

Social scientists focus on pandemic's broader religious impact beyond congregations

It came as no surprise that many of the sessions and papers presented at the November meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Baltimore were devoted to the pandemic. Yet even the scholars making the presentations were unsure about Covid's effect on religious institutions, beliefs, and practices in the long term. The prevailing concern about the pandemic for religious institutions remains whether they can draw back members and attendees to pre-pandemic levels. Although research findings are still coming in on this question, most scholars at the conference agreed there has been significant loss so far, though the rates of such attrition are different for different religious groups and movements, which several articles in this issue document. An informal group of congregational researchers who gathered at the conference, which **RW** attended, reflected on how to study congregations in their new hybridized formats (through online participation) and diminished presence in their communities. They swapped stories about how even small congregations have enacted ceremonies and practices to permanently close their doors. But other social scientists at the conference looked at the religious changes surrounding the pandemic in terms of how the crisis may have shaped the beliefs and attitudes of both secular and religious people.

A study by political scientists David Campbell, Geoffrey Layman, and John C. Green combined the themes of secular growth and changed attitudes about public health. They found that the "secular surge" they have studied in American politics and society may have deepened since the pandemic. The researchers analyzed panel data between 2017 and 2021 and found that the increases in secular attitudes were steepest among those supporting public health measures, such as vaccination and wearing masks. They also conducted an experiment that primed a debate about public health measures during the pandemic, asking participants to react to news stories relating to public health restrictions clashing with religious groups. Democrats or liberals in the experimental group who read the news story with the religious element showed increased rates of secularism (or negative attitudes toward religion) compared to those in a control group who did not read the article with the religious angle. But at the conference Layman reported also finding



Source: Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative.

that Republicans experienced a decrease in secularism, especially when they read the religious treatment in the article. He argued that public health measures may have created a backlash against secularism among conservative Americans.

The whole issue of religious confidence in science and public health came under scrutiny in another session at the conference. Timothy O'Brien of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee presented a paper on religious believers' moral perceptions of scientists based on a National Opinion Research Center (NORC) survey of 1,515 respondents. He found that religious respondents, including Catholics, mainline Protestants, and evangelicals, showed less appreciation for science and scientists than the non-religious. Evangelicals and Catholics in particular perceived scientists as less virtuous than did the other respondents. O'Brien concluded that efforts to increase trust in scientific information and research should focus on the moral culture of science. Another paper by Christopher Scheitle and Katie Corcoran of West Virginia University delved deeper into how issues of trust and truth may be what lead to science-religion conflicts. In analyzing a NORC survey conducted from 2020 to 2021 among 2,003 U.S. adults, they found that religiosity was related to greater questioning of the truth of science. But religiosity did not have an effect on trust issues. On the other hand, among respondents considered "Christian nationalists" (referring to conservative Christians seeking a Christian America), the truthfulness of science and scientists was less important than their trustworthiness. Political conservatism was meanwhile correlated with both truth and trust issues.

Evangelical churches running intensive theological education programs for members

Theological education programs have been growing in evangelical churches for members who want to study church history and theology without going to seminary or who don't feel called to the ministry, reports Maria Baer in *Christianity Today* magazine (November). While congregations have always had Bible studies, adult education programs, and new member classes for teaching church doctrine, the new programs are different in that many try to focus more on education than devotion and often replicate aspects of seminary education without the high tuition. At a program in Arizona called Surge that includes dozens of churches, participants hear from pastors and guest lecturers and read seminary-level books. Participating churches then gather together for intensives. One pastor says that all too often congregations have transferred discipleship and education to parachurch organizations and seminaries.



Source: Surge School.

Other pastors interviewed were concerned about the biblical and theological illiteracy among their members. Baer writes that these programs and their leaders deny that they are trying to compete with or supplant seminary education and that some have cooperative programs with seminaries. Surge in Arizona has a cooperative arrangement with Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, and Village Church Institute in Texas, another prominent church-based theological education program, cooperates with Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Dallas Theological Seminary. Although churches in the Reformed tradition have been at the

forefront of the trend, networks like Surge include Anglican, Pentecostal and Baptist congregations.

