

Religious liberty intensifying culture wars?

A new study finds that religious freedom is becoming a long-lasting wedge issue in the culture wars between conservative religious believers and secularists, especially as the former become likely to take on the status of a religious minority themselves. In a study published in the journal *Religion, State, and Society* (50:3), political scientist James Guth analyzed the Democracy Fund's Voter Survey and the 2016 and 2020 American National Election Studies, focusing on the Masterpiece Cakeshop case, where an evangelical baker refused to sell a cake to a same-sex couple celebrating their marriage. Guth found that high religious commitment, adherence to traditional theology, and related conservative culture war perspectives were correlated with a strong defense of religious liberty more than was membership in an "ethnoreligious" minority group. The religiously unaffiliated, atheists, and agnostics tended to downplay religious liberty issues. As for the question of whether people should be exempt from providing a service for the sake of conscience, white evangelical Protestants were the most affirmative, while atheists, agnostics, and the unaffiliated rejected such "conscience rights." Guth writes that the stability in these surveys of public attitudes on the wedding cake case and religious liberty contrasts with the more rapid legal changes that have been occurring in society, including same-sex marriage itself. "Indeed, in some respects, public opinion in this case resembles more closely attitudes toward abortion rights, on which the public has been consistently, narrowly, and strongly divided since *Roe v. Wade* (1973)."

Guth adds that the finding indicating that these issues not only divide the public but split it into antagonistic camps "confirms media accounts suggesting that religious conscience exemptions have aroused strong sentiments on both sides, with few proponents of compromise or moderation, either legal or political." Since the Biden administration has already surpassed the Trump administration's lower federal court appointment record, even the Supreme Court appointment of Amy Coney Barrett will not weaken leftist advocates' resolve that antidiscrimination laws should have priority over any asserted right to religious liberty. Guth concludes that perceptions of the value of religious liberty and support for conscience exemptions are both led by religious factors. "Although historic 'religious minority' status still



has some influence, concern for religious liberty and backing for ‘conscience rights’ is now strongly tied to traditional religiosity, ‘orthodox’ theology, and related culture war attitudes...If that is the case, concern for religious liberty and support for conscience claims may become increasingly ‘marginal’ as traditional religion gives way to ‘personal choice’ values in a rapidly secularizing United States. If traditional religious minorities lose their concern for religious liberty and the unaffiliated show none, the shrinking population of traditionalists is unlikely to elicit much public support or many concessions from the political system....” Eventually, this can result in an “American-style laicite,” with all religious claims in the public square being censored. “Although the first new ‘losers’ might primarily be Christian traditionalists, triumphant secularists might well target other religious groups in the future, transforming the very meaning of ‘free exercise,’” Guth concludes.

But, at least on the state legislative level, a new study finds that some traditionally “blue” or liberal states have done a better job of protecting religious liberty than conservative, “red” states. The study, *Religious Liberty in the States*, conducted by the Center for Religion, Culture, and Democracy, is based on a statistical index and catalog of legal safeguards protecting the free exercise of religion, covering 29 items that include religious protections against vaccination requirements, exemptions from participation in same-sex weddings, and health care provisions that allow for provider refusal of abortion, contraception, and sterilization. The website *Real Clear Religion* (September 16) reports that in ranking the states on such safeguards, the survey

did not find a clear partisan divide. There are both red and blue states at the top and bottom of the rankings. Heading the list is red Mississippi followed by blue Illinois. Texas, known as an evangelical stronghold, is in the middle of the rankings. While prominent blue states, such as California and New York, rank at the bottom, other blue states, including Washington, Connecticut, Maryland, and Maine, scored in the top third. Both Mississippi and Illinois were far ahead of third ranking New Mexico because Illinois passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Health Care Right of Conscience Act, which safeguard a wide variety of religious activities and health care facilities and personnel from government burdens. Mississippi's health care conscience provisions went further, extending conscience protections even in the case of medical emergencies.

