

Vol. 37, No. 10

August 2022

## **“Green wave” of progressivism sweeping Latin America puts religion on defensive**

While the “green wave” of progressive politics that is sweeping much of Latin America is unlikely to secularize the continent, it is creating a new pluralism as well as a growing divide between younger and older generations on religion and morality, according to specialists. **RW** was in Bogota, Colombia, shortly after Gustavo Petro assumed the presidency of the country in early August. The leftist former member of the country’s M-19 guerilla organization, who won



Source: WLRN / AP

an unprecedented victory over his conservative rival, is the latest example in the trend of progressive leaders and policies gaining a foothold in Latin American countries, with Chile and Peru having also recently joined the leftist standard bearers of Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba. In a wide-ranging interview, sociologist William Mauricio Beltran Cely of the National University of Bogota told **RW** (with the translation assistance of Hector Cifuentes) that it may be too early to ascertain Petro's impact on religion in Colombia, since the new president has taken a cautious attitude with Christians in the overwhelmingly Catholic country. "I sense Petro is conscious of the power of the church, especially the Catholic Church. In that sense, he's searching for the churches' support." Petro was a supporter of rebel priests and theologians and was influenced by liberation theology decades ago. "It could be sincere or a strategy to win church support," Beltran said. "But all other churches oppose him. They are afraid of the leftist government in imposing limits on the church. So they don't trust Petro or leftist movements. But Petro is very careful not to feed the opposition. If you don't have Catholic support [in Colombia], it's very hard to do anything."

Yet Beltran said that the situation in Colombia is now following in the tracks of Chile and Argentina (except that Colombia does not have these countries' large immigrant populations) and is becoming "less Catholic everyday." Citing surveys he and his colleagues have conducted, he said that about half of the 60 to 70 percent of Colombians who identify with Catholicism show weak commitment to the church, and that 10 percent of this population are "Catholic in name only," even if they believe in God. The Protestant (mainly Pentecostal) resurgence that has spread across Latin America arrived in Colombia belatedly, representing about 20 percent of the population. About five percent of Colombians are atheist and agnostic, along with another five percent who either are adherents of other religions, including the LDS Church, Islam, Judaism and indigenous religions, or mix faiths and spiritualities, as seen in the New Age movement. The more positive role given to indigenous religions by the Petro administration could be observed in the indigenous ceremonies that were held during the swearing in of Vice-President Francia Márquez, an Afro-Colombian.

The Catholic Church has lost much of its social and political power, with a parallel education system existing alongside the Catholic one. The robust rate of vocations, which allowed the church to select an elite priesthood, has weakened. "The church has to accept most candidates now...With the success of Protestants, more young people also see it as an option to become pastors," Beltran said. This decline also is due to the clerical sex abuse crisis that is becoming more visible in Colombia and the rest of Latin America. All of these dynamics are related to the green wave of progressive politics in Latin America, and they tie into the generational divide that can be seen everywhere from the polling booth to the church pew, Beltran said. Even if they claim the Catholic label, young Colombians differ considerably from older ones on moral issues, such as abortion and same-sex marriages (now both legal to some extent). Beltran added that about 20 percent of Colombian Catholics represent the concerns of the older conservative elite, especially on abortion, and are pitted against a progressive sector espousing leftist causes, who

find a hearing among young people, especially in the major cities. But the younger generations are also drawn to evangelicals and other religious groups, so it is hard to say which side in the culture war has more adherents, he said.

More than progressive politics and the emergence of leaders such as Petro, Beltran concluded that it is the forces of secularization, but more significantly globalization and pluralism, that are remaking much of Latin America religiously, most dramatically in Colombia, where Catholicism still retains social influence. The culture wars in Colombia and other Latin American countries were also the subject of a session that **RW** attended earlier in August at the American Sociological Association's annual meeting, which suggested religion's changing role and strategy in these conflicts. Progressive changes on abortion and gender issues in El Salvador, Chile, Argentina, Colombia, and parts of Mexico have galvanized the pro-life movements in these countries. But in Colombia, pro-life activism has mimicked the green wave groups in their use of banners, flags and street mobilizations and has become more secular, eschewing its older use of marches and prayer vigils. The older arguments on the sacredness of life from conception until death have lost ground to more libertarian and religious freedom arguments against abortion policies. Instead of priests, anti-establishment figures are regularly used in pro-life demonstrations.

