

## Religion-based nationalism as the new normal for Republicans and conservatives

Populism has been positively and negatively associated with religion to varying degrees, but according to recent reports the religion factor is more established in the U.S., both in the Republican Party and in populist conservatism in general. While the religious right is regularly eulogized as a spent force, observers note that conservative religious politics has migrated to a new brand of populist, national conservatism. In a paper presented at the recent Society for the Scientific Study of Religion conference in Portland, Ore., which **RW** attended, James L. Guth and Lyman Kellstedt provided a unique look at religious populism before and after the Trump presidency. Analyzing the American National Election Study of 2020, the two political scientists found that the evangelical affinity for Trump and populism remained relatively unaffected from 2016. Older Catholics, mainline Protestants, LDS members, and Orthodox and Conservative Jews provided some populist support, while other ethnoreligious minorities and secularists were on the other side.

These divisions and tendencies feed into the party system, as populism adds “something new to the electoral equation,” apart from traditional ideological identities, according to Guth and Kellstedt.



Source: Quinn Dombrowski | Flickr.

Aside from party politics, a religion based and populist “national conservatism” is now at the center of conservative debates, writes David Brooks in *The Atlantic* (November 18). Yoram Hazony, an Israeli Orthodox Jew who is the chief intellectual architect of national conservatism, “argues that you can’t have a society that embraces government neutrality and tries to relegate values to the private sphere. The public realm eventually eviscerates private values, especially when public communication is controlled by a small oligarchic elite. If conservatives want to stand up to the pseudo-religion of wokeism, they have to put traditional religion at the center of their political project,” Brooks reports. Hazony reasons that if 80 percent of Americans are Christian, then Christian values should be the dominant ones. “Majority cultures have the right to establish the ruling culture, and minority cultures have the right to be decently treated,” Hazony said at the National Conservatism Conference held last month in Orlando, Florida.

Other conference speakers held up the national conservatism of Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary. Conservative Christian activist and author Rod Dreher extolled Orbán’s Christian nationalism for understanding the civilizational stakes of the culture war, as reflected in his use of the power of the state to limit how much transgenderism can be taught to children in schools. Brooks writes that over the past few decades there have been various efforts to replace the Reagan paradigm of conservatism: “the national-greatness conservatism of John McCain; the compassionate conservatism of George W. Bush; the Reformicon conservatism of the D.C. think tanks in the 21st century. But the Trumpian onslaught succeeded where these movements have so far fizzled because Trump understood better than they did the coalescence of the new American cultural/corporate elite and the potency of populist anger against it. Thus the display of Ivy League populism I witnessed in Orlando might well represent the alarming future of the American right, the fusing of the culture war and the class war,” Brooks concludes. But he doubts that Hazony’s vision of an American return to Christian dominance has much appeal. “Evangelical Christianity has lost many millions of believers across recent decades. Secularism is surging, and white Christianity is shrinking into a rump presence in American life. America is becoming more religiously diverse every day. Christians are in no position to impose their values—regarding same-sex marriage or anything else—on the public square.”

(*The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/scary-future-american-right-national-conservatism-conference/620746/>)

## **Mormon influencers dominate the blogosphere with motherhood advice**

Blogs on motherhood and family issues started by Mormon women have risen significantly over the last decade, and they are often the most influential sites on the topic on the internet, writes Dawn Araujo-Hawkins in the *Christian Century* (November 3). These blogs, such as Fun Cheap or Free, which is run by blogger Jordan Page and now one of America’s fastest growing private companies, have “amassed hundreds of thousand of followers on social media by sharing their tried-and-true motherhood tips—sometimes in posts sponsored by companies like Hershey’s,



Source: Fun Cheap or Free.

Unilever, and Lowe's. And, also like Page, many of them [have] spun their internet fame into real-world businesses or book deals," Araujo-Hawkins writes. There are several factors as to why Mormon mothers have become key online "influencers," but the increasingly lucrative and popular demand for parenting resources should not be overlooked. With mothers controlling 85 percent of household purchases in the United States, in the "mid-aughts, many a hobby blog suddenly became a source of income for the women who ran them as brands decided to partner with them in an effort to reach their loyal and engaged audiences." Araujo-Hawkins adds that this opportunity fit in "perfectly with the Mormon belief that the intentional, public sharing of joyful motherhood is something akin to a religious duty. For advertisers, it was a match made in heaven, and Mormon women were quickly ruling the algorithm game."