(*Religion, State, and Society*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/crss20>; *Real Clear Religion*, https://www.realclearreligion.org/articles/2022/09/16/religious_liberty_beyond_red_and_blue_divides_853926.html)

Presidential elections divide Brazil's evangelicals while Afro-Brazilians enter political fray

In the race between current President Jair Bolsonaro and former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil's elections, evangelicals are finding themselves sharply divided on the candidates, even as Afro-Brazilian religions are finding a new voice in the political process. Writing in *Christianity Today* magazine (September), Marcos Simas and Carlos Fernandes report that while about 70 percent of evangelicals voted for Bolsonaro in the last election, there is now a much closer split, with 39 percent showing a preference for the incumbent and 36 percent going for Lula (who was released from prison in 2019, with corruption convictions annulled last year). Observers say that this time economic concerns may carry just as much or even more weight than religious and ideological ones. Such factors as Covid, inflation (exceeding 11 percent), and unemployment (at 10 percent) may drive Bolsonaro's poorer supporters to seek an alternative, Simas and Fernandes write. There is also growing diversity among the country's large evangelical population: 196 deputies and seven senators belong to the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, but these politicians are spread across 19 different political parties. About a quarter of them belong to Bolsonaro's right wing Liberal Party, drawn to its social conservatism (being pro-life and for defense of religious freedom and the traditional family). But even a segment of Bolsonaro's supporters diverge from him on some issues, such as environmentalism.

Bolsonaro has received more endorsements and support from pulpits this time around, write Simas and Fernandes. This may be because he has cultivated closer ties with Pentecostal leaders, participating in the nation's March for Jesus rally. He also followed through on his promise to appoint an evangelical to the Supreme Court. But other evangelical critics have charged that fellow clergy and laypeople have become too close to Bolsonaro, demonstrated in recent incidents of evangelicals being caught up in corruption and influence peddling scandals. But it



Source: NPR.

remains to be seen if Lula can take advantage of this dissatisfaction with the president; he has defended the decriminalization of abortion in Brazil as well as supported other socially progressive positions. Lula himself doesn't focus on these culture war issues but stresses economic concerns—something that has resonated with Brazilians who saw their standard of living rise significantly during his presidency.

Among more than 27,000 candidates in the various October elections in Brazil (President, one-third of the members of the Federal Senate, 513 members of the Chamber of Deputies, members of the assemblies of the 27 Federal States, governors of each Federal State), 713 were leaders of religious groups, with 70 percent being evangelicals. In a new development, as reported by Jean-Claude Gerez in an article published by the Swiss Catholic news agency *Cath.ch* (September 26), 29 candidates presented themselves as priests (*pais-de-santo*) or priestesses (*mães-de-santo*) in Afro-Brazilian religions such as Umbanda or Candomblé, with some wearing their religious attire on campaign posters. According to Ivanir dos Santos (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), who is himself a priest in an Afro-Brazilian group as well as a religious freedom activist, the figure is probably higher, since not all Candomblé- or Umbanda-related candidates advertise it prominently.

One of these candidates, Bernadete Souza d'Oxóssi from the leftist Socialism and Liberty Party, who is the head of the *terreiro* (place of worship) Ilê Axé in Ilheus (State of Bahia), recounts that she became politically aware after attempting to intervene in a social conflict, with her *orisha* (spirit) manifesting at that time, leading police officers to assault her and claim that Satan would

get out of her body. According to Ivanir dos Santos, religious intolerance and demonization of African-born beliefs have been key reasons for Afro-Brazilian religious leaders' involvement in politics. More generally, the emergence and involvement of evangelicals in politics since the beginning of the present century has led to a new place for religion in public debates in Brazil, says Rodrigo Coppe Caldeira (University of Belo Horizonte). The presence of Afro-Brazilian religious figures as candidates is also linked to the growth of black awareness and related attempts to increase Afro-Brazilian representation in parliament. According to the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE), despite Afro-Brazilians making up 54.1 percent of the population, only 124 of the 513 federal deputies elected to the National Congress in 2018 self-identified as black, reports Tatiana Lima (*Rio On Watch*, September 20). Black activists are eager to change that.

(*Christianity Today*, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60187)

New ethnic members reshaping American women's religious orders

Women's religious orders are seeing an increasing number of members from new immigrant groups and in the process are changing their structure and activities, writes Thu Do, a nun and researcher at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. Writing in the Jesuit magazine *America* (October), Do notes that "new members of



religious orders are increasingly the children or grandchildren of immigrants from Catholic countries outside of Europe, including Mexico, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Vietnam. They come from families in which devotional practices and religious engagement are often more visible than in families who have long been in the United States, and these practices are influential in their vocational discernment." Do adds that over the last decade, about 7 in 10 members in formation have been white, compared with 9 in 10 among members who have professed perpetual vows. While women religious of color now make up 13 percent of full members, they make up 3 in 10 among members in formation, "which means that women of color will make up an increasing share of sisters at religious institutes."