### **Pope Francis planning his succession through cardinal appointments**

While some observers have seen the consistory and two days of meetings Pope Francis held in late August with 197 cardinals as a pre-conclave preparing the way for the election of a new pontiff in the not-too-distant future, Vatican observer Jean-Marie Guénois sees the pope preparing methodically to ensure the continuity of his line (*Le Figaro*, August 26). Guénois writes that Pope Francis is a practical man who is leaving all options open depending on his state of health—including that of remaining till the end of his terrestrial life. Precisely the pope's health and his age have led some cardinals to think that he will not be able to continue for many years, and that the recent consistory thus offered the opportunity to become acquainted with and assess the potential of other participants, reports Loup Besmond de Senneville (*La Croix International*, Sept. 1). A European cardinal "admitted that he has had his aides draw up a file on each cardinal."

But Pope Francis is carefully preparing for his succession in order maximize the likelihood that his successor will continue on the same track. Since cardinals under the age of 80 elect the pope, the way to achieve this aim is to select a number of new cardinals, something that Pope Francis has been doing at a faster pace than his predecessors. Moreover, while John Paul II and Benedict XVI made a point of selecting cardinals with various views, including some opposite to their own, in order to reflect the diversity of the Catholic Church, Francis is selecting men who appear willing to support his reforms and who show a strong pastoral orientation. Francis also picks



Source: *The Dialog*.

some prelates with different profiles (e.g., theologians), but all of them happen to be above 80 and thus not among those who will elect the next pope. Currently, out of 132 cardinals who qualify as electors, 83 have been chosen by Pope Francis. Forty-two percent of them come from Europe, 18 percent from Latin America, 17 percent from Asia and Oceania, 12 percent from Africa, and 11 percent from North America.

### **Vaccine hesitancy as first shot fired in new science-religion battle for evangelicals?**

Vaccine hesitancy may be taking place among only a segment of evangelicals, but is this new conflict with medicine signaling a more confrontational era between evangelical Christianity and science? Those were some of the issues addressed in a session on evangelicals and vaccine hesitancy that **RW** attended at the August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Los Angeles. Jerry Park and Stephanie Boddie of Baylor University presented a survey where they found that while African Americans are more hesitant to vaccinate than whites generally, evangelical Protestants are more hesitant than other Americans. They found that greater endorsement of “Christian nationalism” is associated with Covid vaccine hesitancy. Even within racial minority populations, there are conservative Protestant effects on vaccine hesitancy.



Source: *The CT Mirror*.

This was apparent in the way the hesitancy effect was more pronounced among minorities that espoused Christian nationalism.

From these results, sociologist John Evans of the University of California at San Diego argued that, aside from evolution, there have been no “fact claims differences” between evangelicals and science, and that even questions about evolution have not impinged on matters of everyday life and death in the way that vaccine resistance and hesitancy has in recent years. The evangelical clash over the efficacy of vaccines and virology most resembles older conflicts with science that Christians had over the efficacy of prayer in the 1880s. Since then, evangelicals have largely respected scientific claims about medicine and health—until Covid appeared. Evans argued that the return of conflict and dissent over scientific fact claims such as vaccination “makes it easier for evangelicals to reject other science and medical innovations.” This is especially the case as evangelicals join with other populists in a rejection of elite expertise, he added. Evans concluded that “ultimately, evangelicals are pragmatic... They will bend to science when they see people are dying; conservative Protestants will still see doctors. But the populist strain is there,” he said, and needs to be considered in instances when evangelicals interact with society.

