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FEATURE STORY:

Praying and networking give religious right second wind?

In just a year's time, media commentators have swung between dismissing the religious right as a spent force and treating it as looming—and often threatening—presence in public life. Judging by recent reports, the religious right today may be a bit of both—weak in an organizational sense but wielding influence through its networks. The website *Religion Dispatches* (August 4) looks at the group POTUS Shield, a charismatic prayer network based around support for President Trump and his agenda. In an interview with the website, Peter Montgomery, a senior fellow with the liberal People for the American Way, says that leaders such as Rick Joyner and Cindy Jacobs who are connected to the network “aren’t out there trying to create a large organization. They’re not trying to create a Pentecostal Family Research Council. They’re just trying to build up their own networks of followers.” He adds that much of POTUS Shield has its roots in the New Apostolic Reformation, which seeks to reclaim the authority and spiritual gifts of the apostles while creating social transformation.

Montgomery cites the work of sociologists Brad Christerson and Richard Flory, who argue that such loose networks, while flexible enough to allow church leaders to spread their ideas without having any accountability from an organization, may have less political impact since they refrain from the work of organizing for political change. Yet because their networks overlap, with someone like Jerry Boykin of the Family Research Council also serving on the board of POTUS Shield, these groups “help feed people into the kind of political organizing that other religious right groups are doing.” Montgomery portrays POTUS Shield as a new phenomenon, but *Charisma* magazine (July), which is a strong supporter of Trump and promoter of these networks, links the group to an intercessory prayer movement that has existed for over a decade. The magazine notes that similar groups, such as Justice House of Prayer (JHOP) and Intercessors for America (IFA), are actually experiencing a “second wind.” The groups formed in Washington around 2004 and targeted issues for prayer that ranged from abortion to racial injustice.

It was the IFA that has highlighted the issue of the repeal of the Johnson Amendment (thereby allowing clergy to endorse candidates from the pulpit) and a societal return to traditional marriage. When a coven of “witches targeted President Trump with destruction,” the network rallied “prayer warriors” for rapid response. While bolstered by conservative changes, such as the appointment of Neil Gorsuch as a Supreme Court justice (which POTUS Shield prayed for and “prophesied”), organizers claim that such prayer activity is just a precursor for a “Third Great Awakening,” that will create a “godly society.”

(Religion Dispatches, Charisma)



ARTICLES:

Anti-immigrant cloud threatens transnational missions

The growth of immigrant church leaders seeking to evangelize their fellow immigrants in the U.S., often through transnational groups and congregations, is coinciding with “America’s volatile relationships with immigrants [and] the waning interest of second and third generations who have little memory of their homeland,” reports *Christianity Today* magazine (July-August). Most of these mission initiatives include modest church planting efforts, child sponsorship, and elder care programs based on family and social networks among the poor and working class, writes Andy Olson. The growth of “diaspora missions” has become a hot topic among missiologists, largely

because they are seen as representing a new paradigm of integrating preaching with social concern and often operate outside of established mission organizations. They also tend to be “glocal,” meaning that national borders are “seen as more of a nuisance than a defining trait.” Olson notes that interviews with more than two-dozen mission leaders “revealed a picture of a growing but tenuous movement.”

Olson continues that “In Latino churches in particular, where a vast swath of worshippers are undocumented, the specter of deportation has chilled many outside activities and forced pastors to turn inward to console their congregations.... Potentially as consequential as the recent crackdown on immigrants are President Donald Trump’s repeated threats to shut down—or at least tax—immigrant



remittances to Mexico. Nearly every mission program in this [article] relies heavily on personal money transfers.” Anti-immigrant sentiment has long made this movement more fragile, but even if it withstands the “current national zeitgeist, there is no guarantee the next generation will want to carry [these missions] forward,” Olson adds. As the second generation becomes more financially comfortable and at home in the U.S., they do not realize the poverty still existing in their home countries and may exhibit waning interest in engaging in missions there.

(*Christianity Today*, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188; *Religion Dispatches*, <http://religiondispatches.org>)

Alt-right embraces alternative healing

Holistic health and alternative medicine are finding a following among the far right, even if the ethnic and religious origins of these remedies may seem worlds apart from their agenda, according to Holly Folk of Western Washington University. Folk, who presented a paper at the mid-August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Montreal attended by **RW**, finds an “elective affinity” between right wing groups and alternative medicine. In a content analysis of far right organizations and websites, she found that the amount of content devoted to health has increased greatly. Such Internet personalities and groups as Alex Jones and his Infowars site, Mike



Adams, and the Edwards Group regularly mix chiropractic and Ayurvedic treatments with conspiracy theories about the government and discussion about UFOs. Other beacons of the “alt-right,” such as the magazine *American Renaissance*, have so far resisted the turn to alternative health.

The far right’s anti-authoritarian stance also translates into opposition to the medical establishment. Unlike the cultural left’s embrace of holistic health, these sites have a distinct take on alternative health—they reject Chinese remedies while embracing Ayurvedic medicine because of its “Aryan” origins. But there is an unexpected tolerance of diversity, with respectful treatment of such alternative techniques as yoga and reiki. On sites such as Natural News and Fitness Forum there is also an emphasis on masculine vitality and “vitalism,” as seen in the body building treatments. Among women, advice on home birth, child rearing, and anti-vaccination is

popular. But even with these differences, both left and right uphold a “spiritual religion though self care...that is not likely to stop anytime soon,” Folk concludes.