The blogs cover more than the joys of motherhood, several dealing with tragedies and problems in marriages and families. But they all stress faith and reliance on God and the importance of families. While Catholicism and evangelicalism have strong family and motherhood traditions, Mormonism elevates the role of mothers and families in general, assigning them to a position of divine authority and importance in salvation, particularly in the Latter Day Saints' teachings on eternal families. The tradition of Mormon women keeping diaries and sharing them with the public, with the approval of church authorities, goes back to the religion's founding and the trials and tribulations of members' trek to the American West, and may be a precursor to the LDS



penchant for blogging, according to the article. But the bloggers are not necessarily seeking to sell the LDS to their largely non-Mormon audiences. Page often wishes the Mormon mother bloggers felt able to be more upfront about their faith, “instead of hoping to entice people with the happy family life that is the fruit of their faith,” Araujo-Hawkins reports. Page says that “because our religion is very highly scrutinized, we’re very careful to try not to be too preachy. We are already looked at as very strange, and I think we want to try to fit in as much as possible and teach by way of example.”

(*Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org>)

### **Passing down the plate to younger generations challenges Catholic family foundations**

Family-based Catholic foundations are finding it difficult to pass on their faith-based philanthropies to the youngest generations who tend toward non-affiliation, reports *America* magazine (November). Many of the foundations supporting Christian ministries and institutions



Source: Twitter, @AlbertusPres.

were started by wealthy individuals who then passed on the reigns of leadership to succeeding generations of their families, but this transmission is facing new obstacles as the less religious Millennial and Generation Z generations move into adulthood, writes Michael J. O'Loughlin. Focusing on Catholic foundations, he notes that there are estimates that their granting programs give more than \$14 billion a year. A study by Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, a philanthropic consortium, finds that younger generations of would-be philanthropists, like their peers, are motivated by issues and causes more than by institutional loyalty. "That could spell trouble for foundations that have historically supported Catholic institutions because of faith connections," O'Loughlin writes. The study suggests that early exposure to on-the-ground ministries could strengthen the connections between younger generations and the institutional church. One solution may be found in the approach of the Raskob Foundation for Catholic Activities, started in 1945, which has moved to a membership model, where descendants of the founders can be involved as much or as little in the grantmaking process as they desire. But the model also stresses educating the younger generations in Catholic social teachings so that when they turn 18 they are able to participate in more formal ways, whether they are religious or not.

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

## CURRENT RESEARCH

● **Covid-19 has impacted both individual religious practice and belief and congregational life, according to new surveys.** One recent survey, conducted in late 2020 by Brandon Vaidyanathan of Catholic University, included 1,609 respondents from Virginia, Maryland, Texas, and Washington, D.C. Although not a random sample, these respondents reflected the demographic traits found in a 2019 survey of religious leaders. Presenting his findings at the late-November meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Diego, which **RW** attended, Vaidyanathan reported that those who were frequent attenders before the pandemic said they had maintained or even increased their attendance after congregations were reopened. A similar pattern was evident among those who said they prayed frequently before the pandemic—little change in 2020. He said the strongest relationship the survey showed was between a decrease in the perceived importance of religion and an increase in mental health problems. More than measures on attendance and prayer, it was the perceived importance of religion that mediated the reported change in mental health, according to Vaidyanathan.

As part of the new ongoing Hartford Institute for Religious Research study on Covid, another survey was presented in this session on the impact of the pandemic on congregational safety nets and social services. Based on a sample of 2,000 respondents (mostly congregational leaders or representatives) from 38 denominations, the study found that 70 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they engaged in social service programs. While 15 percent of the congregations did discontinue their social services during the pandemic, one-third said their level of assistance had

<b>Worship Mode Makes A Difference</b>		
<b>In Person Worship Only</b>	<b>Online Worship Only</b>	<b>Hybrid - Both In Person &amp; Online</b>
More decline -15.7%	Some decline -7.3%	Most growth 4.5%
Least willing to change	Most willing to change & Most worried/threatened	Moderate willing to change
Smallest size	Mid-sized	Largest size
More struggle to adapt	Least struggle to adapt	Some struggle to adapt
Some tested positive	Fewest tested positive	More tested positive
Some attender deaths	Fewest attender deaths	More attender deaths & more staff tested positive
Older clergy	Older clergy	Younger clergy
40% Catholics	0% Catholics	60% Catholics
8% Mainline	30% Mainline	62% Mainline
7% Evangelical	3% Evangelical	90% Evangelical

*Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research.*

remained stable, if not increased. Ninety percent of the congregations stopped meeting during the pandemic, while one-quarter maintained their level of volunteers and nine percent reported new volunteer roles being created. As far as donations were concerned, 40 percent said they saw an increase in giving and one-third said their financial health was about the same as it was before the pandemic. The study did not find that denominational traditions had significant effects on the finances of congregational social services during the pandemic; rather, it was the size of the congregation that had the strongest effect, with very small and small churches reporting lower increases in finances. Racial and ethnic factors did not have a significant role in the pandemic's effect on congregational social services, although it was found that only 55 percent of white congregations offered social services, compared to 84 percent of Latino and 67 percent of Asian congregations.

As for worship attendance, the survey found that 93 percent of congregations had resumed worship by 2021, but mostly in some hybrid form. As might be expected, the decline in worship attendance from 2019 was greater than previous years, standing at 12 percent. By contrast, the pre-pandemic 2020 Faith Communities Today survey had found a five-year median attendance decline of 7 percent for all U.S. congregations. In this pattern of decline it mattered how worship was conducted: the 15 percent of congregations who reported only meeting in person (smaller congregations with older clergy but also almost half of Orthodox and Catholic churches) also reported the steepest decline, at 15.7 percent. For the 5 percent of congregations who remained completely online, the decline was 7.3 percent. These are the congregations most concerned



about the pandemic and represented 30 percent of mainline churches, but very few evangelical and no Catholic or Orthodox ones. For the 80 percent of congregations maintaining a hybrid mode of worship, there was an overall growth of 4.5 percent in attendance. These congregations also reported the highest rates of mortality from the virus, and are represented by 90 percent of all evangelical churches, 60 percent of Catholic and Orthodox parishes, and 62 percent of mainline congregations.

(The Hartford Institute report on Covid and congregations can be downloaded from: <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org>)

● **Each generation tends to be less religious than the previous one in Switzerland, similarly to what can be seen in other Western countries, and one should not expect people to become more religious as they grow older, according to a recent study.** Combining data from quantitative research conducted over some 30 years, Jörg Stolz and Jeremy Senn (University of Lausanne), in a paper published in German and French as part of the series *Social Change in Switzerland* (Issue 27, November), show that religious belonging in each generation tends to decline more rapidly than in the previous ones, and that levels of attendance and private religious



Source: Pixabay.

practice are less than those of former generations. The younger an age cohort is, the slightly less religious it is than the previous one.

The authors claim that no switch from Christian religion to holistic spirituality can be observed, in contrast with common assumptions. Except for the practice of yoga, which has been rising over the past decade, several other practices or beliefs associated with holistic spiritual orientations have either remained stable or declined. But this pattern does not hold for all generations, with holistic spirituality being most strongly represented among people born between 1951 and 1970 (with the exception again of yoga and its rising spread among people born since 1981). Research data seems to confirm the impact of secularizing factors on religious socialization. There is also a decline in individual religiosity and religious affiliation over time. Neither believing nor belonging is on the increase, with time-demanding religious behavior (i.e., attendance) being given up first. One can thus speak of “generations with decreasing faith.”

A similar failure of transmission is taking place in eastern and western Germany, according to a paper Stolz, together with Oliver Lipps and David Voas, presented at the recent meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Portland, Ore., which **RW** attended. Using data from the German Socio-Economic Panel, the researchers looked at children’s and parents’ levels of religiosity over time. They found that a failure of religious socialization created the same pattern of cohort replacement evident in other parts of Europe, with each generation becoming less religious over time. They unexpectedly found that religious transmission took place to a greater extent in highly secularized east Germany than in west Germany, most likely due to a minority of very religious parents being more able to pass on their faith there. They found that those in stricter religions were better able to pass on their faith than those in more lax ones (such as evangelicals as compared to mainline Protestant and Catholic families). But Stolz, Lipps, and Voas were less certain about the factors driving this cohort replacement, speculating that it may be due to the social context where religion is not seen as important more than to individual attributes.