## Pro-lifers weigh new strategies and disaffection after fall of *Roe*

Since the decision reversing *Roe v. Wade*, leaders and participants in the pro-life movement are saying that the time has arrived for a more socially involved phase of the movement. But there are signs that the movement is showing new divisions, as well as disaffection from a key Catholic population group. Writing in the conservative *National Catholic Register* (August 8), Mary Frances Myler reports that what anti-abortion activists term “Pro-Life 3.0” focuses on decreasing the demand for abortion through government programs and policies, instead of focusing more exclusively on limiting legal access to abortion. Charles Camosy, a moral theologian and chief proponent of the Pro-Life 3.0 approach, argues that it is more consistent with the breadth of Catholic social teaching and also includes possibilities for bipartisan collaboration. He explains that while Pro-Life 3.0 represents a shift in approach, it builds on previous phases of the pro-life movement.

Myler writes that before *Roe* the movement was “politically complex” and did not fit within the left-right political divide. Following *Roe*, “Pro-Life 2.0 was defined largely by its fusionism, channeling political activism largely through a coalition of the religious right, small-government libertarians, and anti-communist hawks.” Now, freed from the limitations imposed by *Roe*, and coinciding with the Republican Party’s populist shift, Camosy says that the pro-life movement has the opportunity for “new and creative political arrangements,” and “for Catholics to support a political agenda that more fully comports with Catholic social teaching.” Patrick Brown, a fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, said that the Catholic emphasis on “subsidiarity,”



Source: WRKF / WWNO

which holds that social challenges should be addressed at the most immediate level of society, stresses the importance of local faith-based organizations and pregnancy centers, which will likely increase post-*Roe*. While church teaching on solidarity recognizes a legitimate role for the government in supporting pregnant women, some pro-lifers are wary about bipartisan collaboration, especially at a time when Democrats are increasingly presenting themselves as “pro-abortion” and not merely “pro-choice.”

But along with new political alliances, a part of the pro-life movement has embraced an abolitionist agenda that eschews a gradualist approach to stopping abortion. Without limiting the states in regulating abortion, abolitionists, who mostly hail from evangelical churches and the Southern Baptist Convention, have become more outspoken. Harkening back to the slavery abolition movement, these activists seek laws to stop the practice on a national level. They are also less hesitant to prosecute mothers having an abortion, according to *Christianity Today* (August 1). Whether abolitionist or incrementalist, the pro-life cause has suffered a loss of popularity among Latino Catholics, according to a poll by the Public Religion Research Institute. The survey found 75 percent of Latino Catholics saying abortion should be legal in all or most cases. This figure is a significant increase from the 51 percent who gave that answer in 2010. Latino Catholics were also the religious group least likely to look to religious leaders for guidance on abortion. Only 32 percent of Latino Catholics said that their faith dictated their views on abortion, compared to 73 percent of evangelical Protestants.

## CURRENT RESEARCH

● **A reported decline in claims of strong or intense religiosity over the last year may well be due to changes in survey methods because of the pandemic rather than an actual weakening of religious faith.** In a paper presented at the recent meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Los Angeles, Landon Schnable reported that findings on “intense religiosity” in the 2021 General Social Survey (GSS) showed huge drops compared to previous years in such categories as biblical literalism, prayer, and claiming evangelical identity. Schnable attributed



Source: *Parade*.

these unusual declines to how the GSS was fielded in 2021 as a web survey rather than in-person survey as in previous years. The response rate decreased from 70 percent to 17 percent in 2021.

Schnable examined how this change in survey method created significant changes in response rates by looking at a subset of the 2021 GSS data, finding that phone responses to questions about intense religiosity registered a 45 percent response rate compared to only 25 percent in web surveys. The lower response on intense religiosity was also related to how response categories had changed under the web method, for instance, allowing for an answer of “somewhat strong” religiosity that was not provided in previous surveys. He further examined this change by using data panels from 2016, 2020, and three months in 2020–2021 to identify survey-takers, finding that those considered to be among the “disillusioned, disadvantaged, disinformed, and disconnected” in surveys are the ones who tend not to finish web surveys, creating a drop-out effect for 2021. Taking this effect into account, there was actually no decrease in intense religiosity for 2021, and indeed the rate even went up a little from previous years.

