

Jihadism down, but far from out, 20 years after September 11

Twenty years after the Islamic jihadist attacks on 9/11, and amidst the perception that such terrorism has waned, “there is a significant risk of jihadi resurgence,” writes Colin Clarke in the *CTC Sentinel* (September), the publication of the Combating Terrorism Center based at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Most terrorism specialists acknowledge that global jihadist movements like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State are considerably weaker than they were two decades ago, and that significant and effective counterterrorism measures have been implemented in much of the West. But Clarke writes that the “Taliban takeover of Kabul in the late summer of 2021 has prompted a reevaluation of the threat.” While the Pentagon had assessed that groups such as Al Qaeda might be able to “regenerate” and pose a threat to the U.S. within two years, officials now believe that jihadists can regroup and grow much faster than expected. According to Clarke, the idea that global jihadism is a problem that is being managed rather than a growing threat capable of producing serious destruction is still widespread among many who do not recognize the “determination of a movement that has grown in size, sophistication and geographic expanse and looks wholly different than it did merely two decades ago.”

But he notes that there have been losses as well as gains in the fortunes of jihadists. What is called “lone actor” jihadism peaked in 2017 and leveled off between 2018 and 2020, partly because of Covid-19, but also due to the loss of the caliphate and the ability to promote the cause to recruits. While the “operational tempo” of jihadist groups has declined in recent years, “various affiliates have become more active while others have become semi-dormant.” This decentralization of jihadism, especially Al Qaeda, can be seen in the Sahel region of Africa, where the group successfully married its global agenda to local tribal grievances. Clarke writes that, even if more fragmented, “[t]he global al-Qa’ida network alone, to say nothing of the Islamic State, operates in more countries now than it did on September 11, and can call upon nearly 20,000 fighters.” The localization of jihadism means that instead of just two main groups, there could be dozens of versions of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, “each capable of growing into a more widespread conflagration.” The shift to local control has also split and weakened Al



Source: Magharebia, Dec. 2012 (via Flickr).

Qaeda in several cases, and it can blur the line between terrorists and local political leaders. At the same time, this local turn can lend these groups durability and longevity. Clarke writes that the viability of jihadism “rests on the outcome of the ongoing struggle within Islam between moderate Muslims and radicals.”

Within jihadism, the conflict between the Islamic State and Al Qaeda continues and may intensify with the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan. But in an analysis published by *Stratfor* (September 17), Charles Thorson writes that the Taliban’s victory will provide a significant propaganda victory for global jihadist groups, while the long-term outlook is much less certain and will partly depend on how much emphasis the Taliban puts on ideology in dealing with foreign groups. Among competing jihadist movements, Al Qaeda should be the primary beneficiary of the Taliban’s

victory due to its historic links with the group. Even before Al Qaeda’s General Command issued a statement praising the Taliban victory, its affiliates in the Arabian Peninsula, Somalia, and North Africa had already done so. According to a recent UN Security Council report, less than 1,000 Al Qaeda members are still staying in Afghanistan. While the Taliban fought only a national struggle and have pledged not to let their country again become a haven for foreign terrorist groups, they are not of one mind in their assessment of foreign jihadist activities, with more hardline members being sympathetic to international jihadism and at risk of switching to competing radical groups depending on developments.

According to Thorson, “the group will prioritize maintaining its ideological cohesion, and ... at least in the near term, Al Qaeda will likely be safe from a major crackdown.” The risk thus is that Al Qaeda will be able to reconstitute its capabilities, drawing on foreign fighters in Afghanistan to refill its ranks. Also present in Afghanistan, where it attracted disaffected Taliban fighters, the Islamic State is opposed both to the Taliban—whose religious credentials it questions—and to Al Qaeda. It cannot capitalize much on the Taliban’s victory and might actually engage in low-level insurgency and attacks against them. Thorson concludes that its best opportunity to recruit

“would come in the event the Taliban substantially moderated and took substantive action to counter Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups in Afghanistan, which would push more radical members to defect” to the Islamic State.