Turned off by technology, beauty industry turns on to spirituality

The use of spirituality and the occult in beauty products is a new feature in the global organic personal care market, which is expected to exceed \$25 billion by 2025. The *New York Times Style Magazine* (August 20) reports that “It is no longer enough to employ pesticide-free ingredients—these days, products should have superpowers, too. Many companies are concocting formulas to offset the radiation allegedly emitted by technological devices, while others promote oils that don’t just moisturize the skin, but also feed the soul.” Alice Gregory writes that while this “surge of half-mystic, half-homespun enlightened grooming products may seem new,” the trend harkens back to such esoteric thinkers and practitioners as Rudolph Steiner, who taught that every organic thing had a life force. In the 1920s, with the help of other scientists, Steiner founded a lab that produced natural cosmetics based on this principle.

By the 1980s, the “idea of a beauty product having to be also responsible for one’s spiritual health was relegated to the fringe, replaced by the aspirational promise of sterile, lab-born solutions,”

Gregory adds. She adds that concerns about the degradation of the earth have romanticized nature. The factory of the British beauty company Ila displays this concern as it plays Eastern chants over loudspeakers designed according to sacred geometry, as specified by a Vastu priest. Also in the English countryside, the company de Mamiel sells different facial oils for the different seasons to attune the “skin and the soul.” Therapie Roques ONEil makes a “chakra-restoring balm”—a “potion”—which “creates a vital yet protective veil that helps you regain an inner sense of self.”



TM faces second-generation disenchantment and loss of charismatic leadership

Transcendental Meditation (TM) has become highly factionalized since the death of founder Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 2008, with the familiar scenario of second-generation members chafing under original members seeking to maintain the purity of the movement’s teachings, writes Lane Atmore in the journal *Communal Societies* (No. 1, 2017). Atmore conducted 44 interviews with TM members and former members, as well as researching the headquarter town of Fairfield, Iowa, where many members live, and the Maharishi European Research University (MERU) in the Netherlands. Atmore divides up the TM movement into the “old guard” (original members), the second generation, and those whom she terms “disenfranchised meditators.” Many of the second generation have started to leave Fairfield and are interested in “reaching past Maharishi and TM, to explore other truths,” while the old guard has sought to conserve his teachings. The disenfranchised meditators “are those who still live in Fairfield but have chosen to leave the movement. They may continue to meditate but disagree with the Maharishi University of Management (MUM) administration, as well as the continued practice of charging exorbitant fees for meditation training,” Atmore adds.

While tension has declined between the locals of Fairfield and the TM members from the early years (the movement established its base there in 1970s), MUM is facing financial hard times, as many of the old guard face retirement and many of the students have gravitated to its graduate computer programs rather than undergraduate programs and more TM-based courses of study such as Ayurvedic health. There is also a split between low-paid staff and faculty and very wealthy meditators who live in a separate community and “style themselves as ‘rajas’ and wear golden crowns, according to various sources.” The aforementioned high costs for basic TM initiation ceremonies (at \$950) and other meditation lessons have caused concern, though Atmore writes that openly criticizing TM leadership is discouraged. The individualism that has long driven TM practitioners as they seek the personal benefits of the practice has continued at Fairfield through the Maharishi’s writings and taped lectures since his passing, while MERU has pursued increased horizontal ties between members. While an outright schism between Fairfield and the global movement has yet to occur in TM, Atmore concludes that it should not be ruled out, especially over TM’s “core teachings.”

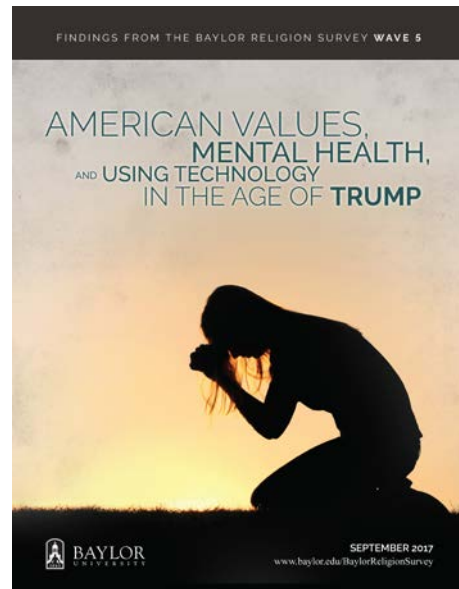
(*Communal Societies*, <http://www.communalstudies.org/>)



CURRENT RESEARCH

- The new Baylor Religion Survey finds the emergence of “Trumpism,” a form of Christian influenced nationalism and a widespread fear of religious “others.” The survey, which is the fifth wave of the study and was conducted among 1,501 respondents earlier this year, found that beliefs about God were related to their support of the presidency of Donald Trump and the related issues of as immigration and Islam. Those who believe in an authoritative God who is actively engaged in world affairs tend to view the United States as a Christian nation, see Muslims as threats to America, value “gender traditionalism,” and oppose GLBT rights. The Baylor researchers found a fear of “others” among many respondents. Depending on their perspective, people may fear liberals or conservatives, Muslims or conservative Christians, or others who differ from themselves. The most feared religious groups were found to be, in order, Muslims, atheists and conservative Christians. The latter group was feared because they are thought to want to limit the freedom of others. The survey also found that nearly half of Americans are certain they are going to heaven, and that a majority of people say they have never used the Internet to find spiritual content or share their religious views.