● **Just as there are food deserts in poor neighborhoods, African Americans attending universities often face “church deserts” that present them with a dearth of compatible religious institutions.** In a paper presented at the August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Los Angeles, attended by **RW**, Richard Pitt of the University of



Source: Pinterest.

California at San Diego looked at how African Americans (outside of those attending historically black colleges) face particular challenges in finding faith communities near their colleges. Pitt pointed out that many Americans live in religion deserts, with 32 percent of all Americans and 59 percent of blacks living over 16 minutes away from their places of worship. In looking at 80 non-sectarian liberal arts colleges across the country, Pitt found that more than half (52 percent) did not have a historically black denominational church (such as the Church of God in Christ or African American Episcopal Church) within their vicinity, while one-quarter had just one historically black denominational church nearby.

He estimated that 40 percent of the black students at these schools could be said to live in religion deserts, while another 20 percent have just one of these kind of churches to attend. This is in contrast to other religious minorities, such as Jews (with 60 percent having a nearby synagogue to attend), Latino Catholics (80 percent having a Catholic church nearby), and Muslims (11 percent having a nearby mosque). That leaves many African American Christians to attend alternative black religious organizations on campus, such as religious Greek letter organizations, parachurch organizations, such as InterVarsity or Cru, denominational student ministries, or performing arts groups, such as gospel choirs. Pitt concludes that these religion deserts may be a reason why many blacks drop off from religious involvement during these years of their lives.

● **Two different analyses of data on unchurched American Southerners come to opposing conclusions about the residual effects of faith on moral and political questions.** In *Christianity Today* (August 2), Daniel K. Williams addresses this matter in relation to the Pew Research Center's finding in their Religious Landscape Survey that 30 percent of Southern Baptists "seldom" or "never" attend church. "The southern Bible Belt is quickly becoming a region of unchurched or lapsed Protestants who may still hang onto their evangelical identity to some extent but who don't think going to church is necessary," Williams writes. He adds that these de-churched Protestants "are not adopting the political views of de-churched Catholics in the northeast. Instead, they remain strongly individualistic Republicans who still oppose abortion, even if some of their other views differ from those of their church counterparts." In an analysis of data from the 2018 General Social Survey (GSS), he finds that white Protestants in the South who do not attend church anymore are still "generally fundamentalistic when it comes to the Bible, and they're still strong law-and-order, pro-military Republicans who believe in a Southern civil religion where people are free to pray in schools but not get abortions." These respondents still identify as Protestant Christians, but their positions lack "grace and [have] left behind a deeply suspicious individualism, where law and order and self-defense are paramount."

This "conservative individualism without trust" is apparent in relation to questions such as whether most people try to take advantage of others. A majority of 54 percent in the survey agreed, and 58 percent said that people are looking out for themselves. The responses from white Southern Protestants who attended church every week, on the other hand, were almost the direct



Source: Historical Rural Churches / John Kirkland.

opposite. Sixty-two percent said that most people would “try to be fair” rather than take advantage of them, and 57 percent said that most of the time, people “try to be helpful.” Those who attended church weekly were also more likely to vote than those who hardly ever attended. “When people leave church, they retain that moralism—at least insofar as it pertains to other people—but lose the sense of self-sacrifice and trust in others. They keep their Bible, their gun, their pro-life pin, and their MAGA hat, but also pick up a condom and a marijuana joint and lose whatever willingness they had to care for other people in community,” Williams concludes. But in the blog *Religion in Public* (August 27), political scientists Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe question Williams’ analysis. They do not find that Southerners who attend church once a year or less are as pro-life as frequent attenders. Instead, low attenders across regions “appear to be more supportive of gun control, abortion rights, removing Trump, and other liberal positions,” they write.

● **Canada’s Jews, numbering 380,000, were the most targeted religious minority for hate crimes reported to police in 2021, according to Statistics Canada.** Comprising only about one percent of the population, Jewish victims represented 14 percent of reported hate crimes last year. Jews saw a 47 percent rise in reported hate crimes compared to 2020, according to the bureau. Only black Canadians, who make up about 3.5 percent of the country’s population,

reported more hate crimes. Overall, 1.3 Canadian Jews in every 1,000 reported being victims of hate crime in 2021. Statistically, Canadian Jews were more than 10 times more likely than any other Canadian religious minority to report being the target of hate crime.