*(The paper on the Swiss research is a summary of a longer article to be published in 2022. The paper can be downloaded in German or in French from the website <https://www.socialchangeswitzerland.ch>)*

● **A preliminary study finds that Mongolia, Israel, and Estonia have some of the highest proportions of Christian women in the world.** While it is widely believed that women are the most active and numerous Christians in the world, there have been few attempts to quantify this reality. Census information includes gender data, but many census reports don’t include denomination breakdowns. From 2019 to 2021, together with her colleagues, Gina Zurlo of the Center for the Study of World Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Seminary has attempted to conduct surveys of gender distributions around the world (despite obstacles presented by Covid). Presenting on the first phase of this research at the American Academy of Religion meeting in



San Antonio in late November, which **RW** attended, Zurlo reported that the highest percentages of Christian women were found in Mongolia, Israel and Estonia, with rates of 63 percent each. She said that with these countries having little in common religiously, it would take more research to understand these higher rates. As far as women's leadership in churches goes, Zurlo found in the case of Mongolia that while women believed they had an equal chance of being a leader, when it came to actual practice, they did not see equal opportunity in attaining such positions. She also found that Catholic churches had lower female numbers than Protestant churches.



Mongolian girl reading the Bible (source: Mission Eurasia - Mongolia).

- **A study finds that while spirituality and religion are incorporated by technology professionals in both the U.S. and China, there are few spaces and opportunities in the latter country to practice spirituality and a reluctance to speak about the subject in the workplace.** In the study, presented at the recent meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Antonio, which **RW** attended, Santa Clara University sociologist Di Di interviewed 97 hi-tech professionals, 51 in China and 46 in the U.S. In her interviews, Di asked the tech

professionals in both countries whether they had incorporated religious or spiritual practices in their workplaces. The majority of the interviewees in both countries agreed that they had done so, but only the American respondents reported the availability of meditation rooms and other spaces for spiritual practice. In the U.S., “inclusion” and the need for better and healthier



Source: Lifeway Research.

workers were seen as the motivating factors behind such innovations. In China, on the other hand, there was found to be little mention of religion and spirituality in the workplace, where these matters are seen as leading to conflict among workers. “By not talking about religion, [they see themselves as] more inclusive,” Di said. If there were motivations in the Chinese tech workers’ attitudes to spirituality and religion, they often related to the need to “move forward” and “keep calm” in the midst of poor working conditions.

### **Young Shi’a Muslims launching their own independent organizations in Norway**

Since 2009, young Twelver Shi’ites in Norway have started forming their own groups, independent from mosques, in an attempt to localize Islam and address current issues, writes Ingvild Flakerud (University of Oslo) in the proceedings of a conference that took place last Spring in Rome, now published by OSMED (Observatory on the Mediterranean) under the title, *Shi’ism in European and Middle Eastern Contexts*. In the Oslo area alone, where 10 Shi’a mosques and centers exist—some with their own youth groups—no less than nine self-governed groups have been launched by Twelver Shi’a youth, the earliest one in 2009 and the newest one in 2021. Most members of the groups were born or raised in Norway and are fluent in Norwegian, which is used as their shared language. They are concerned about the views associating Islam with violence, are looking for adequate ways to answer criticism against Islam, and want to support each other in living in Norwegian society. Facing offences against Islam (such as cartoons and burning of the Quran), Shi’a youth are wondering how to respond in a peaceful and socially acceptable manner, according to Flakerud. At the same time, being





Source: TRT World.

themselves a minority within the broader Muslim minority in Norway, they also need to respond to harassment by two hardline anti-Shi'a Sunni Salafi groups describing Shi'a as infidels.

That Shi'a youth did not turn to mosques for answers, although they had visited them with their parents since childhood, is striking. They prefer self-teaching and searching for their own ways rather than using instructor-centered methods. Their activities may range from study groups and translating books to getting involved in local interreligious dialogue. Debates and self-reflection are encouraged. "A shared purpose among Twelver Shi'a youth groups established in Norway has been to localize Islam in new interpretive spaces in the Norwegian society," Flakerud writes. She also notes that many youth actually participated in several groups, which suggests that "they were in a process of exploring different ways of localizing Islam."