*(The Baylor Religion Survey can be downloaded at:
<http://www.baylor.edu/BaylorReligionSurvey>)*



- **Christians who see religion as important are more likely to see a connection between immigration and crime and thereby seek punitive measures for immigrants, such as deportation, according to a study by Scott Desmond of Indiana University-Purdue University.** At the meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Montreal, Desmond presented a paper using data from Chapman University’s 2014 American Fears Survey, with 2,000 respondents. He found that Protestant and Catholics, particularly those who identify as the former and just as “Christian,” are more likely than the non-religious to see this crime-immigration connection. But Desmond also found that those who attend services regularly are less likely to see

this connection and to favor such measures as deportation. Those identifying as “Protestants” and “Christians” were also more likely to see immigrants as prone to crime and bringing other threats to the U.S., such as spreading disease. Desmond noted that decades of social research suggest a weak connection between more immigration and greater crime and concluded that “religious beliefs may influence perceptions about immigrants and shape policies.”



● **Asian and Hispanic evangelicals are less likely to embrace the agenda of President Trump than white evangelicals, and the difference may be due to the latter’s perception that they are being discriminated against, according to a paper presented at the meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in mid-August, which RW attended.** Janelle Wong of the University of Maryland drew on a cooperative survey of 10,000 respondents consisting of voter panels (although not truly random because of the small populations of Latino and Asian evangelicals), finding that there was division over aspects of the Republican agenda. While Latino and Asian evangelicals lined up with their white counterparts on opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion, they differed on a range of social issues, including immigration and climate change. Wong sees the difference between white evangelicals and their ethnic counterparts hinging on the



former’s perception that they are discriminated against by the wider society. On the question of whether they face discrimination, 57 percent of white evangelicals and 37 percent of white non-evangelicals agreed. Those who agreed with that position were more likely to take the conservative position that immigration hurts the economy. Asian and Latino evangelicals were less likely to hold this position. But those that did agree that they were

discriminated against as evangelicals were more likely to take conservative social positions.

● **The average number of congregations in the U.S. appears to have increased sharply by 2006 and then leveled off to about 384,000 by 2012, according to a new estimate by Simon Brauer of Duke University.** Writing in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (June), Brauer analyzes all three waves of the National Congregations Study (1999, 2006, and 2012), which he writes has advantages over studies that used 2008 figures as well as those based on denominational self-reporting and public listings. He estimated the total number of congregations in 1998 by dividing the total number of congregations in denominational reports considered reliable by their proportion in the National Congregations Study. He found the number started out at 336,000 in 1998, then sharply grew to 414,000 in 2006, and then leveled off to 384,000 in 2012. His 2006 estimate conflicts with other estimates for that period because Brauer took greater account of non-denominational churches, which grew during these years but have since stabilized.



(*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*,
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jssr.2017.56.issue-2/issuetoc>)

● **Both non-affiliated and non-denominational churches are drawing African-Americans, while middle class blacks are attending services more than in previous decades, according to a paper presented by Jason Shelton of the University of Texas at the recent meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Montreal.** Shelton looked at data from the General Social Survey from 1972 to 2016, focusing on the shifts between traditional black churches and those from outside this tradition. He found that affiliation with traditional black churches declined from 57 percent to 45 percent of African-Americans. Non-denominational church affiliation increased from 1.0 percent in 1972 to 11 percent in 2016. The non-religious category grew from 4.3 percent to 17 percent. Within the middle class, the changes were somewhat similar, though the traditional Baptist affiliation grew from 40 percent to 50 percent, while Methodist affiliation declined dramatically from 35 percent to 11 percent. Non-denominational Christian affiliation increased from 5.0 percent to 17 percent. Those with no religious preference went from 0.0 percent to 11 percent. Yet middle class churchgoing is increasing, with a decline of those going once a

year (from 34.7 percent to 26.8 percent) and a 6.4 percent increase among those going at least once a month.

Shelton also looked at the percent of members of African American denominations who linked racial inequality to either discrimination or personal motivation. There has been a significant decrease of those agreeing that inequality is linked to discrimination and a growth of those claiming motivation is more significant in sustaining such conditions. For instance, 76.5 percent of black Baptists said that discrimination was the cause of racial inequality in the late 1980s compared to 62.4 percent saying the same in recent years. Further, 38.2 percent of the Baptists agreed on the role of motivation in causing inequality in the late 1980s compared to 56.4 percent in recent years. Shelton concludes that there is no longer a monolithic black church and that class differences shape religious affiliations.



● **About one in 10 Protestant churches has had someone embezzle funds, according to a survey from LifeWay Research.** The survey of 1,000 Protestant senior pastors found that 9 percent of pastors say that their church has had funds embezzled. Ninety-one percent say they are not aware of any embezzlement. *Baptist Press* (August 3) reports that the study finds that Church of Christ ministers are more likely to say their church had funds embezzled (16 percent) when compared to Baptist (7 percent) or Presbyterian/Reformed pastors (6 percent). Pastors of mid-sized churches—those with between 100 and 249 members—are less likely to say funds had been embezzled (6 percent) than those with 250 or more members (12 percent).