(*Christianity Today*, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60189)

New spiritual fathers' influence in Orthodoxy shifts from tradition to social network

Seeking advice from a spiritual father is nothing new in the Orthodox tradition, but these religious figures have come to present new characteristics in the modern context and often to be associated with “fundamentalist rigorism,” writes Efstathios Kessareas (University of Erfurt) in an article combining analysis and criticism in the journal *Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West* (November). Several bishops and other Orthodox leaders, including Metropolitan Elpidophoros of America (Ecumenical Patriarchate), have expressed concern in recent years about the tendency in some Orthodox circles to advocate the practice of absolute obedience to spiritual fathers, which may have its place in a monastery, but creates problems when practiced by lay people living in the world. In addition, some who present themselves as spiritual fathers try to gather their own faithful circles around themselves. While this



Source: Pravmir.

phenomenon has been studied by several authors in the context of post-Soviet Russia, where there was a real demand for spiritual guides at the same time as a monastic renaissance, it is also happening in other Orthodox countries and within Orthodox communities in the West.

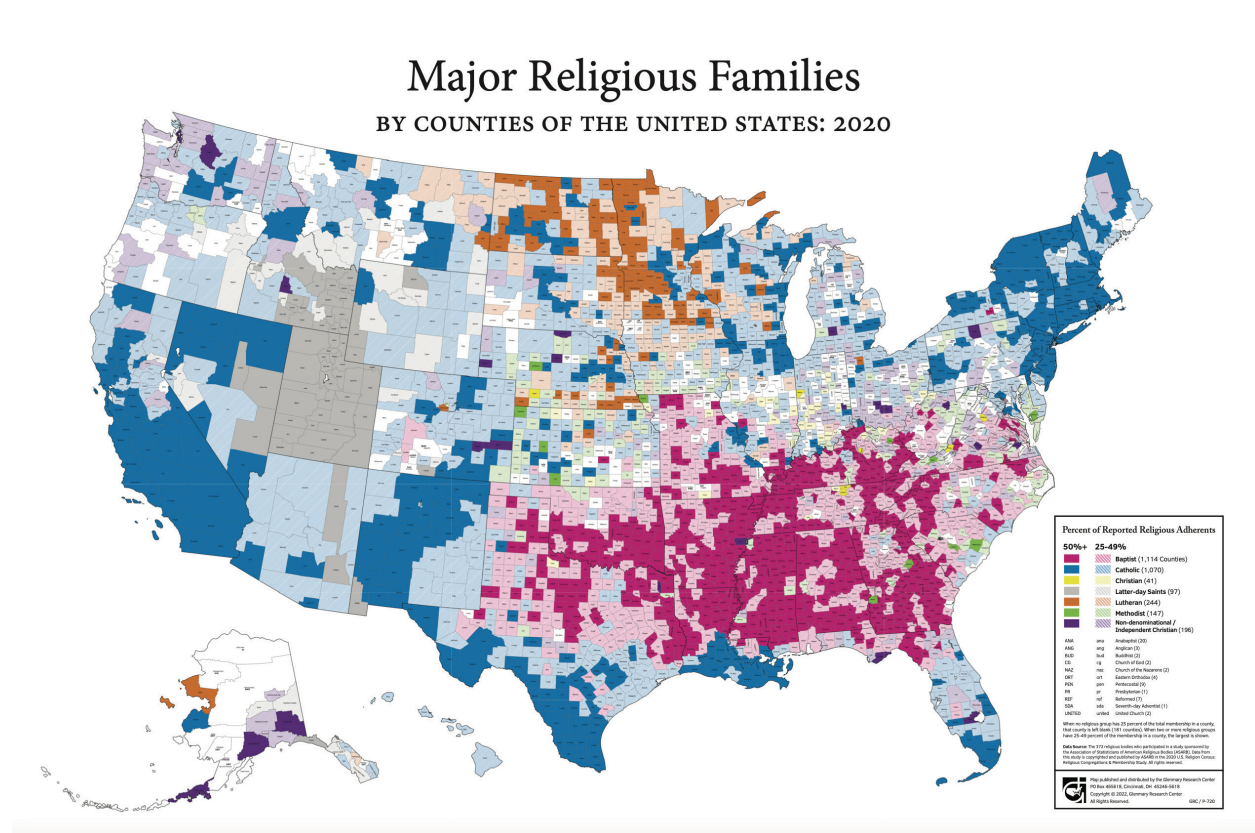
Kessareas points out that the Orthodox tradition is committed to the role of monasteries as a source of encouragement and spiritual renewal for the laity. Problems arise when monks or priests assume the role of spiritual fathers outside of a monastic setting and, moreover, propagate critical and rigorist views about what they see as compromises on the part of ecclesiastical institutions (which fits into the classic sociological perspective of a tension between functional