Source: The Atlantic Jewish Council.

● While religious and ethnic minorities that are more religious than their host population tend to be more socially and economic disadvantaged than the majority, a new study finds that the Swedish minority in Finland represents something of an anomaly. In a paper presented at the recent meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Los Angeles, which **RW** attended, Weiqian Xia of Stockholm University looked at Finland's population register data from 1971 to 2020. He found trends similar to those in other parts of Scandinavia, including declining rates of affiliation with the main Lutheran church, a growth in minority denominations and religions, including Mormons, and secularization by cohort age. But unexpectedly,

Languages of Finnish municipalities as of 2016.  
**Legend:**  unilingually Finnish  bilingual with Finnish as majority language, Swedish as minority language  bilingual with Swedish as majority language, Finnish as minority language  unilingually Swedish  bilingual with Finnish as majority language, Sami as minority language



Xia found a higher rate of affiliation with the Church of Finland among the Swedish-speaking minority than among Finns. The Swedish-speaking Finns had a lower rate of secularization while being wealthier and more highly educated than other Finns. Xia found that they had a more cohesive community and greater social capital than Finnish people in general, preserving a stronger sense of community and culture. He concluded that the Lutheran church serves as a source of identity more than a religion for this minority.

### **El Salvador's ecumenical populism takes authoritarian turn**

El Salvador is becoming increasingly authoritarian under President Nayib Bukele, as he draws on his multireligious background and connections to enforce an aggressive rightist agenda, writes Amy Fallas on the website *Religion and Politics* (August 2). In 2019, Bukele won the presidency on an anti-corruption and anti-establishment platform through a wave of popular support. To support his policies he has deftly incorporated aspects of his Christian bona fides (his family descends from Bethlehem, Jesus's birthplace), Muslim leadership (his father's religious role in El Salvador), and Jewish connections (his wife claims Sephardic roots). "These different modes of religiosity allowed him to establish connections with evangelical leaders, the Catholic establishment, and even diplomatic relations in the Middle East," Fallas writes. "Yet, the



Source: *Americas Quarterly*.

politicized aspects of his faith would not only remain a source of conjecture, but Bukele himself would strategically use religious belief to redirect criticism of his policies from Salvadorans locally and abroad.” This tactic has only intensified as his own popularity has declined in recent months over his abusive leadership. Since last March, the Bukele regime has incarcerated over 46,000 Salvadorans with alleged connections to gangs, even as the government previously negotiated with gangs to boast a record of decreasing homicides.

A central part of Bukele’s rhetoric during his campaign stressed the spiritual danger of gangs. He recently posted a photo on Facebook of a satanic altar in an alleged gang member’s home, remarking: “the war against gangs is a war between good and evil.” Supporters regularly extoll his policies as fulfilling a divine purpose. “Bukele has mobilized this religious language to establish key connections to influential evangelical leaders as well as a sizable and devout [evangelical and Catholic] Salvadoran diaspora in the United States,” Fallas writes. In the leadup to his presidential bid, Bukele courted the support of prominent evangelical leaders like Edgardo Cardozo, Juan Carlos Hasbún, and Dante Gebel. During a summit in 2018, evangelical leaders prayed and voiced their support of Bukele, underscoring how his commitment to anti-abortion and anti-gay marriage policies was a fulfillment of prophecy. Perhaps the most controversial of all recent policy shifts was Bukele’s proposal to make El Salvador the first country in the world to recognize Bitcoin as legal tender. “It could be argued,” concludes Fallas, “that while Bukele publicly disavows a singular religious identity, he certainly embraces a faith-based ethos around cryptocurrency that does not allow anyone to call his power into question. Bukele’s belief in Bitcoin not only challenges crypto advocates’ claims to a democratic and transparent currency but also bolsters a growing perspective that considers devotion to cryptocurrency a 21st-century religious phenomenon.”