● **Muslim women tend to be more pessimistic about their place in U.S. society than Muslim men, according to an analysis from the Pew Research Center.** Pew's new survey of American Muslims finds that more Muslim women than men say it has become more difficult to be Muslim in the U.S. in recent years (57 percent versus 43 percent). The survey found that Muslim women are more divided on acceptance of their place in society at large than are men. Only half (52%) of Muslim women say they feel connected and have a lot in common with most Americans, and 44 percent view the American people as friendly toward Muslim Americans, compared with two-thirds of Muslim men on these statements. Eight-in-ten Muslim women (83 percent) say there is a lot of discrimination against Muslims, compared with a smaller share of men (68 percent), a finding which may be explained by the requirement that women wear Islamic head covering in public.



(Pew's Survey on Muslims can be downloaded at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/>)

● **A study led by Elaine Howard Ecklund of Rice University calls into question the ideas that scientists operate with a model of inherent conflict between religion and science and that**

scientists serve as a vanguard of secularization. Ecklund, along with Daniel Bolger and Robert Thomson Jr., presented a paper at the recent meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion that featured a large, first of its kind study of scientists and religion among scientists around the world. The survey of 22,525 scientists from France, Hong Kong, India, Italy, Taiwan, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States found low rates of religiosity (measured by religious service attendance, prayer observance, and belief in God) among scientists as compared to the general populations in Western countries. But in India, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, the scientists tended to be more religious than the general population.

The highest rates of religious faith were found among scientists in Italy, Taiwan, Turkey, and India. Ecklund and colleagues found that the popular perception of intrinsic conflict between science and religion were only “minimally reflective” of the perceptions scientists held themselves. The idea that scientists are at the vanguard of secularization was challenged by the fact that more than half of scientists in four of the regions examined identify as at least “slightly religious.” And either a significant minority or a majority of scientists in all of the regional contexts but France claim belief in God without doubts.

(An introduction to Ecklund’s project and its findings [from which some of this article draws] is published in the open access journal SOCIUS and can be downloaded from: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2378023116664353>)



● **Protestant-Catholic differences spurred by the Reformation have significantly weakened in the eyes of many Europeans, according to a new survey by the Pew Research Center.** The survey found that only a minority believes a key Reformation concept of faith alone being necessary for eternal life. In fact, majorities or pluralities of both Protestant and Catholic groups say that both faith and good works are necessary to get into heaven—which is the traditional Catholic position. As might be expected, those who say they take religion seriously are more likely to agree with the specific teachings of their respective faith traditions. Five centuries after the Reformation, Catholics form the largest group throughout the Western European countries surveyed.



(The Pew survey can be downloaded by visiting: <http://www.pewforum.org>)

● **In the secular context of Europe, it is the non-religious more than the religious who are the most intolerant of Muslims, according to a study in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (June).**



Sociologists Egbert Ribbverink, Peter Achterberg, and Dick Houtman conducted a multilevel analysis of the European Values Study (2008) and found that more secularized countries are on average more tolerant toward Islam and Muslims, yet at the same time, the strongest anti-Muslim attitudes are found among the non-religious in these countries. The authors first hypothesized that the religious Protestants would be the most negative about Islam since they are in competition with Islam in a secularized society. Instead they found that Protestants who take their faith most seriously are the most tolerant toward Muslims.

The researchers note, “There may be some sort of solidarity between these religious groups that struggle to hold on to their religion and their values in a secular context.” This solidarity may be why religious believers are found to be particularly welcoming

toward refugees from Syria and Iraq in Western Europe. The researchers found that the strongest opposition towards Muslims was among the non-religious. But they did not find this opposition stemming from their secular values. They speculate the opposition may be due to the polarization a secular society experiences over the issue of Islam.

● **One of the first quantitative studies of Germanic Neopagans finds that most do not link their beliefs to their racial identity and eschew extremism, while they are open about their religion in public.** The Internet-based survey, featured in *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* (19.1), asked questions of about 3,000 respondents about Germanic/Norse Paganism, also known as Heathenism, and showed a relatively diverse following. Over half of them had come to Heathenism in the past five years, suggesting the movement is showing some popularity. Adherents of what author Joshua Marcus Cragle calls “universalist” and “centrist-tribalist” (which is open to people from other cultures) Heathenism far outnumber those adhering to the “folkish” variety (based on Germanic racial identity). But close to half of the respondents did view racism as a problem within “Heathenry,” at least among a minority of members. Other interesting findings include a somewhat high percentage of members in military/law enforcement (six percent), and that the largest Heathen demographic identify as “solitary practitioners”; northern Europe stood out as the only place where that pattern was not the case. Many came from eclectic backgrounds. Most of the respondents reported that they were open about their Heathenism most of the time.

(*The Pomegranate*, <https://www.equinoxpub.com/home/journals/pom/>)



● **Turkish Muslims are divided by generations in Germany, with the older generation more likely to embrace “fundamentalism” than the younger ones, according to Olaf Muller of the University of Muenster.** In a paper presented at the meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, he created a scale for fundamentalism going from zero to four based on how Muslims viewed themselves as following all Islamic teachings, their belief in the restoration of a Muslim society, and the exclusivity and superiority of their faith. Muller used a 2016 survey of 1,201 Turkish immigrants and residents and found that 57 percent of the first generation stressed following all Muslim teachings, compared to 36 percent of the second generation. On restoring a society based on Mohammad’s teachings, 36 percent of the first generation supported this position compared to 27 percent of the second generation. Forty percent of the first generation held the view that only Islam can solve the problems of our time compared with 22 percent of the second. Muller concluded that 13 percent of all Turkish Muslims in Germany could be considered fundamentalists (meaning they register a 4 on each of these positions).



