commonalities) have been more compelling than "Muslim brotherhood," though Islamic rhetoric has contributed to it. Beside the Diyanet (Turkish State administration of religious affairs) that cooperates with official Azerbaijani Muslim institutions, several non-State

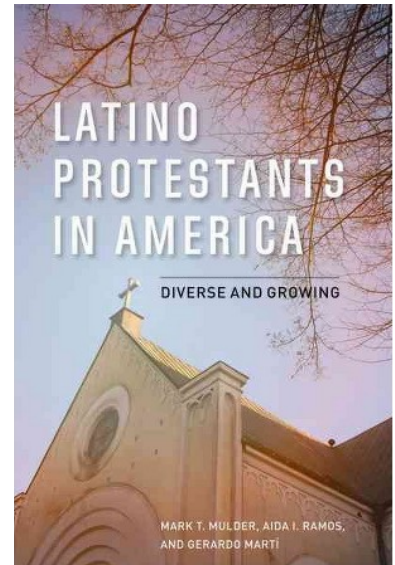


Turkish religious groups have also contributed to Turkish soft power in the country. The most successful one used to be the movement of Fethullah Gülen, which spread a positive image of Turkey in a number of countries for years through its educational, business, and media initiatives. But since the complete break between the movement and the Turkish leadership after the failed military coup of July 2016, the Gülen movement has lost much of its strength, and thus Turkish soft power in Azerbaijan has lost one of its most important and effective channels, Aliyev adds.

(Several policy papers prepared for the March conference can be downloaded as a PDF document on the GIP website: <http://gip.ge/religion-and-soft-power-in-the-south-caucasus/>. The conference concluded a research program supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation, and a volume titled Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus will be published by Routledge in September 2017).

Findings & Footnotes

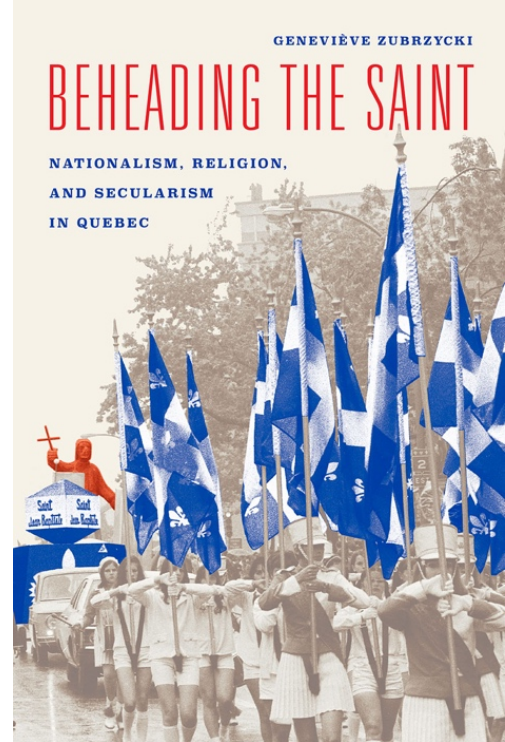
■ Hispanic Protestants in the U.S. are one of the few sectors of American Christianity that continue to grow, but they are also becoming so diverse that it is difficult to make many generalizations about them, according to the new book *Latino Protestants in America* (Rowman and Littlefield, \$38), by Mark Mulder, Aida I. Ramos, and Gerardo Marti. The authors note that for various reasons beside just language differences, Latino Protestants have been difficult to track through traditional surveys, though the authors employ a good deal of survey analysis as well as ethnographic research to fill in the gaps about them. Based on a national study of Latino churches and ministries in various U.S. regions, the researchers confirm survey findings that Hispanic Protestants often stress their religious identity more than their ethnicity, yet they also note that becoming Protestant does not make them less Latino in their practices or identity. The book looks at both Latino mainline and evangelical churches, often marked by their varying attitudes toward Catholicism, with the former sometimes adapting Catholic traditions and liturgy (leading even long-time attenders to believe they are attending Catholic churches) while evangelicals stress their differences from Catholics (though in a less polemical way than in the past).



Other topics and trends cover the increasing consolidation of Latino parachurch organizations (such under as the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference). These larger groups are increasingly addressing social issues such as immigration and community development. Even though showing some variation in liberal or conservative orientations, involvement in social and community issues is common to most of these churches. The book concludes with as many questions as answers about the state of Latino Protestants, especially on the pressing matters of immigration, citizenship, and “document status.” The authors argue that even though the immigration rate is down from Mexico and Central America due to declining fertility, immigration

dynamics and policies may be more likely to impact Latino Protestants than Catholics because the former have higher birth rates and maintain stronger network ties to churches and fellow believers in their home countries, which facilitates more migration.

■ *Beheading The Saint* (University of Chicago Press, \$35), by Genevieve Zubrzycki, suggests that even though the province of Quebec has drastically secularized over the past 40 years, religion “is a skeleton in Quebec’s closet, of a palpable absence, like phantom limb pain.” The book focuses on the commemoration of the Feast of St. John the Baptist and how it illuminates the shifting and ambiguous role of Catholicism in Quebecois identity. Through examining photos and other visual symbols, literature, and other historical documents, Zubrzycki traces how the commemoration and parades moved from a center of Quebecois Catholic and patriotic devotion to a staging ground in the 1960s for secularist and radical political activism and symbolism that directly challenged the church and national heritage (Quebec is one of the few places where blasphemy is often used in place of profanity in cursing). She argues it was these bodily, aesthetic practices and symbolism employed by a new generation, often involving blasphemous imagery and protests (including the beheading of the St. John the Baptist statue in 1969) that fomented the “quiet revolution” and rapid secularization of the 1960s. But it is an incomplete and contested secularization as seen in the way religion continues to inform recent battles over accommodating Muslims and other immigrants. The government has both restricted religious expression, such as the Islamic head covering by public officials, while allowing a crucifix to hang in the National Assembly, seeing such symbols as part of the national patrimony.



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

Bnei Baruch emerged from a small circle of students of the Kabbalah in Israel in the 1990s to become one of Israel’s largest new religious movements that is taking on a global expression. The movement, numbering 50,000 participants in Israel and 150,000 worldwide, takes a pragmatic approach to the mystical Jewish texts known as the Kabbalah, teaching that these spiritual teachings should be accessible to non-Jews and applied to society. Participants claim that Bnei Baruch is more a spirituality than a religion, though they daily gather together for “night teachings” in sex-segregated groups to study Kabbalistic texts under the charismatic leadership of its founder Michael Laitman. The movement is similar in some ways to the more publicized

Kabbalah Center, which has had a special appeal to celebrities for its popularization of Kabbalistic teachings, especially in the way it has used the media and the Internet to expand.

The group teaches a spiritualized version of “communism” that sees the world moving toward greater altruism, and members have even started a small Israeli political party. Even the relatively low-key approach of Laitman has drawn criticism and controversy from Israel’s fledgling anti-cult movement (led by ultra-Orthodox Jews). A small group of ex-members claim the group is authoritarian and abusive, although there have been few reports of actual criminal misdoings. New religious movement specialist Massimo Introvigne argues that the opposition more likely stems from rival groups and interpretations of the Kabbalah that stress its Jewish or purely scholarly nature. (Source: *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, Vol 13, Article 2; <http://www.religjournal.com>)

