



Americans embracing the alternatives of spiritual secularity and secular religiosity?

In recent years, it has not been unusual for secular and cultural movements and trends to be portrayed as religious, spiritual, or at least quasi-religious. Most often, the activity in question may be interpreted as religious in nature even if they are accompanied by beliefs that are considered religious. Such a case can be seen in an article in the conservative magazine *First Things* (March 2020) on the emergence of “secular monks” – a segment of middle-aged, highly successful American men who lead a secular lifestyle in a religious way. Writer and “practical philosopher,” Andrew Taggart, cites the example of Twitter co-founder and CEO Jack Dorsey, who “was raised Catholic but is no longer a believer. He is a Stoic, a practitioner of Vipassana meditation and a biohacker. He is forty-three, unmarried, and childless.” Dorsey’s stringent and ascetic lifestyle, including celibacy or childlessness in many cases, is found among a growing number of professional men, who “tend to be secular humanists, scientific materialists, and experimenters on themselves.” If not their beliefs, the lifestyles, practices, and work ethic of these professionals is somewhat similar to the Calvinists described by sociologist Max Weber who adopted a ‘this-worldly’ form of asceticism as they “submit themselves to ever more rigorous, monitored forms of self-control: among them, cold showers, intermittent fasting, data-driven health optimization, and meditation boot camps.”



The resulting “life design” or “life hacking” allows people to author their own lives as they attempt to achieve perfection. The practice of meditation and other spiritual exercises in the case of Dorsey and others is not about attaining superhuman powers or enlightenment but rather to maintain “clarity” and “focus” in the service of success.

The drive for purity and self control is seen as making for freedom, but this “ascetic conception of the good life leaves no room for marriage and parenthood.” There are also cases of secular movements and practices acquiring religious or spiritual beliefs. This is clear in the case of the anti-consumerist group known as Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping. In the February issue of *Nova Religio*, a journal on new religious movements, Todd LeVasseur looks at how this parody and satiric performance art group has become an “earth-centered protest religion.” Founded by actor and activist Bill Talen in the late 1990s, the Church of Stop Shopping was actually inspired by an Episcopal priest in New York who familiarized him with ideas of progressive theologians. Talen brought his act to the streets of Times Square to protest against its “Disneyfication,” eventually gaining notoriety for preaching and performing anti-consumerist actions and rituals throughout the U.S. and in other parts of the world. More recently the church has been active in the Black Lives Matter movement, the #NODAPL Dakota pipeline protests and in denouncing Monsanto and U.S. President Donald Trump.

Far from being just performance art or even a protest movement, the Reverend Billy Bob and his church follow in a long line of activism, starting with the environmentalist Earth First movement, that draws on ecological concepts, such as Gaia and contemporary neopaganism (often called “dark green” religion). LeVasseur argues that Reverend Billy is not a “fake preacher,” as he has transitioned from parodying fundamentalist religion in his early work to actually solidifying “his identity as a Gaian animist to the point where he is now a leader of his own branch of this form of dark green religion,” even he retains parody and satire. His recent writings hold that the earth and its sacredness is the reason for his actions against consumerism. There are no figures provided as to how many support this Reverend Billy and his church, but the author argues that it is drawing those who “are either recovering, reforming, or replacing existing religious identities as a response to the ecological crisis.”

([First Things](#), [Nova Religio](#))

Modern art’s esoteric roots rediscovered, spurring new spiritual artwork

“Where it once it was embarrassing to mention art and spirit in the same sentence, today it could not be more au courant,” says art gallery curator Maurice Tuchman in the magazine [Art World](#) (January 6, 2020). Tuchman had attempted to curate an exhibit on spiritual themes in modern art in the 1986, featuring more than 100 artists exploring spiritual themes, but it “landed like a thud,” writes Eleanor Hartley. Since then, a “steady drip of rediscoveries of art with occult themes has been felt,” she adds. Such an opening for art with esoteric spiritual themes revives more than a century-old interest in modern art rejecting both materialist vision of human existence while also moving beyond “conventional representational strategies toward a radical new approach to art.” The examples of the modern revival are numerous—from a 2016 exhibition of “spirit paintings” by British artist Georgiana Houghton to the new work of self-taught and telepathic healer Emma Kunz to last year’s record-breaking attendance for Hilma af Klint’s “spirit-guided” paintings at New York’s Guggenheim Museum.