ARTICLES:

Religious minorities' plans to return to Iraq beset by political differences

Christians and Yezidis who had suffered deeply under the Islamic State (IS) have celebrated the extremist regime's recent expulsion from Mosul and the surrounding villages of the Nineveh Plain, with some of these refugees already moving back to their ancestral homeland. But religious and political differences are also returning to the region, with various religious leaders and groups lining up on opposing sides, reports *The Tablet* (August 12), a Catholic magazine in the UK. Plans about how to resettle these groups have been under debate almost since the IS pushed these religious minorities out of Mosul and the surrounding villages, most notably the proposal to establish an autonomous region for Christians and Yezidis [See June 2016 **RW** for more on this proposal]. The problem is that Iraqi Kurds, who were instrumental in routing the IS, also dispute claims to the region. The Christians distrust the Kurds, believing that they received little security from Kurdish troops after the Kurds disarmed them.

The Yezidis have fewer issues with the Kurds, but it is the strong political divisions among Christians, who have shrunk from two million to 400,000 today, that make them "easy prey for manipulation," writes Filipe d'Avillez. Although the crisis in the region has brought the various churches closer together, they still have different takes on politics. The Assyrian Church of the East tends to favor autonomy, as do the Syriac Catholic and Orthodox churches. The leadership of the Chaldean Catholic Church has been more opposed to this idea, though it has recently softened its position. Avillez concludes that an autonomous region may be the only way for these religions to preserve themselves. But for this proposal to work, "church leaders and politicians, the people on the ground and the leaders in the diaspora, will have to achieve something that so far has always proved elusive: to pull in the same direction."

(*The Tablet*, <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/>)



Saudi Arabia determined to keep custodianship of Islam's central places

Faced with low oil prices and challenges to its influence, the Saudi Kingdom's role as the custodian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina is becoming more important, writes analyst Kamran Bokhari in *Geopolitical Futures'* daily digest (Sept. 1). For a long time, the Saudi dynasty was aware of the importance of controlling the Hejaz for playing a dominant strategic role in the Middle East. But the significance of the holy cities, under Saudi control since 1927, goes beyond regional politics and influence since they are magnets for Muslims all around the world. Without the discovery of oil and the riches it brought to the leaders of the Kingdom, Bokhari notes, it is not certain that the Saudis would still be in charge of Islam's holiest places today. But controlling them also involves responsibilities. Not a few Muslims are complaining about the way Saudis manage the pilgrimage and sometimes mistreat pilgrims. It is vital for the Kingdom to be able to maintain security and stability, even at times of regional insecurity and domestic turmoil, if it does not want to see its control over the sites challenged. For years, the only country calling for an internationalization of the holy places has been Iran.

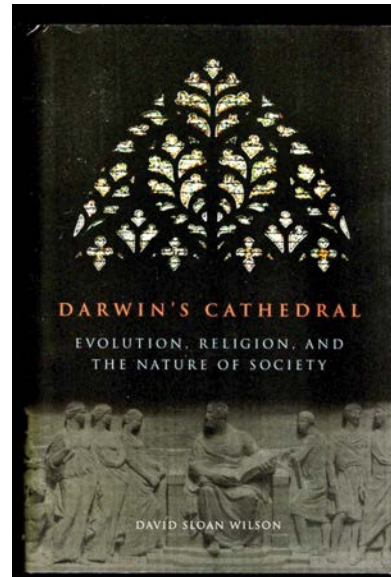
Interestingly, during the recent crisis opposing Saudi Arabia and its regional allies to Qatar, one of the accusations against Qatar was that it had allegedly asked for the internationalization of Mecca and Medina—something that the Qataris denied. According to Bokhari's analysis, such reactions mostly express the Saudis' own feeling of insecurity, since there is not (yet) any real challenge to their control of the sites. But such questions might be raised depending upon the turn of events in the future. If foreign troops of the Islamic Military Alliance created to fight terrorism in late 2015 by the Saudis were someday called to protect the *hajj*, this development might also have longer-term consequences for Saudi control, Bokhari concludes.



(Founded by George Friedman, *Geopolitical Futures* is a subscription-based publication devoted to predicting the future course of the international system. <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/>)