Many of these new nuns are not native English speakers, with Spanish and Vietnamese being the most common languages. Some of these nuns and postulants study at international institutes, which were started in the 1960s, with some, such as orders in Vietnam, arriving in the U.S. to

escape persecution. Other institutes “arrive with a desire to evangelize American culture, which they see as worldly, materialistic, and lacking in spirituality,” Do writes. Because of these changes, religious institutes are generating a range of unique innovations—“from restructuring governance by merging with other provinces or institutes to collaborating with other religious institutes to reassess where their motherhouses should be located and how they can include younger, foreign-born, and culturally and ethnically diverse sisters in their leadership.” The Dominican Sisters of Mary Immaculate Province in Houston was founded in 1975 by sisters who had fled wartime Vietnam and has grown to about 100 professed members.

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

January 6 driven more by new social currents than Christian nationalism?

The view that the January 6 riot was largely motivated by “Christian nationalism” and evangelical fervor is belied by new available data coming from the legal cases of those who have been prosecuted in connection with the event, writes Daniel Strand in the *American Conservative*



Source: Kurt Kaiser - Wikimedia Commons.

magazine (August 23). Strand cites the Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST), which has compiled and analyzed data on January 6 as it has been made available. Looking at the geographical origins of the protestors, the project, directed by Robert Pape of the University of Chicago, casts doubt on the evangelical and Christian nationalist character of the January 6 event. The more rural a county is, the less likely it is to be represented by a Capitol protestor who was arrested, and the higher the percentage of a county's vote for Donald Trump, the "lower the chance that country would send someone to the Capitol who would be arrested for activities related to January 6. Against the assertion that deep-red Trump counties were breeding grounds for violent Christian nationalism, we find that the more pro-Trump a county, the less likely violent protestors were to have originated there," Strand writes. In fact, violent rioters were more likely to come from urban rather than rural areas and were actually based in contested ("purple") counties outside the Bible belt and the South.

Strand cites the investigation into the indictments and the timeline of the riot by journalist Roger Parloff, which suggests that it was the far-right Proud Boys and Oathkeepers that played the central role in fomenting the violence that occurred on January 6, even if they were a minority. The CPOST data show that those who were arrested on January 6 were motivated by the belief that the election was stolen and what they call "the great replacement" theory, which holds that whites are being displaced by minorities. "What neither Parloff nor the CPOST study mention is any explicit religious motivation, let alone theological beliefs about America being a Christian nation. Religious beliefs barely show up in all the studies, and when they do, they are ancillary to the actors who instigated the violence...In fact, the CPOST study concludes that the political movement that engaged in violence at the Capitol is a new movement and not the continuation of a political movement," Strand writes. He adds that this doesn't mean that further research won't uncover Christian nationalist roots to the violence, but "at the moment the link is not there."

(*American Conservative*, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/christian-nationalism-didnt-cause-january-6/>)

Psychologists taking religious, spiritual concerns more seriously during mental health crisis

A growing number of psychologists believe that religion and spirituality have tools that can help with today's mental health crisis, which is leading to an increase in training opportunities to integrate faith and spirituality into psychotherapy, writes Richard Schiffman in the *Washington Post* (September 23). There have also been a growing number of articles and research papers on the role of faith and spirituality in dealing with the mental health crisis gripping the U.S. The recognition has been a long time coming. A new diagnostic category, "Religious or Spiritual Problem," was added into the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association) back in 1994, but it was only in 2016 that the American Medical Association advised that doctors should provide a spiritual care plan as part of their treatment for



patients, Schiffman writes. Part of the reason for the time lag is the still prevalent religiosity gap between psychologists and the general population, according to David Lukoff, a clinical psychologist. While mental health professionals are often uncomfortable with the subject, which they have little personal experience in, more than half of patients are interested in spiritually integrated therapy. Only a quarter of psychologists and psychiatrists have been trained in how to meet clients' spiritual needs, according to Lukoff. He recently helped develop a program to promote "spiritual competency" for therapists, which includes classes on mindfulness, self-compassion, forgiveness and mystical experience. Many of the new programs and courses stress spirituality more than religion, with one psychology professor defining spirituality as a "shift into a more expansive state of awareness."