Much of this new interest is based on reinterpreting the history of modern art. Author Charlene Spretnick argues that spirituality, mysticism, and occult ideas course through the works of such modernist artists as Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, Miro, Dove, and Klee. But until recently, even such an established artist as af Klint feared blowback from the art community and ordered that her Theosophy-guided works not be unveiled until 20 years after her death (and it has actually taken 40 years for these paintings to find a following). The idea of the artist as a channeler of other-worldly forces, often through the practice of theosophy and Rudolph Steiner's anthroposophy, is especially prevalent in the new spiritual turn of modern art, writes Houghton. The reasons these once-marginal artists are moving into the spotlight may be due to the break down of the canon under pressure from multiculturalism and feminism as well as a reaction to the commodification of art. Today it is not difficult to find the equivalents to the pioneer mystic, as today's artists openly "cop to spiritual influences on their work. Some go further, attempting to channel unconscious or even supernatural energies through drugs, hypnosis, or seances. Yet others seek portals through technology... Though none of this has yet gelled into a recognizable movement, it would seem that contemporary art and the spirit have once again made a tentative peace," Hartley concludes.



Orthodox in Appalachia—seeking a holy enclave

Religious and political factors make Russian Orthodoxy attractive for some people in the Appalachian region of the U.S., according to a recent study. Former evangelical Christians who convert to Russian Orthodoxy may not only find an answer to their religious longing, but also “a politically conservative ideological haven,” writes anthropologist Sarah Riccardi-Swartz (New York University), whose PhD field research focuses on communities of converts to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) in the Appalachian Mountains. In a response to “The Culture Wars Today” series on the *Berkley Forum* (Dec. 18, 2019), Riccardi-Swartz reports that converts tend to see Russian leader Vladimir Putin “as a god-inspired leader,” fighting for moral values, who could help to make America “holy again.” Perceiving the United States as morally bankrupt, they feel that Russian Orthodoxy might show the path to salvation from secularism and from ongoing moral decline. As Riccardi-Swartz remarks, the concerns expressed by the Appalachian ROCOR converts are not new. What makes them less usual is that their

search for traditional values makes them look for a model in a foreign country, long seen as hostile— even making them think how they would position themselves in case of a future war between the United States and Russia. At the same time inheriting previous conservative views and looking for ideological resources outside of the United States, they become involved in the global circulations of conservatism on the rise in different parts of the world.

(The Culture Wars Today, Berkely Forum)



CURRENT RESEARCH

● **Religious affiliation, or the lack of it, is one factor driving the Democratic primary vote, according to recent surveys.** A study from the Pew Research Center finds that Joe Biden remains the first choice for Protestants and Catholics while Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren are drawing the unaffiliated. No candidate was found to have majority support from any of the large religious groups, and many voters still say they are undecided. The surveys were taken during the Iowa caucus and right before the first-in-the-nation primary in New Hampshire. Black Protestant voters tended to choose Biden as their first choice (44 percent)— a preference that the former U.S. Vice President is banking on as the race moves to South Carolina— but even among this group, 30 percent remain



undecided. The unaffiliated were more likely to say they would vote for Sanders while atheists and agnostics more often chose Warren.

While Pete Buttigieg has been the most vocal about his faith, only five percent of fellow Protestant and four percent of Catholic voters said they would vote for him. Exit polling during the New Hampshire primaries showed that among voters who regularly attend religious services, Klobuchar was the most popular of the Democratic candidates (30 percent), followed by Bernie Sanders (16 percent), Pete Buttigieg (16 percent), and Joe Biden (13 percent). Warren fares far worse with religious voters, picking up only seven percent of those who attend religious services once a week or more. Klobuchar attends a congregation of the United Church of Christ and gained attention among religious voters recently for being the only Democratic candidate to claim she favored expanding the party tent to make room for pro-life Democrats.

(The Pew article can be downloaded [here](#))

● **Religiously non-affiliated Americans are further to the left than the affiliated, but they are also less politically interested and active than both the affiliated and atheists and agnostics, according to a study by Phillip Schwadel in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in February 2020).** The unaffiliated has remained an ill-defined category in politics, but they have been generally thought to be more liberal than the affiliated. Schwadel uses data from the Pew Research Center’s American Trend Panel (wave 23) and confirms that religious nones are more liberal than religious affiliated and are more likely to be Democrats. Yet the non-affiliated represent a “softer secularism” than atheists and agnostics, as they are more likely to support the Republican Party. Schwadel also finds that nones tend to be more politically apathetic than both the affiliated and the atheists and agnostics further to their left.



([Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion](#))

● **New studies of “Generation Z” finds that they are similar in religious makeup to their older millennial sisters and brothers and are thus likely to continue the trend of non-affiliation with religious institutions, though the growth of this trend may be slowing, according to the blog *Religion in Public* (February 8, 2020).** Melissa Deckman looks at new data from a 2019 survey, which was not a purely random sample but was designed to be representative on the demographics of Generation Z, and then compares it with findings from a 2016 survey of Millennials. She finds that the percentage Gen Z Americans who identify as

religiously unaffiliated is similar to the Millennials (both at around 38 percent). Gen Z attendance rates (as far as frequency of attendance) are also somewhat close to Millennial rates, with 45 percent rarely or never attending. Decker did find, however, a jump in the rate of Gen Z non-attendance patterns, with 2014 Pew data on Millennials finding that only 35 percent said they rarely or never attended.



In a follow-up article to Decker's on the same blog (February 8), Paul Djupe and Ryan Burge look at data from the General Social Survey GSS), 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES), and the recent release of the Voter Study Group Panel (VSG), confirming her finding that the rate driving up non-affiliation has slowed to a crawl. The rate of non-affiliation has been accelerating with each generation starting in 1994, driven by a mix of

weak parental religious socialization by parents, scandal and reaction against politics in religion. "These older generations are still experiencing some secularization...but not nearly as rapidly as the young. From this evidence we expected the rate of being a none among Gen Z might be even higher, leading to a bump above Millennials. The small sample from the GSS, however, suggests Gen Z is not outpacing Millennials and may have even fallen behind," Djupe and Burge write. They look at the CCES and VSG and found a similar pattern of non-affiliation growing with each generation and then slowing to the point where Gen Z is no more unaffiliated than the Millennials. Another article by Joseph Baker on the blog (February 15, 2020) cautions that claims of a "religious rebound" are premature. The non-affiliated Gen Z has a greater percentage of non-theists and are less certain in their beliefs about God than Millennials. While Gen Z are at an age of considerable flux and subject to life-cycle effects, Baker notes that Millennials showed less doubt and lower rates of non-theism when they were at that age.

[*\(Religion in Public\)*](#)

● **Although most corporations have established wide-ranging diversity programs and statements, religious diversity continues to trail behind other diversity classifications, according to a new report from the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation.** The report is based on an analysis of the online diversity and inclusion landing pages of Fortune 100 companies and their related Employee Resource Group (ERG) data. The study finds that religion receives less attention in these diversity statements and resources than race/ethnicity, women/gender, sexual orientation, veterans/military, disability, age, and family. The foundation's analysis finds that religion by less than half (43 percent) of company diversity homepages, with 57 of the Fortune 100 currently making no reference to religion or faith. Of the

43 companies that do make a mention of religion, about half of those only make one mention of it, usually as a “boilerplate non-discrimination statement.” When looking at the Employee Resource Groups that these companies sponsor, only about one in twenty deal with religion or faith in any way. The top “religion-friendly” Fortune 100 corporations include Alphabet/Google, Intel, Tyson Foods, Target, American Airlines, Apple, Dell, American Express, and Goldman Sachs. The study found that companies that focus on religious diversity also scored higher on other types of diversity and inclusion.

(The study can be downloaded [here](#))



● **A study of alumni from Christian, public, secular private, homeschooling, and classical schools finds the latter form of schooling was the most effective in their maintaining Christian beliefs and practice after graduation.** Classical schools can be secular or Christian, but they share a method of education based on Socratic learning from the “great books,” though



the classical schools associated with the Association of Christian Classical Schools (ACCS), which was the association studied in the survey, add a strong conservative Christian thrust along with family involvement to this approach [see RW, vol. 34, No. 12]. The survey, conducted by sociologists at the University of Notre Dame of alumni aged 24-42, found that alumni of ACCS schools scored significantly higher than the alumni of the other forms of schooling on measures such as church attendance, Bible reading, and beliefs in a literal and infallible Bible. On a scale of -50 to +50, ACCS alumni scored 23 on Christian commitment and 38 on Christian lifestyle, while the other alumni scores never reached beyond 10 (and that was for homeschooled alumni).