(*CTC Sentinel*, <https://ctc.usma.edu/september-2021>; *Stratfor*, <https://worldview.stratfor.com>)

Has the golden age of religious architecture ended?

Is religious architecture in a state of decline? It may depend on which architectural authority one is consulting, writes John L. Allen. In an article originally appearing on the Catholic website *Crux*, and reprinted in *Christian News* (September 6), Allen reports that a recent survey of the 25 most significant architectural works of the postwar era had scant religious representation. Citing the *New York Times* “Style” supplement, he finds that of the 25 structures selected, only two had any connections to religious faith: the Bait Ur Rouf Mosque in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and the Sainte Marie de la Tourette Dominican monastery in Éveux, France. He adds that in 2019, Italian architecture historian Maria Antonietta Crippa published her own survey of significant buildings of the last 40 years in the magazine *Décor*, and while it showed little overlap with the *New York Times* rundown of important buildings, it too found only a small proportion of religious structures—4 out of 40, or 10 percent. These appraisals stand in contrast to a 2017 survey in



Church of St. Eustache, Paris, France, 17th century (source: Pxfuel).

Architectural Digest (AD), which included 23 religious structures out of a total of 50 of the most iconic buildings from around the world.

But these 23 religious buildings were all built prior to the 20th century. Allen writes that across time nearly half of the “greatest architectural achievements of humanity, as designated by AD, have been inspired by religious faith. Over the last seventy years, according to the panel assembled by the Style section, that percentage has dropped to eight.” He speculates that Christianity and other religions entered a period of defensiveness against secularism in the 1970s, and that such a posture, even if necessary to protect religious tradition, “has taken a toll in terms of religion’s capacity to be bold, to take risks, to express itself with confidence and to imagine new forms, not only in architecture but in all realms of culture.”

The “marriage crisis” of single American Muslim women

Muslim women are reportedly facing a “marriage crisis” in the U.S., as increasing numbers are experiencing divorces as well as difficulties finding Muslim husbands. An interview appearing in the *Washington Post* blog *The Lily* (September 20) features Tahirah Nailah Dean, an Afro-Latina Muslim lawyer and writer who has collaborated on a new photo series documenting the experiences of single Muslim women around the country. While scholars and Muslim leaders



Source: Tanvirbashar007, Pixabay.

have often referred to the marriage crisis as involving the growing divorce rate in the Muslim community, and marriage counselors and imams have focused on initiatives to help keep marriages together, Dean notes that far less research has been done on the growing number of Muslim singles. She adds that unmarried women outnumber single men since the latter are allowed to marry outside their religion while Muslim women are not allowed to do the same. These unmarried women tend to be between the ages of 25 and 35, are often highly educated and high-achieving, and many are also black or dark-skinned. Dean observes that in the Muslim community there is an emphasis on marriage being part of the faith, getting married young, and parental approval or facilitation. “There’s cultural baggage[,] with mothers especially having this idea of who their sons should marry, wanting their daughters-in-law to take on more traditional duties, staying at home, having less regard for wives that are high-achieving, having an idea that a woman ‘expires’ if she remains unmarried past 27.”

Dean, who is also writing a book on unmarried Muslim women, says that when she speaks “with matchmakers and women over 30, when they encounter men in their age bracket, they’re all looking for 20-something women. The blame is always put on the woman, that she waited too long to start looking, that she made the mistake of prioritizing her education and career. But men are doing that too, and it’s only women that are getting penalized for it.” As for racial and ethnic discrimination, Dean notes that it is not so much the case that Muslim men are not interested in Muslim women of color. But when it comes time to introduce their parents to these women, they will say, “‘Actually, my parents aren’t okay with me marrying outside of my ethnicity,’ or even, ‘I didn’t *realize* that they’re not okay with that.’ Sometimes it’s not explicitly stated. Their parents will say, ‘Oh, she’s not going to know how to make dinner this way’ or ‘She doesn’t understand our language.’”