authority and personal charisma, Kessareas notes in passing). The problem of rigorist reactions was clearly manifested during the Covid crisis, with some spiritual fathers criticizing the submission to health guidelines, encouraging their spiritual children to refuse vaccination, and interpreting the handling of the pandemic as a manifestation of the will to impose a new world order in society. According to Kessareas, the Internet has led to the emergence of a new type of spiritual father. Far from cultivating a silent retreat from the world while receiving spiritual children and lay visitors, these modern spiritual guides are active in social networks and comment on contemporary events, striving to expand their audience and spread their ideas.

(*Religion und Gesellschaft in Ost und West*, Institut G2W, Bederstrasse 76, 8002 Zürich, Switzerland - <https://g2w.eu>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **Non-denominational congregations continue to grow and have just overtaken any single Protestant denomination in terms of adherents, according to the U.S. Religion Census.** The census identified 44,319 independent congregations without any denominational affiliation, increasing from 35,496 in 2010, lead researcher Scott Thumma reported at the annual meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association in early November. The 21 million adherents of nondenominational churches outnumber Southern Baptists, although the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) has about 7,000 more churches. The census captured data on churches right at the start of the pandemic. For the first time, the census



included the Jehovah's Witnesses in its count, finding that there are now more Spanish-speaking Witnesses than English-speaking members in the U.S.

Other conservative Protestant churches showed some decline, including the Christian and Missionary Alliance (losing about 200 congregations between 2010 and 2020); the Churches of Christ (losing 700); the Foursquare church (400); Free Will Baptists (350); the Cleveland, Tennessee-based Church of God (180); the Wesleyan Church (150); and the Vineyard (about 50). Other evangelical denominations showed modest growth: the SBC and the Assemblies of God (increasing by about 500 congregations each); the Presbyterian Church in America (100); the Church of the Nazarene (100); and the Evangelical Free Church (250). Black Protestant churches have also seen some growth: The Church of God in Christ (300 congregations); the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (150), and Full Gospel Baptists (100).

(The U.S. Religion Census data can be downloaded here: <https://www.usreligioncensus.org/>)

● **Countries with high levels of religious freedom were not any more likely to have high rates of Covid cases and deaths, a new study finds.** Especially in the early phase of Covid, many worried that congregations were “super-spreaders” of the virus and that those countries with more religious freedom facilitated its spread compared to more restrictive societies. While most studies have looked at how legal measures adopted by governments on Covid directly or indirectly affected religious freedom, the preliminary study by Nilay Saiya of Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, which was presented at the November meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Baltimore which **RW** attended, looked at the

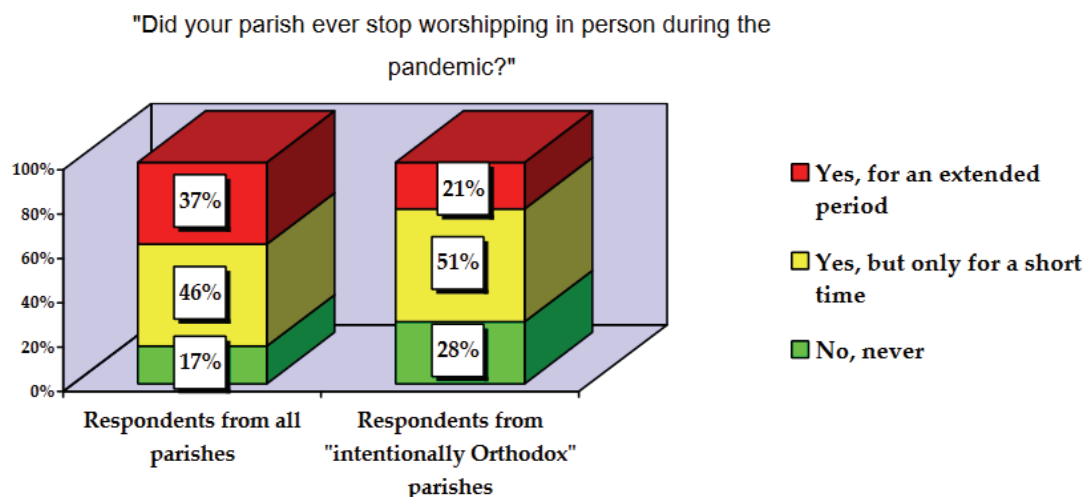


Source: Bill of Health.

effect of religious freedom on Covid. He used global cross-sectional data on Covid infections and deaths (from the World Health Organization) and a religious freedom measure rating countries on a five-point scale ranging from severe repression of religion to broad openness to religious civil society organizations. Saiya found no evidence that countries with higher levels of religious freedom experienced more Covid deaths and infections than countries with more repressive religious policies. The analysis suggests that religious institutions that flouted governmental public health restrictions were the exception rather than the rule, even if such cases received the most media coverage.