*(The small volume on Shi'ism in European and Middle Eastern Contexts can be downloaded from the OSMED website: <https://www.osmed.it/2021/09/28/shiism-in-european-and-middle-eastern-contexts/>)*

## **Widowhood as a vocation in northern Nigeria**

Widows play an undervalued but vital role in the spread of Christianity in northern Nigeria, writes Sung Bauta in the *International Bulletin of Mission Research* (Vol. 45, No. 4). Northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, but there are Christian enclaves. Women constitute the largest segment of church members in Nigeria and widows are a significant proportion of these women



and have been considered unheralded missionaries in the region. Bauta conducted research among a group of 20 widows for a three-month period and found that they intentionally rejected remarriage to devote themselves to active Christian mission. They unanimously saw widowhood as a calling, with many saying that they had felt called to the mission field even before they were married but that such a ministry was often reserved for men. Most of the women saw prayer for Nigeria as their special calling, being active in the Evangelical Church Winning All, the largest church in northern Nigeria, and its women's fellowships, which are based heavily on prayer activity. These widows also viewed raising their children to be Christian leaders as a special calling, Bauta writes. Some of the widows have pressed for opportunities to learn theology. Bauta concludes that the main contribution to these widows' sense of vocation may be in their diligent running of households after their husbands were killed in ethnoreligious conflicts in northern Nigeria.

(*International Bulletin of Mission Research*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ibm>)



Source: International Committee of the Red Cross.

## Women gradually gaining leadership roles in Middle East's churches

After facing a “stained glass ceiling of limitations” in Middle Eastern churches due to religious but also cultural restrictions, women are gradually ascending to the pulpit in the region, reports Mae Elise Cannon in *Sojourner's* magazine (November). Even in churches that allow women's ordination, such as the Presbyterian and Lutheran denominations, Middle Eastern congregations have been slow to accept women in leadership positions, with longstanding cultural traditions against such a change carrying as much or more weight than traditional Christian prohibitions. Cannon writes that low birth rates, emigration, and regional conflicts have resulted in lower church attendance but also a greater need for ministry, which has opened the doors for women. Women are being trained at seminaries in Lebanon and Europe for ministry in such Middle Eastern countries as Palestine, Syria, Israel, and Lebanon, although it is still challenging for them to find



Source: Pxhere.

positions in the region. Some people feel that the elevation of women in leadership represents the influence of the West and a “human rights invasion” that is not biblically justified, even though most of the region's churches originated from Western missionary efforts. The new candidates for ministry acknowledge that they may not be welcome in many Lebanese and Palestinian communities and realize that they have to focus on areas that may be more open to women in ministry, such as bigger cities like Jerusalem. The first three women ordained and in ministry in the region in the last decade all serve in Lebanon under the mentorship of Rima Nasrallah of the Near East School of Theology in Beirut.

(*Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/>)



## Korean religious groups show diverse response to, and slow recovery from, pandemic

Religious groups in Korea continue to face controversy and some fallout from the pandemic, even though there has been considerable diversity in how Korean religions have dealt with the virus, according to scholars speaking at a roundtable session of the recent conference of the American Academy of Religion in San Antonio, which **RW** attended. The new religious movement Shincheonji gained notoriety for being an early super-spreader of the virus and for its defiance of the government's public health measures. But Holly Folk of Western Washington University noted how the group was long viewed negatively by Korean churches before the pandemic for its heterodox teachings, including beliefs that its leader Lee Man Hee is the spirit of Christ and that other churches represent the anti-Christ. Eventually Hee was found not guilty of numerous charges defying public health laws. Folk said that the group has become more guarded against scholars researching it, though it has become more open to the general public, such as by, for instance, holding online seminars on the book of Revelation. For the Buddhist temples in Korea, there was no concerted effort regarding the virus because of their decentralized nature, with 482 Buddhist denominations in the country, according to Franklin Rausch of Lander University. While ecumenical associations of Buddhists have offered guidance regarding the pandemic, private and independent temples have been more vulnerable to the virus. Buddhist temples in general have faced steep declines in their finances since the pandemic—ranging from



Source: *Arab News*.



30 to 50 percent. While larger temples have been able to use online offerings, smaller temples have lacked the resources for such an innovation.

Up until the pandemic the Catholic Church in South Korea had experienced growth, but it has since seen declines, especially in its finances, according to Jeongeun Park of St. Thomas More College. Catholic parishes have mainly embraced a hybrid model rather than going completely online. But many Catholics have also revived traditional devotional practices for healing and home-based practice. There has also been a rethinking of old issues and a turning to the international community for support, Park said. Evangelicals have shown the most varied response among Korean religious groups. Timothy Lee of Brite Divinity School divided the evangelical response into four camps: willing compliers, made up of progressives and moderate Christians who have strongly supported public health measures, including the closing of churches; grudging compliers, including the larger Presbyterian and Methodist churches and such denominations as the Assemblies of God, who resented the government's actions but nevertheless complied; the amenable non-compliers who resisted government regulations but eventually complied; and, finally, the defiant non-compliers, who continue to show overt antagonism toward state rules, seeing the government as influenced by communism. Defiant non-compliers include smaller Presbyterian churches and members of the Christian Council of Korea, whose leader is said to have presided over a super-spreader event in his congregation.