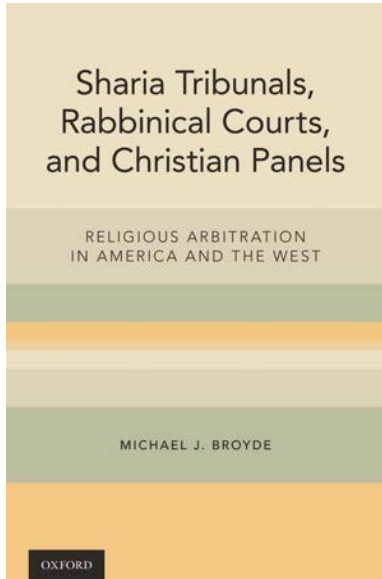
Findings & Footnotes

■ Much of the current issue of the journal of *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (May) is devoted to developing a research program and theory that explains religious diversity just as Darwinian scientists have sought to explain biological diversity. Evolutionary biologists and psychologists have had difficulty in explaining the persistence and diversity of religion. Those anthropologists and other scientists studying religion tend to “read back” religious beliefs and practices to evolutionary history, usually describing them as “adaptations”; fewer engage in fieldwork much as a natural scientist would do to explain the diversity of species and organisms. Biologist David Sloan Wilson, the author of the 2002 book *Darwin’s Cathedral*, calls for evolutionary scientists to study religious diversity using a “cultural ecosystem approach,” where religious communities are treated as “functionally organizational units” that cooperate, compete, and colonize niches just as species do. Wilson writes that using an “axis of variation” approach for studying different religions, such as anthropologists do in characterizing cultures as “loose” and “tight” in their norms (somewhat similar to “strict” and “lax” churches), would provide a framework for understanding their evolution.



Subsequent articles responding to Wilson and colleagues’ proposal range from enthusiastic to mainly negative, with one critic writing that neither religions nor their adherents operate like “functionally organizational units.” Wilson responds by offering some hypotheses from an ecosystem approach that could be used to study religious diversity. For instance, in studying why strict churches do better than lax ones, he notes that in 19th and early-20th century America, it was necessary to belong to a church to be socially respectable, making lax (or non-demanding) churches very popular. “It was the [later] availability of a third option (no church) that made lax churches weak.” Wilson has spearheaded such research in his recent study of Binghamton, New York, though he declined to discuss any findings. For more information on this issue, visit: <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rrbb20/current>.

■ The popular opposition to the establishment of Islamic sharia law in the U.S. may be misinformed, but the drive to establish alternative means of arbitration inspired by religious faith is likely to become more common among Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims. That latter point is the main premise behind Michael J. Broyde’s new book *Sharia, Rabbinical Courts, and Christian Panels* (Oxford University Press, \$85). The increasingly secular basis of legal rulings and the feeling that they “have lost control of the law” (as seen in the Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage) is already pushing some believers—whether Muslim, Orthodox Jewish, or conservative Christian—to set up their own forms of arbitration. Broyde spends many pages in the beginning of the book exploring what religious arbitration actually entails. He sees the Jewish tribunals and their expertise on deliberating on Jewish law within the framework of secular law as the most effective and balanced form of religious arbitration. The Christian version often takes the shape of mediation and negotiation of conflicts (following the New Testament injunction for believers to settle conflicts outside of secular courts), though such practices as covenant marriages have also been popular.

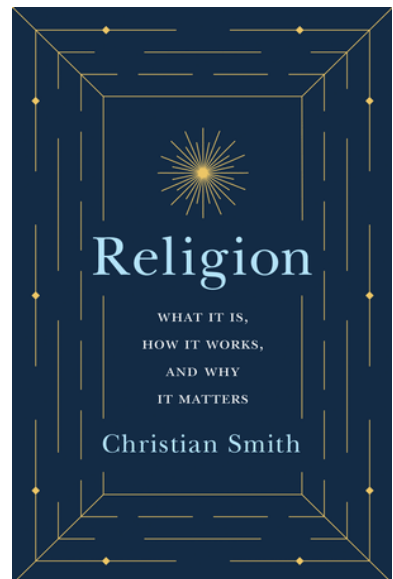


The Islamic attempts at religious arbitration in the U.S. have been more recent but also more controversial. But Broyde does not see anything in how sharia is structured that could not be aligned with American law. The two main obstacles are many Americans’ opposition to any such possibility and American Muslims’ lack of judicial expertise, organizational machinery, and practices that could legitimize its various tribunal rulings in American courts, especially on sensitive issues of family law (involving unequal treatment of women) and theological rulings. To overcome fears that Muslims are setting up a parallel legal structure alongside secular law, they may have to borrow practices from their counterparts in the UK as well as from American Jews who have been able to balance secular and religious legal norms. Broyde concludes that while religious arbitration faces church-state and religious freedom hurdles (how does a secular court deal with religious leaders disciplining a member on doctrinal matters through their arbitration systems?), accommodating a plurality of faith groups’ legal traditions and practices to deal with internal matters (such as same-sex

marriage) may be the best way to overcome endless culture wars where a winner-takes-all scenario prevails.

■ Christian Smith’s new book *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters* (Princeton University Press, \$35) represents the University of Notre Dame sociologist’s attempt to develop an in-depth theory of religion and its influence in the world. His theories are informed by the philosophy of critical realism, which is defined as an alternative to positivism and postmodernism, bringing together the concept of reality operating independent of human awareness with the view that human knowledge is always socially situated, though affirming that people can make truth claims about reality. At first, it is not clear how this philosophy relates to Smith’s treatment and definition of religion—which, he writes, is based on beliefs and practices related to “super-human powers”—and the role it plays in contemporary society. When discussing how religion exerts “causal powers” in the world, however, he argues that the critical realist concept of “emergence” best explains how religious practices and teachings take on a life of their own, creating “other new powers and capacities...which exert strong and widespread causal influences....” He cites the case study of Mormonism and how it created secondary and derivative offshoots in politics and family life.