(*The Lily*, <https://www.thelily.com/some-muslim-american-women-say-they-are-facing-a-marriage-crisis-these-photos-tell-their-stories/>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

- **While young people are commonly viewed as less religious than older Americans, a new study by Springtide Research Institute finds that 78 percent of people between the ages of 13 and 25 consider themselves at least slightly spiritual, including 60 percent of unaffiliated young people (atheists, agnostics and nones).** The institute’s new study, *State of Religion and Young People 2020*, also finds 71 percent saying they are at least slightly religious, including 38 percent of the unaffiliated. The study finds a significant degree of eclecticism and non-institutionalism among respondents. Rather than having religious ceremonies led by ordained ministers at houses of worship, Generation Z is developing more personalized marriage rituals that mix secular or cultural sources. The same applies to everyday life, with respondents mixing and matching religious and spiritual support to manage life’s challenges. The study did find that

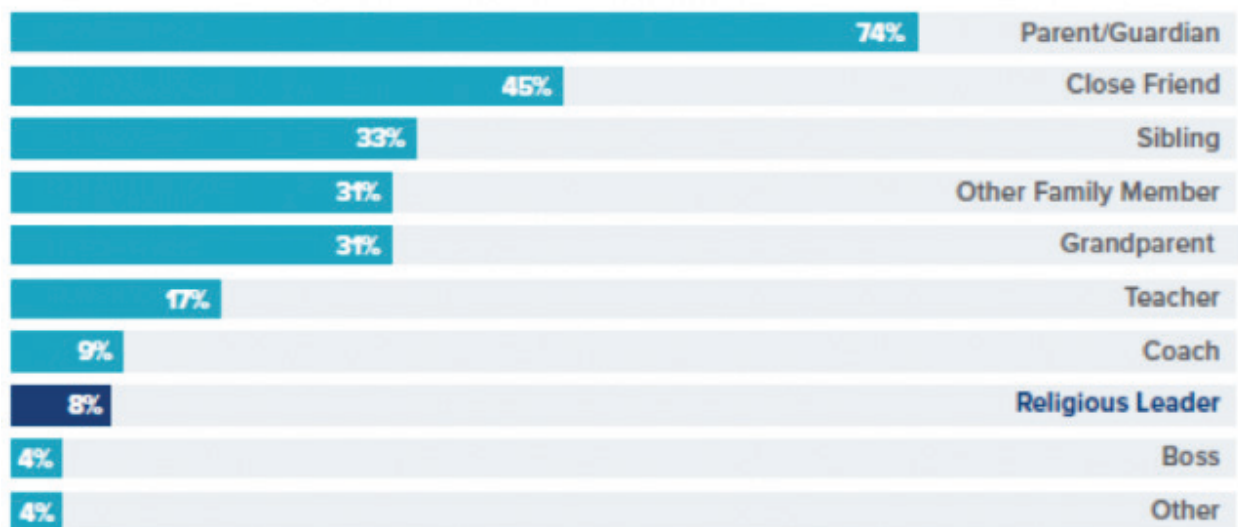
over a third of respondents (35 percent) said their faith had become stronger, while only 11 percent said their faith became weaker (and half said their faith remained stable).

The study confirmed the low institutional trust of Generation Z. When asked to rate their trust of organized religion on a 10-point scale, a majority of young people (63 percent) answered five or below, including a surprising 52 percent of the religiously affiliated. While there was more trust in relationships with people in religious institutions, few religious leaders actually seem to be building such relationships. Eight percent of respondents said there was a religious leader they could turn to, and just 10 percent reported that a religious leader had checked on them during the first year of the pandemic.

(The study can be downloaded from: <https://www.springtideresearch.org/research/the-state-of-religion-young-people>)

Adults young people could turn to if needed:

Survey participants were able to select multiple answers when asked about this. Consider the small number of religious leaders young people are connecting to, especially compared to other kinds of family and non-family relationships.



Source: Intersect.