### **Covid-19 as a tool for anti-Muslim online polemics in Sri Lanka**

The Covid-19 pandemic has influenced social and digital media consumption in Sri Lanka and given rise to a wave of hate speech and disinformation, with Muslims being the most targeted religious group, write Senel Wanniarachchi, Prihesh Ratnayake and Harindrini Corea in a chapter of the new book, *Muslims in Post-War Sri Lanka*. Anti-Muslim narratives have spread in Sri Lanka since the end of the civil war against Tamil separatists in 2009, in a context of majoritarian triumphalism and under the influence of ethnonationalist groups seeing Muslims as a threat to a Sinhala Buddhist nation, and these discourses have inspired anti-Muslim riots.

The outbreak and spread of Covid-19 led to an intensification of anti-Muslim rhetoric online. Based on social media monitoring conducted from April to December 2020, the authors found that 25.7 percent of all recorded harmful speech content in this period was targeted at the Muslim community. It accounted for 84.7 percent of all content aimed at a particular ethnic/religious group. The anti-Muslim rhetoric suggested that Muslims were “spreading the virus deliberately.” The fact that Muslims opposed mandatory cremation for all victims of the disease and insisted on the burial of Muslims was denounced as an unwillingness to accept sacrifices for the common good and even led to claims that “Muslims wanted to bury COVID bodies so that they could later be used as a bio-weapon.” Muslims were depicted as putting the country and its people in danger. The subsequent revocation of the mandatory cremation policy led to a new wave of anti-

Muslim polemics. Accusing Muslims of being super-spreaders of the virus has come as an additional theme following various accusations in recent years, such as assertions that Muslims have sterilized women of the majority Sinhala community through food served at Muslim-owned restaurants. It shows “the increasing normalization of anti-Muslim sentiments and rhetoric in the Sri Lankan COVID-19 pandemic context.”

*(The 200-page-long book, Muslims in Post-War Sri Lanka: Repression, Resistance & Reform, published by Minor Matters, a public movement dedicated to fostering religious harmony and protecting freedom of religion and belief in Sri Lanka, can be downloaded for free from the group’s website: <https://minormatters.org/en>)*



Source: Middle East Institute.

## Findings & Footnotes

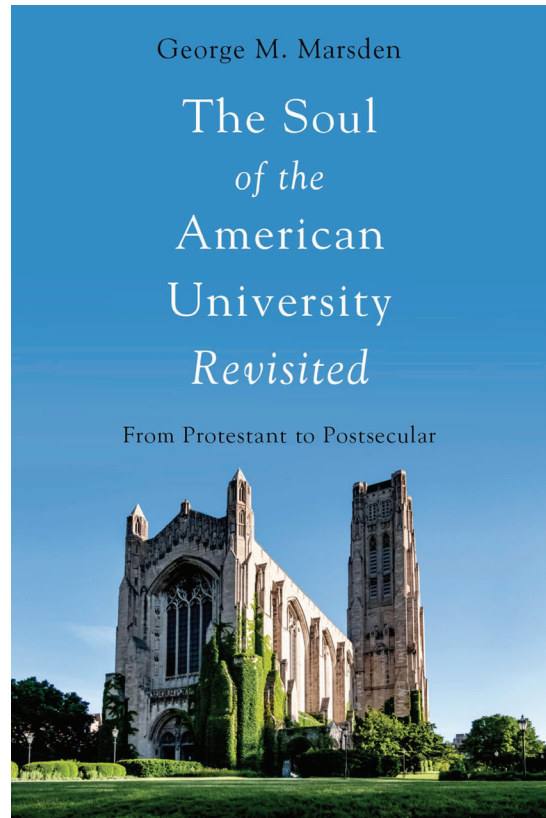
■ Twenty-five years ago, prominent church historian George Marsden wrote *The Soul of the American University*, a widely hailed history and portrayal of Christian, specifically evangelical, higher education and its struggle to resist secularization. Now Marsden has revisited the subject in a new edition of the book, which is the subject of a symposium in the *Christian Scholars Review* (Fall) that includes a response by the author. Contributors and Marsden himself note that his revised prognosis is in some ways more upbeat about the future of Christian universities and colleges in the U.S., as most agree that secularism isn’t the unified force the book had first portrayed it to be. But contributor Phillip Ryken of Wheaton College adds that anti-Christian secular currents today are also less hesitant to threaten dissenting institutions with legal restrictions, censoring, and a loss of funding if they don’t toe the line on sexual and political issues. On a positive note, Ryken adds that today the health of Christian educational