CURRENT RESEARCH

- **A new study examining the political behavior of people engaged in spiritual activities such as yoga, meditation, making art, and walking in nature, finds not much difference from the behavior of more conventional religious believers.** The study, conducted by Evan Stewart and Jaime Kucinkis and published in the online magazine *The Conversation* (September 3), measured such political activities as voting, volunteering, contacting representatives, protesting and donating to political campaigns. The researchers then compared those behaviors, distinguishing between people who see these activities as spiritual and those who see the same activities as religious. The study, originally published in the *American Sociological Review*, finds that spiritual practitioners are just as likely to engage in political activities as the religious.



After controlling for demographic factors such as age, race and gender, frequent spiritual practitioners were about 30 percent more likely than nonpractitioners to report engaging in at least one political activity in the past year. Similarly, devoted religious practitioners were also about 30 percent more likely to report one of these political behaviors than respondents who did not practice religion. “In other words, we found heightened political engagement among both the religious and spiritual, compared with other people. The spiritual practitioners we identified seemed particularly likely to be disaffected by the rightward turn in some congregations in recent years. On average, Democrats, women and people who identified as lesbian, gay and bisexual reported more frequent spiritual practices.”

(*The Conversation*, <https://religionnews.com/2022/09/03/yoga-versus-democracy-what-survey-data-says-about-spiritual-americans-political-behavior/>)

● **While “congregational shopping” was extensive during the pandemic, it has not resulted in a high rate of switching from one’s home congregation.** Writing in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in September), political scientists Nicholas J. Higgins and Paul A. Djupe analyzed a non-probability “quota” sample (that tries to match demographic features reported from sources like the census) from Qualtrics Panels of 1,790 adults. They found that congregational shopping was very high during the pandemic, motivated by congregational closures and the opportunities afforded by online services that made it unnecessary to physically



Source: iStock - SDA Church.

visit other religious services. But Higgins and Djupe found that there was a “null relationship” between shopping and leaving home congregations.

They were surprised by the fact that while the heaviest shoppers were non-denominational Christians, there was a low rate of switching to other congregations among this group. Politics also did not play a significant role in congregational shopping, though it did motivate a segment of members to leave their congregations during the pandemic. Even if congregational shopping does not lead to high rates of members leaving their congregations, if the practice is continued, it may have other effects. Higgins and Djupe write that congregational shopping could “intensify the pressure on congregations to attract and retain attenders in part because they know people are shopping, while they do not know their likelihood of leaving.” The practice could promote standardization of services, especially in the same community. “If political engagement, for instance, is becoming more common among evangelicals, ease of accessing other congregations could encourage the diffusion of that norm,” they conclude.