(This study can be downloaded [here](#))

● **The idea that biology and neurology account for much of religious beliefs and practices has gained currency in some scientific circles but it has not registered with most Americans, particularly religious believers, according to a study by sociologists Elaine Howard Ecklund and Christopher Scheitle.** The study, based on the Religious Understanding of Science Survey and published in the journal *Religions* (10:10), which included 10,241 respondents, found that only 15 percent think that science, particularly “brain wiring,” can explain differences in religiosity, with 3.5 percent agreeing strongly with this claim. Evangelicals (about 32 percent) and Jews (36 percent) had the highest percentage disagreeing with the biological argument. Sixty two percent of the most religious people in the survey said brain wiring does not explain religious beliefs, compared to 44 percent of the least religious respondents.



[*\(Religions\)*](#)

● **In a study of young Christians and Muslims in the Netherlands, it was the Christians who tended to be more critical and oppositional to progressive Dutch sexual norms while the Muslims refrained from such a critique, viewing public displays of sexuality as mainly challenging their personal piety.** But the ethnographic study of Dutch Muslim and Christian young people, published in the journal *Social Compass* (online in February 2020), also showed that evangelical Christians had more in common on how they approached sexual issues with Muslim converts than with those born Muslim. Most of the respondents shared conservative views on such issues as homosexuality, pre-marital sex, and adultery, but the differences became apparent when they discussed the wider Dutch society and its liberal sexual culture.



“While the born Muslims pursued a sexual ethics that differed from the widespread norms of liberal sexuality, they seldom explicitly emphasized this difference and rarely criticized wider society,” writes Daan Beekers of the University of Edinburgh, and Lieke L. Schrijvers of Utrecht University. They add that “it is remarkable that the young Christians with whom we worked, more than the young Muslims, strove to emphatically distinguish themselves from the ‘mainstream’ in terms of

sexuality. Only Muslim converts spoke in a similar way. The researchers conclude that the need to re-affirm one's moral distinctiveness is not necessary among Muslims because Islam itself is already seen as being in opposition to Dutch society.

([*Social Compass*](#))

Religious minority plays majority role in Romania

Even as other Eastern and Central European countries are making less room for religious minorities, Romania has encouraged its ethnic and religious minorities and their communities, "opening up new forms of cultural expression," writes Ovidiu Oltean in the online journal *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* (39:7). Citing the major example of ethnic German Lutherans, Oltean writes that they have diminished in numbers yet their religious institutions, language, and German schools are reviving. This has been facilitated by a generous multicultural framework and the transnational return and migration between Transylvanian Saxons living in Germany and those living in Romania. But most unique has been the entrance and participation of ethnic Romanians (and to a less extent, ethnic Hungarians and Roma people) in ethnic German religious, educational, and religious institutions. Oltean's fieldwork has "revealed the conversion of ethnic Romanians, which traditionally belong to the Orthodox or Greek Catholic (Uniate) [churches], to the Lutheran Church." Although these reconversions started in the 1940s through mixed marriages, the democratization of religious and social life after 1989 and the resulting exit of ethnic Germans back to Germany has intensified this process. Oltean notes that the dearth of Germans in the schools they established in Transylvania were replaced by ethnic Romanians, Hungarians, and Roma.

"They entered these institutions, learned the German language and started to participate to various extents in the German cultural institutions, political organizations and local community organizations, and as it came naturally, in the religious milieu and Evangelical Lutheran organizations," Oltean writes. Some of these conversions are the result of Romanians taking religious lessons in these schools, which are sponsored by the Lutheran Church. Although Lutheranism has suffered losses due to secularization and the emigration of ethnic Germans from Romania, "places such as Sibiu, one of the oldest cities in Transylvania, which has hosted for the last century and a half the bishopric headquarters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, have managed to stop the dramatic decline and disappearance of Lutheran communities... This process of religious conversion has revived Lutheran communities and ensured the presence of... active German-speaking youth in the local organizations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church." Small social networks and "working groups" structured around specific initiatives and projects (traveling between Germany and Romania), contribute to the conservation of Saxon church architecture and to the revival of Lutheran youth organizations." One of these organizations took a derelict fortified church where all the ethnic Germans have left and transformed it into a youth center and hostel, where an annual program of cultural festivals is held. This infusion of new members and the revival of transnational ties has turned the Lutheran Church from only

reproducing a religious and cultural identity into an “institution which actively contributes to the building of a more participative and inclusive society.”

(Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe)



New churches in Nigeria serve as haven from anti-gay society without embracing LGBTQ identity

The restrictions and penalties against homosexuality in Nigerian culture is often reflected in the preaching and teaching of the burgeoning Pentecostal churches in that country, but a new breed of congregations are providing a refuge from these strict attitudes, even if they don't directly challenge the anti-gay laws or embrace LGBTQ identities, writes Nelson C.J., in *The New York Times* (January 26, 2020). The writer recounts visiting more progressive Pentecostal churches that have opened since the early 2000s led by young Nigerians that have “risen up to fill the space conservative churches have left unexplored. Tapping into a generation's concerns about mental health, relationships, identity, sexuality, and finances, these organizations ostensibly offer their congregants a friendly space to unpack whatever they might be dealing with alongside the teachings of God.” Nelson focuses on The Tribe Lagos Church, which began in 2017 and has gained a steady following, serving more than 150 members in Lagos and a smaller branch in Nigeria's capital Abuja, but other youth-oriented groups include Harvesters.

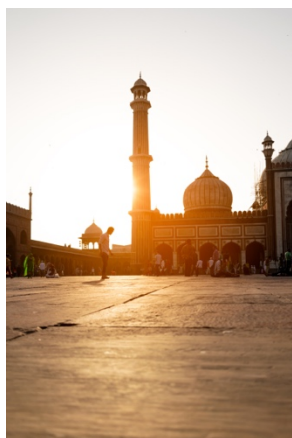
The Tribe was started by a pastor conflicted about the conservative leanings within Christianity “that dominated the country's culture and laws.” The article adds that many LGBTQ people are drawn to such nontraditional places of worship, claiming they find a “more open-minded kind of love and acceptance.” Yet the author adds that these churches are not gay affirming, even if they avoid the negative and politicized focus on homosexuality in society. Their conversations about homosexuality have often played out “via correctional undertones and are sometimes avoided all together.” When asked about the Tribe's stance on L.G.B.T.Q. issues, the pastor said that while the church will not exclude gays or pray against them, he encourages his congregants to be open to the possibility to becoming straight when they encounter teachings from the Bible. The writer concludes that while these churches



provide “safer spaces” for young Nigerians, they are limited in embracing L.G.B.T.Q issues and identities.

When Salafists loot cultural assets, religious norms are also at stake

The looting of antiquities has proven to be an attractive source of income for radical Islamic groups in a country with a long and rich cultural legacy such as Syria, as it had been for some civilian, military and government actors earlier. These groups’ religious views also influence how they deal with objects belonging to Pagan and Christian cultures, writes historian Olivier Moos (Religoscope Institute) in a newly released report on Salafists and antiquities trafficking in Syria by *Religoscope* (February 2020). The report focuses on Idleb Governorate (North-West Syria), where the Salafist armed group Hayat Tahrir as-Sham (HTS) has been heavily involved in the looting of cultural assets. The former Islamic State (ISIS) had made headlines by destroying ancient monuments and artefacts. This did not prevent it from becoming a major actor in illegal trade of antiquities in Syria and Iraq, in spite of its marked dislike of statues. Salafists affiliated with HTS or active in the territories under its control may sometimes share similar views. Moos managed to monitor private Telegram groups promoting and selling Syrian artefacts, and one could read comments by participants reacting negatively to the sale of “idols.” When those are gold or silver statues, some say that they should be disfigured before the sale or sold for their intrinsic gold or silver value.



When it comes to stone statues, this is not feasible, since they would lose their value. Compromise can then be found insofar as they are properly taxed to the benefit of the Islamist group in control of the area where they were found. HTS has never encouraged the disfiguring of cultural assets, but strongly insists on registering sales and paying taxes on them. Beside issues raised by the iconoclastic zeal of Salafists, Moos has also observed among some of them fears about jinns (ethereal creatures referred to in the Quran), who are often reported to reside in pre-Islamic ruins or to protect buried treasures. While some looters claim that benevolent jinns help them to find good spots, other ones are afraid that jinns could harm them, and various kinds of advice are provided on Telegram accounts (e.g. reading the Quran for protection). But this seems to be an individual concern rather than one for Salafist organizations; there is no handbook being circulated about how to deal with jinns. From a religious angle, Moos’ observation that “compromise is not synonymous with hypocrisy,” even when groups such as HTS or ISIS make money from the sale of pre-Islamic artefacts seems crucial. “Religious motivations and economic incentives unavoidably affect and interact with each other.”