institutions is robust, with more candidates for positions, more impressive academic programs, and wider faculty engagement with academic scholarship. The growth of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCC) has been instrumental in strengthening leadership and resources for these institutions as well as representing their interests to the government. Marsden responds to the contributors with his concerns about a “shrinking evangelical center” as evangelicals fragment over social and political matters, as well as economic pressures from the 2008 recession and current ones from the pandemic.

Even if secularism is less unified, university administrators mimic the secular fixation on market-based programs. It is this form of market secularization that Marsden seems most concerned with, as he thinks the culture wars may be ameliorated as religious and cultural minorities press for their rights and continue to bring actual diversity to education and society. He is more critical of the rise of “populist evangelicalism” encouraged by the Trump presidency, which he sees as

reviving an anti-intellectual mood that could threaten the progress evangelicals have made in higher education. Apart from the symposium, evangelical theologian Carl Trueman weighs in on the debate on Marsden’s work in the magazine *First Things* (November) and argues that, contra Marsden, “Today’s cultured despisers of Christianity do not find its teachings to be intellectually implausible; they regard them as morally reprehensible...This was the point missed by...Marsden—though it may not have been as obvious at Wheaton College or the University of Notre Dame in the nineties as it is almost everywhere in higher education today...By definition, such a world rejects any notion that scholarly canons, assumptions, and methods can be separated from moral convictions and outcomes. Failure to conform to new orthodoxies on race, morality, sexual orientation, and gender identity is the main reason orthodox Christianity is despised today.” For more information on the symposium, visit: <http://christianscholars.com>. The *First Things* article can be downloaded at: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/11/the-failure-of-evangelical-elites>

■ *Building Faith: A Sociology of Religious Structures* (Oxford University Press, \$45) is one of the first book treatments of the interplay of religious buildings and the faith and practices that they embody. The book, by sociologists Robert Brenneman and Brian J. Miller, provides case studies of religious structures in the U.S. and Guatemala, arguing that buildings are an important part of religious identity that will likely continue beyond the lure of secular and virtual spaces. Even in utilitarian and repurposed religious structures—a church converted to a mosque or a commercial space to a church—the authors find what they call “building energy,” an emotional force that develops and can be sustained for years as congregations engage in a building project to house their faith. Brenneman and Miller find that even



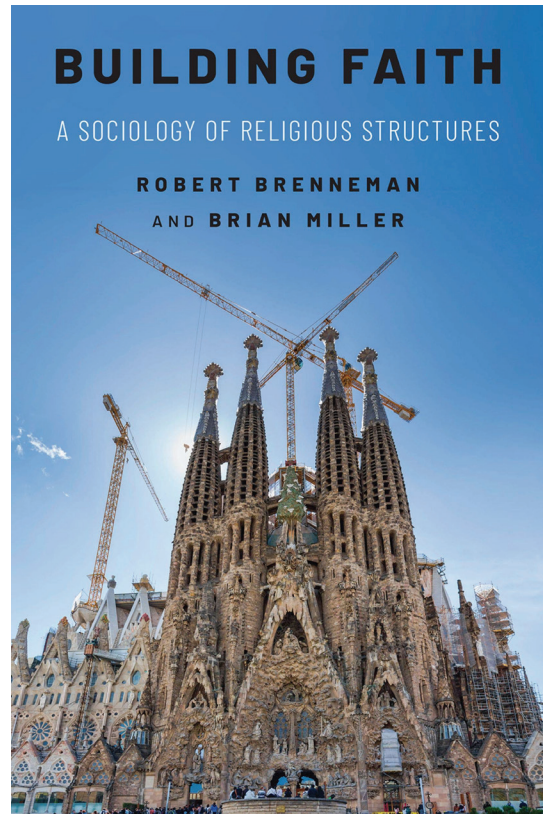


denominational congregations don't follow a "straight jacket" approach to building but instead freely borrow and select a range of styles, even if they stay within the broad range of their traditions and familiarity.