## **Russian Jews choosing emigration to Israel as viable option**

More Jews are emigrating to Israel from Russia than they are from Ukraine, seeing it as a desperate option to prevent history from repeating itself, reports an article in the online magazine Common Sense (August 9). According to Israel’s Aliyah and Integration Ministry, in the first half of 2022, 11,906 people emigrated from Ukraine to Israel—while nearly 17,000 from Russia did the same. “While Ukrainian Jewish refugees have various asylum options, Russian Jews are ineligible for refugee status, and Israel is the simplest option,” writes Avital Chizhik Goldschmidt. The factors behind the emigration include protesting the war, fears of economic meltdown, and concerns about revived discrimination, harkening back to the days of the U.S.S.R. In those days, Jews were denied permission to immigrate to Israel, and there is the fear “that this might be their last, best chance to get out.” For two decades, Vladimir Putin cultivated an image of himself as a philosemite, using this portrayal as a way of countering charges that he and other Russian leaders were fascist.



Source: Bloomberg / Getty Images.

But leaders have increasingly made conspiratorial comments about Jews. In May, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insisted that Hitler had “Jewish blood.” In June, television anchor Vladimir Solovyev took to a Kremlin media organ to warn of Russian-speaking “traitors” who “have some relation to the Jewish people.” Just a few weeks later, the Jewish Agency, an Israeli nonprofit that has helped Jews immigrate to Israel, was informed of its closure, and late last month, Russia’s leading Jewish intellectual dissidents, Yevgenia Albats, Dmitry Aleshkovsky, and Dmitry Bykov, were declared to be foreign agents. “All of this—the purge of the intellectuals, the state-sanctioned insinuations of Jewish treachery, and now the closing of the Jewish Agency—are in keeping with the old Soviet model. The only unanswered question is how much Russian Jews will suffer.”

### **More than theology, economics drives religious moderation in Saudi Arabia**

Under the leadership of Saudi strongman, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (nicknamed MBS), a discourse on religious moderation has been promoted and various social norms have been relaxed, with conservative Wahhabi clerics left with no choice but to align themselves with these changes. However, the religious reforms appear to be inspired by practical considerations more than a deep belief in tolerance and pluralism, writes Ulrich von Schwerin in the leading



Source: *World Watch Monitor*.

Swiss daily *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (August 29). More than preaching tolerance, moderation seems to be understood as refraining from engaging in political Islam. There have been obvious changes in Saudi Arabia, including an interreligious forum organized in Riyadh last May by the World Muslim League, permission granted to women to travel abroad freely, and the banning of the feared religious police from Saudi streets. All those transformations have led observers to wonder if the long-held pact between the ruling Saud family and Wahhabi clerics, who are given a free hand in return for their support, is being overturned.

According to Peter Mandaville, editor of *Wahhabism and the World: Understanding Saudi Arabia's Global Influence on Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2022), MBS needs a cultural and social opening to achieve the ambitious goals of his Vision 2030 program for the modernization of the Saudi economy. Thus, he has allowed males and females to interact in public areas and Saudi citizens to cooperate with people from other religious and cultural backgrounds. While it is true that Saudi Islamic humanitarian work abroad has come under strict state control and that the financing and export of Wahhabi-inspired religious work worldwide has drastically declined for various reasons, the impact of decades of spreading the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam around the globe will be felt for a long time and can survive without Saudi support. It also remains to be seen if the changes in the religious policy of the Saudi state will last. As long as Wahhabi clerics are seen by MBS as an obstacle to his economic reforms, he will continue to try to limit their

influence. But this may change if he needs them at some point, and he might even have no choice but to turn to them if his economic reform plans fail. Indeed, Vision 2030 has to deliver in order for the state to earn its legitimacy from economic development and no longer from recognition by religious figures.