(The full report (40 pages) can be downloaded [here](#))

Hindu nationalism joining forces with European nationalists

There are “growing ties between the far right in India and Europe, a connection that is rooted primarily in a shared hostility toward immigrants and Muslims, and couched in similar overarching nationalistic visions,” writes Eviane Ledig in *Foreign Policy.com* (January 21, 2020). The article notes that these links have predated the rise of Europe’s nationalist wave when Hindu nationalists collaborated with fascists in Italy and Nazi Germany, with Hindu right pioneer V.D. Savarkar seeing the Nazi’s solution in dealing with the “Jewish problem” as a model for India’s approach with its “Muslim problem.” Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been hailed as a nationalist hero, with Steve Bannon calling him “a Trump before Trump,” and Dutch nationalist leader Geert Wilders praising his leadership.



Last fall, 23 members of the European Parliament belonging to far-right political parties visited Kashmir shortly after the Indian government had removed special autonomous status from the region. This action was taken after a period of unrest in the region with separatists supported by Pakistan, although analysts say that it was part of India’s ambition to expand its territorial reach and to further restrict Muslim populations, Ledig writes. The invitees were promised a VIP meeting with Modi and toured Indian military faculties. The visit was sponsored by a New Delhi-based NGO called the International Institute for Non-Aligned Studies. Although the visit of the MEP’s were criticized by the international community for flouting diplomatic norms, “it signals a new development in Indo-European relations...The far-right in these two regions are learning from each other, and their abilities to govern according to a shared ideological agenda rooted in Islamophobia are evolving in parallel,” Ledig concludes.

([Foreign Policy](#))

Findings & Footnotes

■ Australia shares with other Western countries the conflicting realities of a secularizing population alongside the growing public presence and diversity of religions. A special issue of the online journal [Religions](#) looks at this trend, especially concerning how the Australian government and other public institutions manage the new diversity. The introductory article notes that increasing proportions of government spending are channeled through religious agencies while political controversies mushroom involving everything from urban planning to marriage law to border control. The articles include critiques of the policy goal of social integration in the face of religious diversification and the ways these developments play out in a country with more limited provisions for



religious freedom than other secular societies. Particularly noteworthy is an article on the megachurch networks that have emerged in Australia in recent decades (and spread worldwide), such as Hillsong, C3 Church, Citipointe Church, Planetshakers, and Influencers Church, and how they benefited from the trend of privatization taking place in the 1990s. Author Malread Shanahan argues that a range of financial services caused by marketization and the implementation of superannuation allowed these megachurches to expand beyond their primary worship functions, such as in starting schools and colleges and charities, as well as in extending their global reach.

■ *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the U.S.* (Oxford University Press, \$29.95), by Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, makes the argument that Christian nationalists are declining but represent a looming threat to American democracy. Of course, the factor that makes Christian

TAKING AMERICA BACK FOR GOD



CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM
IN THE UNITED STATES

Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry

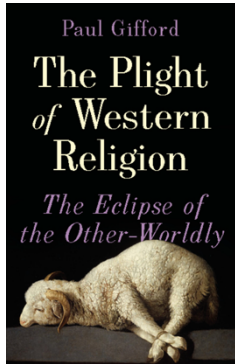
nationalism relevant is the campaign and presidency of Donald Trump, but much of the book spends as much time defining the term and distinguishing it from other forms of religious conservatism as examining it as a social and religious movement. The authors see Christian nationalism as intersecting with evangelical Christianity (one reason why so many evangelicals voted for Trump) but is distinct from it due to its more political approach to questions of national identity, national boundaries, and gender relations and how they are related to the idea that America is, or should be, a Christian nation.