● **New research finds that, coming out of the pandemic, Eastern Orthodox churches in America experienced less loss of members and a growth in faith, especially among more conservative members, and the pattern of growth suggests that online worship has little future in these congregations.** In a presentation at the November meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Baltimore, Alexei Krindatch of the National Census of Orthodox Christian Churches reported a 15 percent drop in church involvement since the pandemic among Orthodox congregations, a loss less than that reported for other congregations. He found that those congregations that maintained offline worship for much of the pandemic did much better than parishes that switched to online worship, even showing growth. A minority of congregations (14 percent) showed growth rates of 20 percent. Many of these congregations had the common characteristics of having in-person worship during the pandemic, being “intentionally Orthodox,” having many converts to the faith, eschewing a “big tent” approach to Orthodoxy in favor of members having more uniform views, and having a conservative social outlook, including being critical of public health mandates such as wearing masks and supporting vaccination.

Fig. 17 Many Parishes Never Closed Their Doors for In-Person Services Through the Pandemic



Source: Orthodox Reality.

Most of the congregations wanted in-person worship, particularly their younger members (with 87 percent of younger parishioners wanting in-person worship compared to 78 percent of middle-aged and 69 percent of older members). This suggests that “online worship has little future in Orthodox churches,” Krindatch said. He also found that faith and trust in clergy grew during the pandemic but that such attitudes declined in regard to bishops and their control of parishes. There was also a growth in optimism among members about working together and common decision-making in parishes. Yet, like most other congregations, there was continuing decline among youth.

(Krindatch’s report can be downloaded here: <https://orthodoxreality.org/coronavirus-and-american-orthodox-parishes/>)

● **The recent midterm elections broke a record for the number of Muslims running for office, according to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR).** CAIR tracked a record-breaking 145 American Muslim candidates running for local, state, and federal office, including 48 state legislative candidates in 23 states. The council noted that many of the candidates were women and that there was a rising number of Somali Americans running for office. Most of the candidates were either Democrats or “non-partisan.” More than 80 Muslim



Mirriam Seddiq created American Muslim Women Political Action Committee to help elect leaders who will advocate for Muslim women's rights. (Source: Noel St. John/National Press Club - Middle East Eye)

candidates won local, state, federal and judicial seats in over 20 states, according to CAIR and the Jetpac Resource Center, a nonprofit that works to increase Muslim representation in politics. The victories represented the highest number of electoral wins among Muslim Americans since Jetpac and CAIR began tracking Muslim candidates. Mohammed Missouri, Jetpac's executive director, noted that all Muslim state legislators who were up for reelection retained their seats.

(The CAIR report can be downloaded from: https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-jetpac-resource-center-welcome-record-breaking-82-muslim-electoral-victories-in-local-state-federal-elections-including-38-state-legislative-wins/)

● **Most Catholic universities and colleges are not following in the path of secularization trodden by their Protestant counterparts, even though the future of Catholic schools has shifted from the hands of religious orders to those of the laity.** In a study of Catholic higher

education published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in November), Baylor University researchers Perry Glanzer, Jessica Martin, Theodore Cockle and Scott Alexander measured the Catholic identity of colleges according to an Operationalizing Faith Identity Guide (OFIG) that they created, including such criteria as the presence of Catholic Mass, requiring the president to be Catholic, having centers and institutes related to religion and Catholicism, a statement of faith, and required theology courses. They found that the majority of Catholic colleges