• **Contrary to media reports, a Pew Research Center analysis finds there was no large-scale departure from evangelicalism among whites during the Trump years.** The analysis, appearing on Pew's blog *Fact Tank* (September 5), found that white Americans were actually more likely to identify as evangelicals four years after Trump was elected, at least among those who viewed the president favorably. The surveys did not even show that evangelicals who opposed Trump were significantly more likely than Trump supporters to drop the evangelical label. Pew also found that Trump's electoral performance among white evangelicals was stronger

Between 2016 and 2020, more White Americans began identifying as evangelical Protestants than stopped doing so

Based on **White**, non-Hispanic U.S. adults who participated in both 2016 and 2020 post-election surveys

	Identified with group in 2016	Entered group between 2016 and 2020	Left group between 2016 and 2020	Identified with group in 2020
Protestant	45%	+4%	-4%	45%
Born-again/evangelical	25	+6	-2	29
Not born-again/evangelical	20	+3	-6	17
Catholic	18	+1	-2	18
No religion	29	+7	-6	30

Note: Based on White, non-Hispanic respondents who participated in both the 2016 and 2020 surveys. The share of White U.S. adults entering or leaving other religious groups between 2016 and 2020 was 1% or less.

Source: Surveys conducted Nov. 29-Dec. 12, 2016, and Nov. 12-17, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

in 2020 than in 2016, which was partly due to increased support among white voters who already described themselves as evangelicals during this period.

There was a small segment of evangelicals who did stop identifying with the label during the Trump years. Among white respondents who took part in both surveys, two percent identified as born-again/evangelical Protestants in 2016 but no longer did so by 2020. But this was offset by the six percent of whites who began calling themselves born-again/evangelical Protestants during the same period. Interestingly, there were more defections by 2020 among white Protestants who did *not* identify as born-again or evangelical in 2016.

(*Fact Tank*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/09/15/more-white-americans-adopted-than-shed-evangelical-label-during-trump-presidency-especially-his-supporters/>)

- **A recent survey of Muslims in Australia finds considerable diversity, especially on controversial questions such as sharia (Islamic law).** The study, conducted by Halim Rane and Adis Duderija and published in the journal *Contemporary Islam* (online in September), is based on a survey of 1,034 Australian Muslims carried out in 2019 and 2020. The researchers asked respondents whether they agreed with a series of statements corresponding to different typologies of approaches to Islam that have been proposed by previous scholars, including Sufi, strict legalist, militant, political Islamist, moderate, traditionalist, progressive, and secular typologies. They found that most Muslim Australians hold liberal positions, believing Islam is aligned with human rights and democracy and seeing their faith as personal and spiritual rather than political (secular and Sufi typologies), while also following traditional understandings of Islam. Smaller minorities agreed with statements corresponding to the strict legalist (applying

sharia to society), political Islamist, and militant (using force in applying sharia) categories. Rane and Duderija conclude that their findings are noteworthy since they debunk claims made by “media and political discourses that frame [Islam] and its adherents as a security threat.”

(*Contemporary Islam*, <https://www.springer.com/journal/11562>)



Source: Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center.

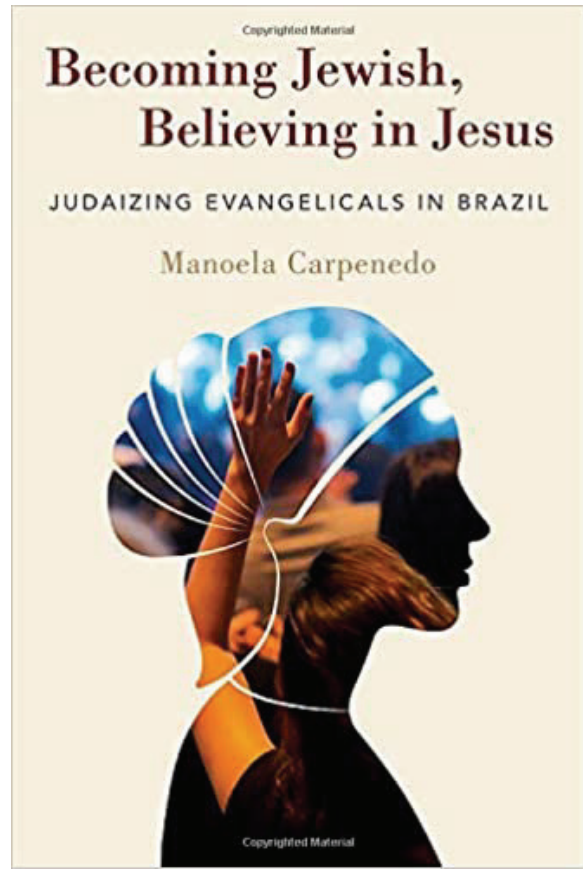
Latin American charismatics adapting and adopting Jewish practices in diverse ways