The political thrust of Christian nationalism even distinguishes it from theocratic movements, such as Christian Reconstruction, because the former identifies America's founding documents as divinely inspired. But through their analysis of surveys and in-depth interviews, Whitehead and Perry find that this core of Christian nationalists (categorized as the "ambassadors") comprise only a small percent of the American population and are declining (because of their advanced ages), yet, taken together with a larger group who are labeled the "accommodationists," they can represent almost half of the American population. But accommodationists may only agree with one of several distinguishing markers of Christian nationalism, such as that the government should promote Christian principles or that the success of the United States is part of God's plan. The authors also find adherence to such principles as influencing, though not necessarily causing, negative views of Muslims and Mexicans. The book is short on accounting for the ways organizations have harnessed such Christian nationalism (and, in turn, shape members' views); aside from brief vignettes of an organization such as "Wall Builders" and the First Baptist Church of Dallas, there is little sense given to the reader of what Christian nationalism looks like in action.

■ Two recent books on religion in Europe and the West suggest that secularization is proceeding apace on the continent, although they provide unique and contrasting explanations about this process. Paul Gifford's *The Plight of Western Religion* (C. Hurst and Company, \$40) is the more pessimistic of the two, arguing that even much of what we might take as religious vitality are actually secularized (and therapeutic) versions of the real thing. It is not exactly a new argument made by secularization theorists, but Gifford, a specialist in African religion, goes the extra mile by sidestepping quantitative studies on decreased church attendance and affiliation and attempting to show that the modern modes of cognition and consciousness have been irreversibly transformed by Western science and the Enlightenment, so much so that there is little hope of religious reversal. The author is not arguing that

religion and science are in contradiction to each other, as the new atheists might (he acknowledges that early science had religious foundations), but rather that the scientific and technical worldview became so dominant that it marginalized religious explanations of the world—even if it took almost two centuries (at least until the 1960s) for the secular mindset to filter down to the general public.

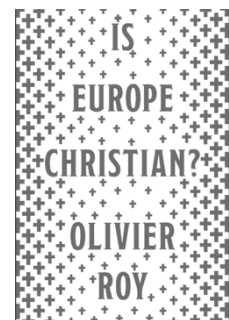
Whether one agrees or not with Gifford, he is widely read in contemporary religion and provides



interesting case studies to make his case. Given his work on African religion, he holds the “enchanted” world of African Christians, with even their politics and sports events suffused with supernatural references, as the standard for religious vitality. He then looks at everything from the New Age to Catholicism after Vatican II to the not-so exceptional nature of American religion, as seen in megachurches, the prosperity gospel (although he doesn’t explain its rapid global dissemination from the U.S.), Christian colleges, evangelical support for Trump, to argue that these religious forms have experienced “internal secularization” and the endurance of cultural (and capitalist) religion rather than authentic supernaturalism.

Olivier Roy’s short but informative book *Is Europe Christian?* (Oxford, \$19.95) bears some similarities to Gifford’s, mainly in the way both forecast the rapid de-Christianization of Europe. But where Gifford sees the eclipse of other-worldly Christianity with cultural religion remaining, Roy sees Christians in Europe living outside of culture as they seek to preserve their faith in a continent with diametrically opposed social values. Such culture, by which Roy means the traditions and symbols that give shape to religious institutions, is replaced by an emphasis on returning to the sources of religion and protesting on “culture war” issues, especially by renewal and revival movements in Catholicism (evangelical Protestantism is too driven by immigration and globalization to show much concern about the Christian nature of Europe, he adds). Meanwhile, Roy writes that mainline Protestant bodies have “self-secularized” by largely accepting the values and lifestyles of European society on progressive sexual and family life issues.

Like Gifford, Roy sees the embrace of Christian symbols and heritage by populist and nationalist parties as having little to do with Christian revitalization; in fact, populists are generally in sync with the new secular value system (they will not challenge abortion or same-sex marriage laws) and criticize religious leaders and institutions for protesting against their anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim positions (though they find more agreement here). The author concludes that religion in general has become defined as a “problem” by secular Europe, especially through the passing of ever-more restrictive laws against public and even private expression of faith—



from banning Muslim head scarves to circumcision. Such secularism can also be seen in the Christian symbols (such as the crucifix) are being redefined as cultural markers rather than religious ones by various European governments. Christians may be too preoccupied with their own internal problems, such as dealing with sex-abuse scandals, to help address what Roy sees as the mounting values crisis in Europe, where “the social contract has ceased to function, as liberal society contains antagonistic groups that take non-negotiable moral issues as their starting points, as matters that are not subject to debate.”