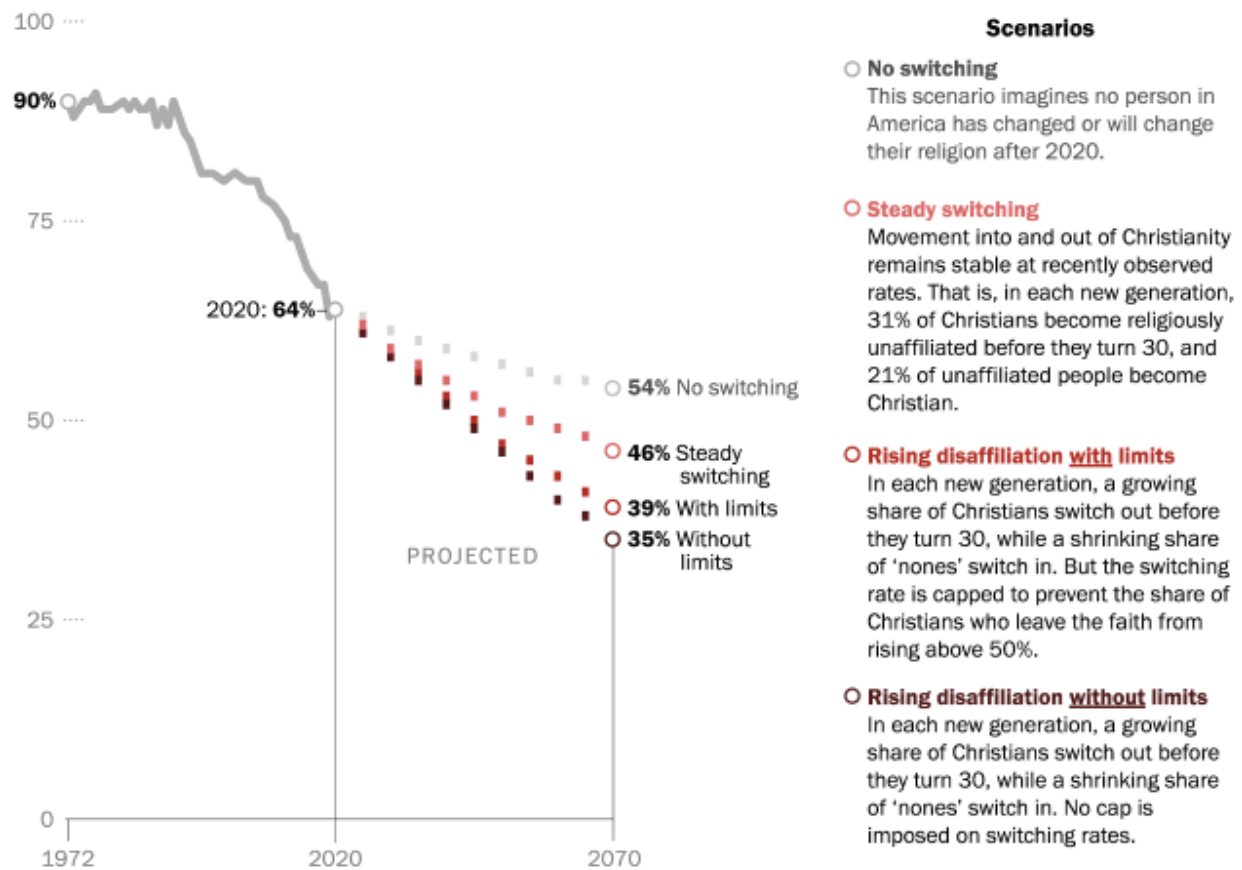
(*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14685906>)

● **A new Pew Research Center study has modeled several hypothetical scenarios describing how the U.S. religious landscape might change over the next half century.** Depending on whether religious switching continues at recent rates, speeds up, or stops entirely, the projections

show Christians of all ages declining from 64 percent to between a little more than half (54 percent) and just above one-third of all Americans by 2070. During this same period, the non-affiliated would rise from the current 30 percent to somewhere between 34 percent and 52 percent of the U.S. population. Pew offers some possible scenarios of what *could* happen based on trends of survey data from Pew Research Center and the long-running General Social Survey. There is the “steady switching” scenario, which depicts moderate, steady “net” switching (taking into account some “partially offsetting movement in both directions”) away from Christianity among young adults, in contrast to a decades-long trend of increasing disaffiliation across younger cohorts; this scenario best represents what would happen if the recent period of rising attrition in Christianity is winding down or already has ended.

U.S. Christians projected to fall below 50% of population if recent trends continue

% of Americans who are Christian



Note: Historical data describes trends among U.S. adults based on surveys of adults. The 2020 estimate and subsequent projections show Americans of all ages. In 2020, we estimate that the religious composition of people of all ages roughly matches the adult composition. Sources: General Social Survey (1972-2006); Pew Research Center surveys (2007-2021); Pew Research Center projections (2020-2070). "Modeling the Future of Religion in America"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

By contrast, a second scenario of rising disaffiliation without limits assumes an ever-increasing momentum behind religious switching. The rise of the unaffiliated might induce increasing numbers of young people to leave Christianity and “further increase the ‘stickiness’ of an unaffiliated upbringing, so that fewer and fewer people raised without a religion would take on a religious identity at a later point in their lives.” But continued religious socialization of children may make them less likely to disaffiliate, continuing a “self-perpetuating core of committed Christians who retain their religion and raise new generations of Christians.” The “rising disaffiliation with limits” scenario best illustrates what would happen if recent generational trends in the U.S. continue, “but only until they reach the boundary of what has been observed around the world, including in Western Europe.” This scenario reflects the patterns observed in recent years. “These projections indicate the U.S. might be following the path taken over the last 50 years by many countries in Western Europe that had overwhelming Christian majorities in the middle of the 20th century and no longer do. In Great Britain, for example, ‘nones’ surpassed Christians to become the largest group in 2009, according to the British Social Attitudes Survey. In the Netherlands, disaffiliation accelerated in the 1970s, and 47 percent of adults now say they are Christian,” the report concludes.