Even for readers wary of wading into philosophical waters, the book offers interesting arguments—with many contemporary examples—of how religion influences society, even as it is changed by such encounters. For **RW** readers, the conclusion on secularization and the religious future may prove the most intriguing part of the book. He argues that the same trends can often mean both religious revitalization and decline, depending on the contexts in which they take place. For instance, secular states that seek to control religions typically suppress religious vitality. At the same time, the same kind of secular political control of religion tends to intensify religious identities and commitments. In other words, religious dynamics tend to



“ricochet” off each other, creating a more contingent and complex religious scene than both practitioners and scholars might expect. Smith concludes by providing dozens of research questions based on his chapters in order to promote coherent and cumulative lines of inquiry.

■ Reginald Bibby has written several books on religious trends in Canada, but in his latest work *Resilient Gods* (University of British Columbia Press, \$29.95), the Canadian sociologist broadens his lens to the global level as well as revises some of his earlier ideas and theories. As with his other books, Bibby analyzes fresh data on religious attitudes and practices in detail, but in this new volume he moderates his earlier forecasts about Canada’s religious institutions undergoing a period of revitalization and goes into more depth about his theory of religious polarization. Bibby has long seen the mainline churches in Canada as undergoing a crisis amidst the growth of a new pluralism, but his analysis of surveys at the start of the new millennium picked up on new interest in religion among Canadian teens and even a slowing of the mainline decline, along with continued evangelical growth. But an overall comeback of religion has not taken place, and what seems more likely is long-range polarization, a three-way split between what the book’s subtitle calls the “pro-religious, low religious, [and] no religious.” Bibby writes that many of the surveys are constructed to capture the pro-religious and a growing number of no-religious (non-affiliated or just secular), but they have left out the huge swath of the “religious middle.” The low religious show inclinations that are both pro-religious and no-religious. Bibby sees the situation as polarized because he sees a process of religious revitalization taking place at one end and secularization at the other, while those in the middle are up for grabs among both camps—a process that he argues is now seen worldwide.

Bibby adds that this religious middle could be seen as “spiritual but not religious,” but they have not really abandoned religion; they may be infrequent attenders, but they identify with a religion. The book finds that the Canadian low religious are holding steady (perhaps in distinction to the U.S. case, where they are thought to be shrinking), and they do not differ much by gender or even age and education. “It suggests

that whether one is attracted to religion or chooses to take a pass is pretty random,” he writes. Regionally, the pro-religious are still in the Atlantic region, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan (with the Bible Belt shifting away from Alberta), and the no-religious in British Columbia, leaving Quebec, which is often characterized as secular, as the home for the low-religious. Other chapters in the fact-filled book look at the social effects of religion and non-religion and the role of death in the growth of religion and spirituality. Bibby concludes that in the case of Canada, continuing immigration will buoy religious fortunes up for the foreseeable future, though for some traditions more than others (such as mainline Protestantism), though the secular-religious polarization is likely here to stay.



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

1) A movement known as the **Remnant** is drawing dissident Mormons with its strongly anti-institutional teachings and practices stressing supernatural experiences. Self-proclaimed prophet Denver Snuffer Jr., who claimed to have a face-to-face meeting with Jesus and was excommunicated from the LDS church in 2013, leads the group. Claiming that after the death of founder Joseph Smith, the church no longer has divine authority, Snuffer has drawn formerly devout Mormons to form small home-based fellowships. With an estimated following of between 5,000 to 10,000 people, the Remnant holds few rules or prescribed offices and stresses that anyone can have heavenly visions, contradicting official Mormonism. On Labor Day weekend, Snuffer organized a Doctrine of Christ Conference in Idaho, where hundreds of voters canonized a new set of scriptures, including a reworking of Mormonism's foundational text, the Book of Mormon, and its Doctrine and Covenants, a collection mostly of Smith's revelatory writings. (Source: *Salt Lake Tribune*, August 27)



2) In late July, a synodal commission of the Russian Orthodox Church made available online the draft of what will become a future **catechism** for contemporary believers. The Assembly of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church first expressed the need for a “contemporary catechism” in 2008 and entrusted the commission with the work in 2009. Leading theologians of the Church have been involved. The 350-page document is divided into six sections: the basis of Orthodox doctrine; the basis of canonical structure and liturgical life of the church; the basis of Orthodox moral teachings; the basis of the social concept of the Russian Orthodox Church; the basis of the teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church on dignity, freedom, and human rights; and the basic principles for the relations of the Russian Orthodox Church with the heterodox. The document regarding the attitude toward the non-Orthodox may be the most controversial part of the volume since it condemns those who “slander the Church authorities” by accusing them of betraying Orthodoxy through participation in ecumenical dialogue. Ecumenism remains a topic of heated debates in some Orthodox circles. According to Fr. Jivko Panev, editor of the French Orthodox news