The adoption of Jewish practices and strong support of Israel are increasingly prominent and taking on new expressions in Latin American evangelical and charismatic churches. Amy Fallas, in the online magazine *The Revealer* (September 9), notes how the adoption of Jewish worship elements in many Latin American churches since the 1990s, such as the use of prayer shawls, sounding of the shofar horn, and adornment of buildings with the Star of David, has led to their increasing engagement with and support of Israel. This can be observed in the recent formation of groups pressing for Latino Christian support of Israel, such as the Latino Coalition for Israel and Philos Latino. Latino evangelicals are also being targeted by pro-Israel lobbies such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and Christians United for Israel. In 2019, the Latino Coalition for Israel organized a summit in Jerusalem that brought together 200 Hispanic evangelical leaders. Fallas focuses on Central America and particularly El Salvador, where it is largely charismatic and Pentecostal churches that have brought together Jewish practices and support for Israel. She argues that these churches’ embrace of biblical prophecies believed to

give Israel a prominent place in the return of Christ, as well as the teaching that Jews are the chosen people, has leant them spiritual power.

In her new book, *Becoming Jewish, Believing in Jesus* (Oxford University Press), Manoela Carpenedo looks at a more recent movement of former Pentecostals who have gone a few steps further in claiming a Jewish identity than their evangelical counterparts, eschewing central Christian teachings. Carpenedo notes how this movement of what she calls “Judaizing” evangelicals has expanded in Brazil and other countries of the global South by distancing themselves from their former charismatic churches, with their emphasis on supernatural gifts and prosperity teachings. Based on interviews and in-depth participant observation among ex-evangelicals in the approximately 10,000-member movement in Brazil, she finds that they defy the stereotypes of Christians seeking to evangelize Jews or playing out an end-times scenario with Israel. Rather, they have gradually moved away from historic Christianity, disavowing belief in the Trinity and Christ’s incarnation and resurrection, while believing that Jesus was a messiah for the Jewish people. She finds that these converts (and most of her interviewees were women) have often been disenchanted by the worldliness and lowering of moral standards they saw in evangelical churches, while also viewing themselves as intellectually superior and more historically and culturally rooted than their charismatic counterparts.

Carpenedo argues that Judaizing evangelicals are not interested in gaining acceptance from other Jews and are unlikely to discard their distinctive identity to move closer to Orthodox Judaism (even as they become increasingly Orthodox in lifestyle). She identifies them as a syncretistic Jewish-Christian renewal movement that seeks mainly to win over evangelicals to their synagogues and Jewish observances. The widespread interest of people in finding their “Jewish” roots is fully shared by the Judaizing evangelicals in Carpenedo’s study, all the more so because Brazil was the destination for many Jews who were exiled from Portugal during the Inquisition. As to why a group of ex-evangelicals would choose to embrace this unique and demanding synthesis of Judaism and Christianity when there are so many options on offer in Brazil’s vast religious marketplace, Carpenedo argues that their new faith provides a distinctive cultural identity and affinity group. As the Brazilian (and Latin American) ideal of mixed racial identity,



known as *metissage*, has faded from the national consciousness as a unifying force, new policies of multiculturalism and identity politics have encouraged such quests for strong ethnic and religious belonging and community, she concludes.