(The Pew report can be downloaded from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>)

● **The interplay between terrorism and organized crime has turned up in several cases of jihadist terrorist violence in Europe, but the connection is weaker among these Islamic terrorists than domestic terrorists.** In research published in the *CTC Sentinel* (September), Raphael D. Marcus, of the NYPD Intelligence Bureau, studied a dataset of 237 individuals who were defendants in U.S. federal courts for carrying out terrorist attacks (including 10 who were killed by law enforcement) from 2014 to 2022. Past research has found that those with a criminal background were more likely to engage in terrorism than those who did not have criminal records. Marcus found that 31 percent of Islamic State defendants and perpetrators killed in an attack had prior criminal records, a trend that has remained constant between 2014 and 2022.



Source: Combating Terrorism Center.

Domestic abuse was prevalent among Islamic State defendants, with 36 percent having prior arrests for this crime. There was also a prevalence of prior firearm offenses found among the defendants. Gang membership and prison time are important elements of terrorism, but they had less relevance among Islamic State defendants than other extremists, such as white supremacist terrorists. Most U.S. Islamic State defendants with a gang affiliation withdrew from the gang upon Islamic radicalization, and there were few examples of “outsourcing” Islamic State operations to gangs or criminal networks. The relationships that U.S. Islamic State inmates had to others in prison only occasionally had “plot relevance [though] exposure to charismatic or high-profile terrorist inmates was a key factor” in the minority of cases of prison radicalization (involving 17 percent of the 29 defendants who served time in prison).

(*CTC Sentinel*, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/september-2022/>)

● **A new study looking at survey data from 103 countries finds religious decline occurring in Latin America, Central Europe and the Balkans, the Mideast, and North Africa.** But there is little evidence of such decline elsewhere in Asia, Africa or the former Soviet Union states despite the broad reach of many modernizing social trends. The study, conducted by Louisa Roberts of the University of South Dakota and presented at the American Sociological Association meeting in Los Angeles in August, which **RW** attended, analyzed World/European Values Survey data from 1981 to 2020. While survey results point to a gradual pattern of decline in Europe (Western, Central, and Eastern) as well as the U.S. and possibly Latin America and even the Middle East, there has been less research on Asian and African trends. Roberts’ study is



Source: The Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage.

among the first to report on these regions, and she finds that average levels of religiosity in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia were stable over time.

Country-average trends in Southeast Asia and East Africa were mixed, with some countries, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, having stable averages, others, like Vietnam and China, becoming more religious over time, and still other countries, like South Korea and Thailand, becoming less religious. Roberts also finds that little-studied sub-regions, such as the former Yugoslavia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, appear to have become more religious over this period. Roberts concludes that the study's results are not consistent with what she calls a "strong version of secularization theory" that ties such factors as economic security, education, and urbanism to a weakening of religion, since global increases in these economic, educational, and urbanization levels have apparently not led most major world regions to become less religious between 1980 and 2020.

● **While 41 percent of Arab youth see their religion as the most important part of their identity—above their nation, family or tribe—73 percent feel that religion plays too big a role in the Middle East and 77 percent think that Arab religious institutions should be reformed.** Journalist and researcher James M. Dorsey (Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore) also reports on his webpage (*The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, September 24) that several recent surveys "reveal contradictory attitudes among Arab youth towards religion as well as widespread rejection of notions of a moderate Islam and formal diplomatic ties with Israel." This is the fourteenth year that the Arab Youth Survey has been conducted by the Dubai-based public relations agency ASDA'A BCW. The survey is based on a

Young Arabs say religion plays too big of a role in the Middle East and religious institutions need to be reformed



How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

"Religion plays too big of a role in the Middle East"

■ Agree
■ Disagree
■ Don't know



"The Arab world needs to reform its religious institutions"



sample of 3,400 youths (equally divided between males and females) from 17 countries in the Gulf, the Levant and North Africa.