But the authors provide interesting examples showing how buildings repurposed by succeeding religious groups over generations may take on layers of new structures drawing on different theologies, and how diverse traditions may also have an effect on congregants. For instance, how does an Antiochian Orthodox Church reconcile its Middle Eastern architectural style with the constraints of the architecture of its original Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod building? Such conflicting styles may lead the current congregation to emphasize its distinctive architectural style, paying special attention to doorways and the use of lighting and darkness to enhance its identity and "emotional energy" for worshippers. The authors also look at whether there is a national architectural style that may override religious styles, concluding that even countries as different as the U.S. and Guatemala share common approaches to their buildings. There are growing transnational and globalized influences and exchanges; evangelical congregations in Guatemala visit American megachurches and may borrow their styles, while it may also be the case that architectural styles may "follow immigrants to the United States as they acquire and build their own structures."

■ Even among proponents of secularization, Africa has represented an exception or at least an anomaly in the trajectory toward a godless world. But the book, *Is Africa Incurably Religious?* (Regnum, £12), edited by Benno van den Toren, Joseph Bosco Bangura, and Robert E. Seed, provides several case studies showing how secularization is no stranger to African societies, even if the contributors, a mix of theologians, mission specialists and researchers, are more confident than many sociologists that secular trends can be reversed. The introduction makes the interesting point that while Westerners emphasize secularization, even when they might not acknowledge religious influences, Africans, whether in the diaspora or at home, tend to discount secular phenomena and stress their religiosity and Africa as a safe haven from secularization. But as Africa is integrated into a globalizing world, the circulation of secularity has also reached the continent. The case studies suggest that throughout African history there have been agnostic currents that can be seen in groups' occasional religious participation and even inactivity (one study showing the low church attendance among the poor in Nairobi). A chapter on African traditional religions notes how ideas of God's indifference and withdrawal are part of these belief systems.

The prosperity teachings that are evident in many churches are part of an older pragmatic philosophy that relates spirituality to worldly concerns with wealth and health, is indifferent to suffering, and easily



dovetails into more secular modes of life and thought. Add to that the fact that Western education models stressing science as a secular value have been widely imported into Africa (as seen in the French-speaking parts of western Africa, such as the Ivory Coast and Cameroon), and it is not difficult to understand the growth of secularism, especially among the urban elite and in the diaspora. Several contributors, meanwhile, see the growth of Christianity and its separation of God's action from nature and everyday life as a logic leading to secularization. Several chapters are more empirical; one survey shows how African theology students do not imbibe a wholesale version of secularism from their university studies, moving not toward atheism but rather a relativizing perspective of religious pluralism. Another chapter illustrates how secularizing effects are most powerful in the diaspora, providing a small case study showing how second-generation mixed-race African Pentecostal migrants in Belgium are more influenced by their secular surroundings than by their families, bringing up the need to find contextualized forms of faith that are not tied to African spirituality.



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

**Nordic animism** is a growing phenomenon in Scandinavia, seeking to return to a native spirituality while distinguishing itself from Neopagan groups holding to ethnic nationalism. Founded by Swedish religious historian Rune Hjarnø Rasmussen, the diffuse movement has been influenced by the Brazilian religion Candomblé and links environmentalism with the return to animism. Rasmussen teaches that Odin, the Norse king-god, belongs to other orishas or spirits that are prominent in the teachings of Candomblé and other West African-based Yoruba religions. Largely non-institutional, this spiritual movement has been popularized by Scandinavian bands and is mainly expressed in blogs and festivals, such as Saturnalia in Denmark, and in the movement's revised animistic Swedish rune calendar and trademark raven flag. Nordic animism seeks to counter nationalistic Heathen groups and closely identifies with Black



Source: Nordic Animism.

Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion, a protest movement fighting climate change. It is also part of a trend of Scandinavians wanting to return to nature and expressing dissatisfaction with multicultural urban life. Yet Rasmussen has been criticized for teaching that the movement cannot authentically exist outside of Scandinavia. **(Source: Paper presented by Frederik Gregorius at the conference of the American Academy of Religion, San Antonio, November 20)**