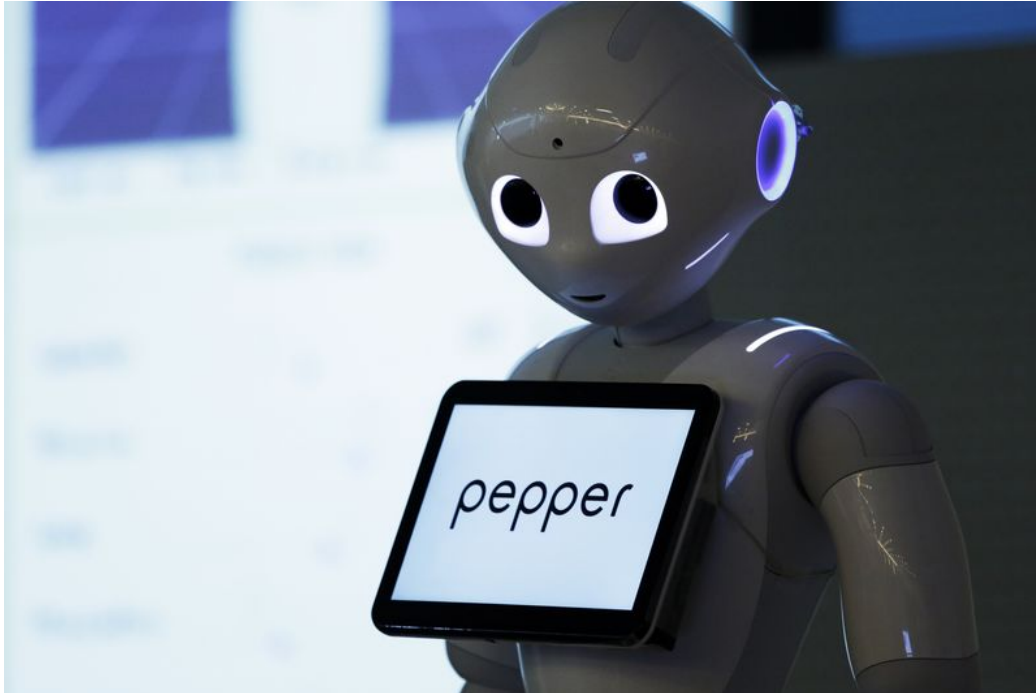
website *Orthodoxie.com*, it is no coincidence that the move takes place under Patriarch Kirill, who is himself supportive of developing good relations with the Roman Catholic Church.

The last steps toward the publication of the catechism come at a time of growing interest in learning the faith at Russian schools. In St. Petersburg, within the framework of the course “Basics of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics,” the proportion of pupils choosing the module on the basics of Orthodoxy is reported to have grown in a few years from 6 percent to 33 percent (while 40 percent choose the module on world religious cultures). In contrast, the module on the basics of secular ethics is losing popularity. Modules on Jewish, Islamic, and Buddhist cultures are also available.

(Source: *Nachrichtendienst Östliche Kirchen*, August 14. The full text of the draft of the catechism can be downloaded as a PDF file (in Russian): http://theolcom.ru/images/2017/KamexuzucСБК_Проект.pdf)



3) A robot programmed to chant traditional Buddhist funeral prayers was introduced at a recent funeral services convention in Japan. The plastics firm Nissei Eco showed off a version of SoftBank’s **Pepper robot** that it had coded to chant traditional Buddhist funeral prayers. The robot costs 50,000 yen (about \$460) to lead a service, whereas a human Buddhist priest can cost up to 240,000 yen (\$2,200). A priest at the convention inspected Pepper to see if it could “impart the ‘heart’ aspect” of religion, but as of yet, the robot has not been hired for any funerals. Last spring there was a report of a robot priest built in Wittenberg, Germany. The robot provides blessings in five languages and recites biblical verses. Although not designed as a replacement for priests yet, the mechanical pastor is meant to provoke discussion about whether machines have a place within the clergy. (Source: *Reuters*, August 23, *The Guardian*, May 30)



4) While Confucianism has already been shaped into an organized form similar to other religions in Indonesia, as reported a decade ago by **RW** (September 2007), the newly-established **Confucian Congregation** in Fujian Province (southeast China) has different roots and instead illustrates how some new religious groups can manage to shape their identity in a way that allows them to have good relations with Chinese authorities. A coastal county of Fujian Province, Mintong seems to be a fertile soil for religion, and decades of Communist attempts to eradicate “superstition” have proved unsuccessful. The founder of the Confucian Congregation, Master Li (Li Yusheng), had first belonged to a religious group incorporating healing before starting his own teaching in the late 1990s and adding some popular Confucian classics to an assemblage of texts in the 2000s. The identity of the group was first Daoist until 2010, then switched to the name of Confucian Congregation, while keeping a number of previous beliefs, rituals, and deities, not unlike those found in other Chinese popular religions. The leaders of the Confucian Congregation, however, numbering seven branches, emphasize the distinctive nature of their Confucian identity in contrast with superstition.

Master Li preaches traditional Confucian values. Contrary to Daoism, Confucianism is not one of the five institutionalized religious paths recognized in China. This status seems to make the Confucian Congregation vulnerable, since it is not protected by law, but its policy has been to make slogans of the Communist leadership their own, since they can be interpreted as compatible with Confucian ideals. The official ideology has been “internalized as an organic part of the congregation.” More recently, the members managed to establish a “Research Council for the Practice of Confucianism,” thus making the local branches part of a legally registered research organization. The cultural revival of Confucianism in China has represented a changing attitude toward Chinese traditional culture by Chinese Communist leaders. As a new religious movement, the Confucian Congregation has taken advantage of the Confucian revival and has managed to gain a respectable position by appearing to support the government goals, “while in fact engaging in the sort of practices that would ordinarily be condemned as ‘superstition.’” The

group has even received permission from the county government for building a large Confucian temple on a square in a public park. (Source: *Nova Religio*, August)