In some cases, answers reflect similar percentages from one area to another, but there are also significant regional variations. Fifty-four percent of youth in North Africa and 45 percent in the Gulf states claim religion as the most important part of their identity, but the percentage is down to 24 percent in the Levant. Despite widespread feelings that religion plays too big a role in the Middle East, 70 percent in the Gulf, 60 percent in North Africa, and 41 percent in the Levant say the laws in their country should be based on *sharia*. A majority (up to 91 percent in Algeria) claim to be concerned about the loss of traditional values and culture, and stress that it is important for them to preserve their religious and cultural identity, even if it means giving up a globalized and more tolerant society; but the proportion goes down to 34 percent in Yemen and 23 percent in Syria, two war-torn countries. In-depth country-specific surveys and field research are required in order to understand what the trends among Arab youths mean in relation to religion, its public role, and the place of religious institutions. Indeed, as the history of contemporary Islam shows, the desire for “reform” can have different practical meanings.

(James M. Dorsey’s informative column, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, has been published for 12 years and can be accessed for free or be supported by becoming a paid subscriber: <https://jamesmdorsey.substack.com>; Arab Youth Survey - <https://arabyouthsurvey.com/en/findings/>)

● **A new survey about Muslim consumers in Southeast Asia suggests Islam’s central role in people’s daily lives and choices.** James M. Dorsey (Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore) reports in his column and blog (*The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, September 28) that the survey, released on September 21, was conducted in May 2022 by New York-based Wunderman Thompson Intelligence in cooperation with the Muslim Intel Lab established last year by communications agency YMLY&R. The sample included 1,000 people, half of them in Malaysia and the other half in Indonesia. The interest of the agencies in those countries is understandable, since as Dorsey remarks they rank among the top *halal* markets. Some 250 million Muslims live in Southeast Asia. The survey sees Muslims living vastly different lives than their parents, “shaped by two potent forces: a resurgence of faith and the spread of Western-style consumerism.” In one generation, there has been an extension of the understanding of *halal* (what is considered as permissible for Muslim believers), which no longer applies primarily to food, but now includes areas such as travel, fashion, banking, education—even *halal* lifestyle apps. In buying any product, *halal* has become a primary consideration for 91 percent of the interviewees. When it comes to banking or investment, 61 percent feel it very important for the institution to be Islamic, although other factors matter as well (such as the reputation and responsiveness of financial institutions).

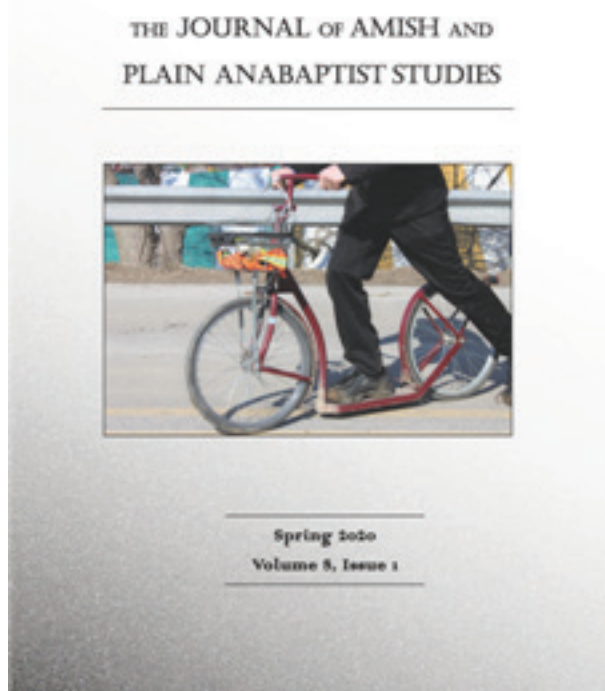


The growth of Islamic stamps of approval for products and services has been encouraged by government policies implemented in Malaysia and Indonesia to promote sectors such as *halal* food and Islamic banking as economic drivers, as well by political parties who have “helped bring religious observance, once personal and private, into the public sphere” in their search for Muslim votes. Urbanization is also said to have played a key role, since those who left villages have been looking “for a network they can trust.” But there are also voices decrying a “commercialization of religion.” And the report warns that “the definition of halal is evolving all the time. What’s halal in one country could be haram in another,” for instance cryptocurrency. The survey provides additional information about self-perceived religiosity, with a third of the respondents considering themselves to be more observant than their parents were at their age, and only 21 percent less observant; 84 percent of respondents said that they pray five times a day, while 53 percent across all age groups use prayer and Quran apps.