(*The Revealer*, <https://therevealer.org/el-pueblo-de-israel-latino-evangelicos-and-christian-zionism/>)

Catholic Church loses influence, allies in post-pandemic Italy

As it emerges from the pandemic, the Catholic Church in Italy is facing a loss of social influence and public confidence that may bode ill for its future, writes Massimo Faggioli in the liberal Catholic magazine *Commonweal* (October). “More than a year since the worst of the pandemic...the bishops’ conference has sunk further into irrelevance. And many feel free to criticize [the church] in ways that might have been unimaginable just a few years ago,” he writes. Although the church remains the most important provider of social services in Italy, it has “lost much of its cultural and political cachet,” even under a popular pope such as Francis. The pope’s



Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi (source: Sara Fornaro | Pixabay).

much stated goal of transparency has given Italians a glimpse into legal battles and criminal activities that have been prosecuted in the Vatican—from the case of Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu (the first cardinal ever to be indicted by Vatican prosecutors) and others charged with real estate fraud, to the politicking over the Zan bill, a piece of anti-homophobia legislation. These incidents and debates have “led to a level of tension between Church and state not seen in years,” Faggioli writes. The popular LGBTQ bill, if approved in its present form, could limit the freedom of expression of Catholics and Catholic institutions, violating guarantees given to the church in 1984 under the revised Concordat.

The issue of how the church can be involved in the post-pandemic recovery has been overshadowed by legislators and entrepreneurs on both the right and the left who question Catholic social teachings. “Criticizing the hierarchy has become the norm across the political spectrum: the left on gay rights, the right on immigration, the populists on the very idea of religious institutions,” Faggioli writes. Also making it difficult for the church to address public issues are the disappearance of Catholic lay associations and the general lack of interest in reviving a Catholic political party, even on the part of Pope Francis. Faggioli lays the blame not only on secularization but also on previous conservative papacies that encouraged clericalism and put a damper on independent lay initiatives. He doubts that Francis can remedy the situation this late in his papacy. While he invested heavily in shaping the social and political role of the church, he lacks allies in Italy. “Francis’s pontificate liberated Italian Catholicism from the right-wing, culture-war inclinations of the clerical elites in the early 2000s, but it has not generated anything new in its wake,” Faggioli concludes.

(*Commonweal*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/hope-hesitancy?>)

Sabbatical year roils farmers and authorities in Israel once again

Every seventh year, the practice of *shmita* (“year of release”), which seeks to let the land rest after being worked for six years, raises practical issues and dilemmas for municipal authorities in Israel, even though a majority of Israeli citizens do not care about this issue, reports Pascal Manker in the French weekly *La Vie* (September 9). Another *shmita* has started with the Jewish year 5782, on September 7. The scriptural foundation for *shmita* is found in the Book of Exodus (23:10–11): “For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.” According to rabbinical tradition, the law applies only to the land of Israel and only to Jewish farmers, which meant that it had little practical consequence for many centuries. But the resumption of Jewish farming in Israel in the late 19th century marked the beginning of fierce debates. Besides the poor being able to take what might still grow on the land left fallow, farmers



Farm in Ramat (source: Shifra Levyathan via the PikiWiki - Israel free image collection project).

are also allowed to take food for their own consumption for a few meals. But the food should in no case be sold during the sabbatical year, while any imported food is fine.

On Israeli markets, ultra-orthodox Jewish sellers advertise their products as *shmita*-compliant—for instance, if they have been imported from the Palestinian territories or from Jordan and other places. Manker explains that some Jewish farmers will sell their land for one year to a non-Jew who will then return it to the original owner, or will use modern forms of agriculture whereby some vegetables can be grown in pots on greenhouse platforms without any contact with the soil, although this is not universally approved by rabbinical authorities. Some 3,500 farms, making up 10 to 15 percent of Israel's cultivated land, are applying *shmita* and are provided with government subsidies to compensate their losses. But the principle also forbids towns from planting trees and flowers during the sabbatical year, which is now being criticized by environmentalists at a time of global warming. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* asked the authorities of the 21 largest towns in the country what they would do, and nine of them, including Jerusalem and Haifa, answered that they would refrain from planting trees and flowers during the coming year. Only one secular town stated that the *shmita* rules would not be applied, and the rest cautiously refrained from answering in order not to antagonize ultra-orthodox Jews. Manker explains that, while being a minority, those groups are also part of the identity of the

country and are thus able to exercise an influence even after having been (temporarily) ousted from the government earlier this year..