### **Al-Qaeda likely to remain leader of jihadists even after Zawahiri**

The assassination of Ayman al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan this summer is unlikely to diminish al-Qaeda's status as a leader in world jihad, reports *The Economist* (August 2). The return to power of its Taliban allies a year ago gave al-Qaeda breathing room to communicate with followers, raise funds and organize. The magazine reports that a UN report published last month said that al-Qaeda's leadership was playing an "advisory role" with the Taliban and that its fighters were present across the country. At the same time, al-Qaeda's regional affiliates have also grown strong, including branches in the Indian subcontinent, Pakistan, al-Shabab in Somalia, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. "The international context is favorable to al-Qaeda," noted the UN report. A septuagenarian doctor with little of bin Laden's charisma, Zawahiri was always an "unlikely vanguard for the global jihadist movement. His successor is likely to



Zawahiri (source: Store Norske Leksikon).

be Sayf al-Adl, the *nom de guerre* of an enigmatic Egyptian former commando who was briefly al-Qaeda's interim leader before Zawahiri took the job." Adl has a \$10 million American bounty on his head for his role in attacks on American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998. It is noteworthy that Adl has been based in Iran for around 20 years, often under de facto house arrest. The magazine adds that "Iran's Shia regime has an uneasy, if pragmatic, relationship with the Sunni jihadists of al-Qaeda. Counter-terrorism officials have previously said that it is not clear whether Iran would allow him to leave. After Mr. Biden's demonstration of America's enduring counter-terrorism prowess, Mr. Adl might feel safer staying put."

## Thai Buddhists innovate to spread their teaching—but not like usual missionaries

Compared with Christian missionaries, Buddhist monks are not active proselytizers, but they are nevertheless willing to share their teachings with those who are open to their message, writes Brooke Schedneck (Rhodes College) in the digital magazine *Aeon* (August 11). Schedneck is the author of a recent book titled *Religious Tourism in Northern Thailand: Encounters with Buddhist Monks* (University of Washington Press, 2021). “Buddhist monks are missionaries too, just in more subtle and indirect ways,” writes Schedneck, who reminds readers that the Buddha told his disciples to find those “with little dust in their eyes” and teach them. There is a lesser sense of urgency than there is among Christian missionaries, since there is more than one life and people are continually reborn in other lives. But on the other hand, since one also accumulates karma during each life, actions have repercussions, and a human life offers a precious and rare opportunity for pursuing nirvana, some monks emphasize the need to lead a moral life in harmony with Buddhist principles.

According to Buddhist teachings, one does not need to identify as a Buddhist in order to reach enlightenment, but being in touch with Buddhist temples and monks is supposed to make it much easier. Aware of the rising popularity of Buddhism and of some practices derived from Buddhist