(The New Muslim Consumer: How Rising Observance is Reshaping the Consumer Landscape in Southeast Asia and Beyond - <https://www.wundermanthompson.com/insight/the-new-muslim-consumer>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ The current issue of the *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* features an interesting “memoir” by editor Cory Anderson, celebrating and chronicling his and others’ decade-long effort to study and publish about the Amish and other conservative and simply living or “plain” Anabaptists in an academic setting. Anderson discusses trends in Amish/Anabaptist scholarship and communal life, as well as the everyday academic politics and practicalities of publishing a new journal and starting a professional association with its own conferences. He argues that past Amish and Anabaptist scholarship tended toward an “exhibition-popular” style that did not grapple with the advancement of knowledge in this field—publishing pioneering work on Amish agriculture, as well as inviting “plain” people outside of academia to contribute. The new paradigm of Amish and plain Anabaptist studies that the journal envisioned brought forth criticism and debates and a surprising degree of competition and bitter conflict in this field. To download the article, visit: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/amishstudies/>



■ The impact of the pandemic on ultra-orthodox or Haredi Jewish communities, as well as the rapid political transformation of many Haredi groups in the U.S. under the influence of Donald Trump, were enough to lead to the founding of the *Haredi Research Group*. Made up of 30 scholars from sociology, history and literature, as well as a number of journalists, roughly divided between the U.S. and Israel, the group has already conducted projects and published commentary on changing Haredi demographics, the controversy over Haredi schools and secular educational standards, and popular representations of Haredi life in the entertainment media. Newcomers to the site will be interested in its in-depth general report on the Haredi that



includes not only the group's history and divisions but also overviews of such trends as the Haredi in the suburbs, the crisis and conflicts in many ultra-orthodox communities during the pandemic, the emergence of the "new Haredi" (comprised of young professionals from across the political spectrum), and pro-Trump Haredi. The group's website is: <https://www.harediresearchgroup.org/>

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

1) F3 is a fast-growing network of men's fitness programs that joins exercise with faith-based social gatherings that are seen as helping to ward off loneliness, especially during and after the pandemic. The workout groups are often seen as an extension of church life, though they are not necessarily all Christian-based. F3, started in 2011 as a free outdoor workout group, has grown from 1,900 chapters before the pandemic to 3,400 groups since then. In these groups, usually gathering in early morning hours, members not only encourage each other during workouts but also pray and build friendships and support for their everyday trials and difficulties. After workouts, members (who do not pay any membership



Source: F3 - Basilica of Saint Mary.

dues) will engage in conversation sessions about life issues. F3 groups are especially strong in the southern U.S., where mild weather permits year-round participation. Sharing and mutual encouragement often concern masculine identity issues, such as support for new fathers and questions about careers, marriage, and divorce. The emphasis on healthy male bonding gives members strong loyalty to their group, with some wearing F3 tattoos and maintaining their own jargon for group activities. (Source: *New York Times*, September 25)

2) Father Mike Schmitz has been launched into social media stardom with his initially little heralded podcast, "The Bible in a Year." The show has been the most popular religion podcast on Apple for much of 2021 and 2022, and in a few instances the show climbed to the number one spot among all podcasts on Apple's platform. It has been downloaded 350 million times and an average of 750,000 times a day. Each 20–25 minute installment features two or three short scriptural readings and a reflection by Schmitz. The 47-year-old Midwesterner, known as Father Mike, has a regular ministry as chaplain at the University of Minnesota at Duluth and the director of the youth ministry for the Duluth diocese. He



travels the country giving speeches, with some of his YouTube videos drawing up to millions of views. Schmitz sees much of his ministry in his podcast and with youth as permitting people to ask questions about the faith. He de-emphasizes politics in his podcasts while being upfront on church positions on abortion and LGBTQ issues. (**Source:** *New York Times Magazine*, September 4)