(*La Vie*, <https://www.lavie.fr/actualite/geopolitique/la-chemita-obligation-biblique-casse-tete-politique-76071.php>)

Turkish women activists fighting discrimination in mosques

Women in Mosques Platform, a Turkish group set up in 2017, is campaigning for Muslim women's equal access to mosques in a country that has traditionally encouraged women to worship at home. On the website of the *Institute for War and Peace Reporting* (September 10), Sevilay Nur Saraçlar writes that, while there are spaces for women in many mosques, they are usually small, separated, and relegated to the back, or in some cases even to a separate building in the courtyard. The situation has angered some younger women, especially those engaged in professional or academic work. While the group has taken on other issues, such as access for elderly people, their key issue is advancing the rights of women in mosques at a time when their attendance has reportedly been on the rise.



Muslim woman in Istanbul. Turkey (source: Pixabay).

Making use of social media, the women activists are challenging customs in the hope of convincing mosque administrators to make changes. While accepting the practice of women standing behind men during prayer, they are against the full separation and isolation that this leads to, with women's quarters being "often separated from the men's area with cloth-covered folding screens," Saraçlar writes. Besides the issue of spaces for women in mosques, inadequate washroom facilities for ablutions before prayer is another issue raised by the group. With the country's Religious Affairs Directorate administering a state-provided budget that has been consistently on the rise since 2006, they stress that some of this tax money should be used for addressing the needs of women wanting their rightful place in mosques. Some other groups working on a wider range of issues, such as the Havle Women's Association, are also supporting the demands of female worshippers.

(*Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/turkey-women-demand-equal-treatment-mosques>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ Throughout August and September, the Berkley Center for Religion and World Affairs at Georgetown University, through its Berkley Forum, has issued a series of reports and reflections on Covid-19 and the Russian Orthodox Church that provide an important resource for understanding changes taking place in church-state relations in Russia. Several writers note how the pandemic may be a watershed in testing the close relationship that has developed between the Putin regime and the church. Nicholas Gvosdev of the Naval War College writes that the Russian government's enactment of sweeping restrictions on church activities—ranging from icon veneration to the organization of pilgrimages and church schools—has led to an erosion of trust between the church and the state. Yet the government also realizes it needs the church and the high degree of social trust it has among the public to promote vaccination in a country with a high rate of vaccine hesitancy. In another paper, sociologist Kristina Stoeckl writes that the pandemic has strengthened the interlocking church and state elites who are pressing for the revival of traditional values and nationalism. In contrast, the measures put in place to stop the spread of Covid 19 has weakened the position of ordinary Russians and members of civil society who were used to traveling abroad and engaging in an exchange of different viewpoints.

Other papers in the series also address wider Orthodox concerns about the strong resistance Orthodox churches worldwide have put up to public health measures restricting church freedom during the pandemic, including conspiracy theories spread by some theologians and church leaders and (more so among laity and priests) resistance to the vaccines; and they also address shifting church practices on social



distancing and communion practices in a tradition known for its sacramentalism. These papers are available at: <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/russian-orthodoxy-and-nationhood-in-the-age-of-covid-19>

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

Maverick City Music, a charismatic Christian singing group and record label, has in a relatively short time gained wide influence in the Christian music industry through its emphasis on worship. Although the Atlanta-based group was founded only three years ago, many of its songs can already be found on church worship setlists worldwide. Even in the midst of the pandemic, Maverick City released five albums and four EPs of original music. The group functions as a collective of over 100 different musical artists, as well as a publishing company for corporate worship music and a record label. The group emphasizes diversity, bringing together black and white singers, and authenticity or “rawness” in its sound. There is little editing and fine-tuning of the music in the studio as singers combine corporate worship and performance. Many of the songs’ lyrics revolve around the themes of doubt, the person of Christ, and overcoming struggles of faith and life. (Source: *Charisma*, September)



Source: TRIBL Records.