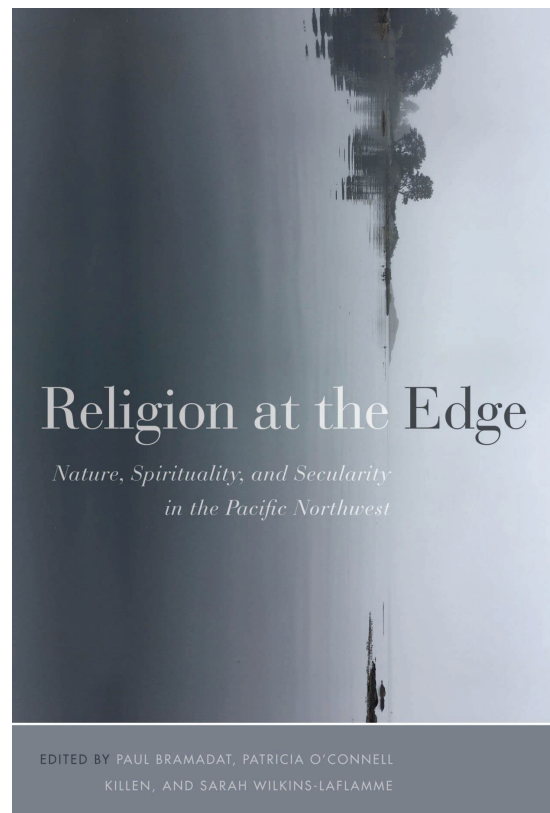
Source: Rawpixel

teachings (e.g., mindfulness), some Buddhist monks do not even bother to leave their temples but simply make themselves approachable. Based on her fieldwork in Thailand, Schedneck has observed how local monks have “created opportunities for non-Buddhist travellers to participate in a meditation retreat, join a Buddhist community, talk with a monk.” Indeed, the development of education has allowed many young monks to learn English. In a tourist spot such as Chiang Mai, they open their temples not only for cultural purposes, but in the hope of showing Buddhism to people who initially came only for tourism. Either those who come to a temple have karmic seeds that led them there, or a visit might plant in them seeds of future inspiration. Schedneck remarks that at a time when the share of Buddhism among the religions of the world is decreasing, such an approach with a lack of emphasis on affiliation also presents challenges. An interest in selected parts of Buddhism will not necessarily lead people to embrace the entirety of the religion and give rise to new generations of Buddhists.

## Findings & Footnotes

■ **RW** mourns the recent passing of ISR co-founder and co-director Rodney Stark. When the editor was about to close up shop after 31 years of publishing RW in 2016, Rod Stark graciously extended the invitation for the newsletter to come under the auspices of ISR and receive a new lease on life as an online publication. Of course, he was best known for his painstaking research in the sociology of religion as well as his wonderful style of writing— qualities that have long inspired RW.

■ It is interesting that aside from the American South and its reputation for fervent religiosity, the other North American region to receive considerable scholarly and journalistic attention for its religious distinctiveness is the equally fervent but secular Pacific Northwest. As the new, wide-ranging anthology *Religion at the Edge* (University of British Columbia Press, \$37.95) shows, the secularity of the states and provinces of Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia is unique to the region and does not just mean the absence of religion. The book, edited by Paul Bramadat, Patricia O’Connell Killen, and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, is the result of a multi-year study of the region and religion, bringing together social scientists and religion scholars. As the contributors make clear, Cascadia may be the largest unaffiliated (“none”) region in North America, but it is interesting also because of the lack of religious establishments historically in the area, making for new, often conservative religious outgrowths, as well as the strong influence of indigenous spirituality and



environmentalism on its religious institutions and culture.

One of the recurring questions in the book is whether Cascadia is a bellwether of future secularity in the rest of North America. Contributor Mark Silk argues that the “spiritual but not religious” population in the region, especially among the younger cohorts, has tended to become neither spiritual nor religious—a secular trend he sees as spreading. Yet, as noted above, secularism in the region is distinctive enough, especially in what Bramadat calls its “reverential naturalism,” a secular spirituality linked to outdoor sports and environmental preservation. The contributors note that these dynamics—non-affiliation and nature-based spirituality—are seen in other places on a smaller scale, though the progressive politics and culture of Cascadia (and especially of British Columbia with the wide space it has given to indigenous culture) will be difficult to transplant or replicate. Other chapters include a study of evangelical and mainline clergy, who see some of the region’s population shifting from non-religious to anti-religious, with a related decline in volunteerism on behalf of the needy and civic involvement; and a chapter based on the oral histories of the secular pioneers in the region, showing how their non- and sometimes anti-religious attitudes set the tone and culture of Cascadia.

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

Among organizations seeking to lessen the sharp polarization of Americans, **Christians for the Common Good (CCG)** has achieved a measure of success. The group, based in Portland, Oregon, has drawn the attention of researchers for its effectiveness in passing state bills, particularly in the area of human trafficking, that have garnered support from both left and right based on the strong relationships it has fostered on both sides of the aisle. Although coming from a progressive evangelical standpoint, CCG has maintained a strategy of seeking



Source: *The Christian Chronicle*.

the common good and bridge-building while avoiding culture-war issues. But the organization faces a number of challenges, particularly funding, as it engages in delicate positioning between mainline and evangelical funders. Activists often press for the group to take clearer political positions. Because CCG also sees itself as a “prophetic” organization there is the danger that it may abandon its bridge-building work. Because participants are involved for different reasons, such pluralism may help fundraising but dampen the stress on the common good. (Source: *paper on CCG presented by Wes Makovsky at a session of this year’s meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, August, Los Angeles*).