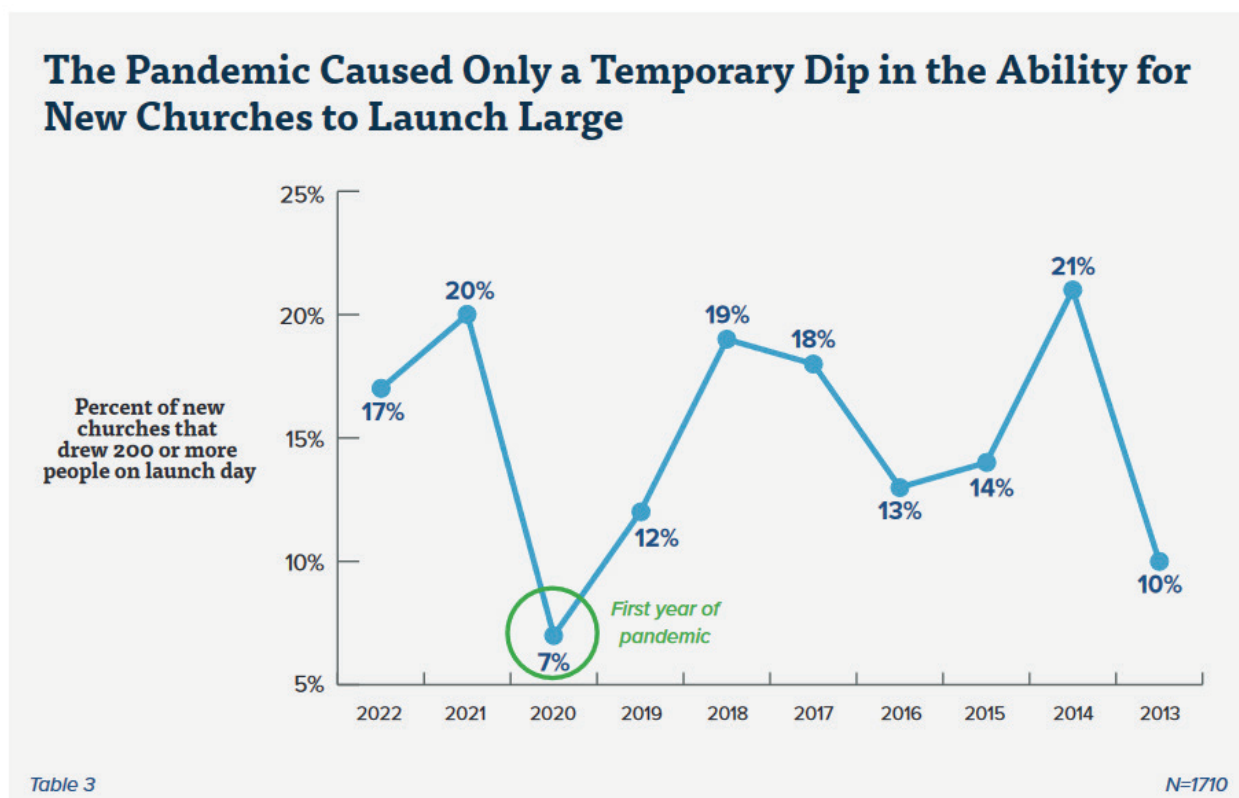


Source: Picryl.

and universities have maintained some affiliation with the Catholic Church, that not one Catholic institution of the 181 studied was completely secular, and that all of them referred to their Catholic identity in their mission statements. In that, these institutions are very different from Protestant schools, 83 of which the researchers found to have no relation to their sponsoring churches.

Many of the Protestant colleges and universities occupied the extremes of the OFIG, either being largely secular or religious. In contrast, the Catholic schools were more in the middle of the spectrum. They required at least one theology course, had Mass available, and sponsored centers and institutes relating to religion. Yet the researchers found that the majority did not refer to Christian reasoning in their codes of conduct or require two or more Christian courses, and that less than five percent required faculty or staff to be Catholic. The researchers found that the most recent school started by a religious order was in 1965. The loss of the religious orders' educational vitality has been replaced by lay-led, often conservative colleges that the researchers conclude "perceive that the more hostile higher-education culture requires...more distinctly Christian and separate institutions that maintain the Church's educational mission and faithfulness."

● **Church planting was largely unaffected during the pandemic, with only slight dips in attendance at their launches, according to a new survey.** Presenting his findings at the November meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Warren Bird, of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, reported that overall there were a "number of new churches already in motion to reproduce themselves by starting one or more other new churches." In a survey of 2,702 participants (2,315 of which were church planters and 387 multisite church pastors), Bird found that only in 2020, the first year of the pandemic, were new



Source: Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability.

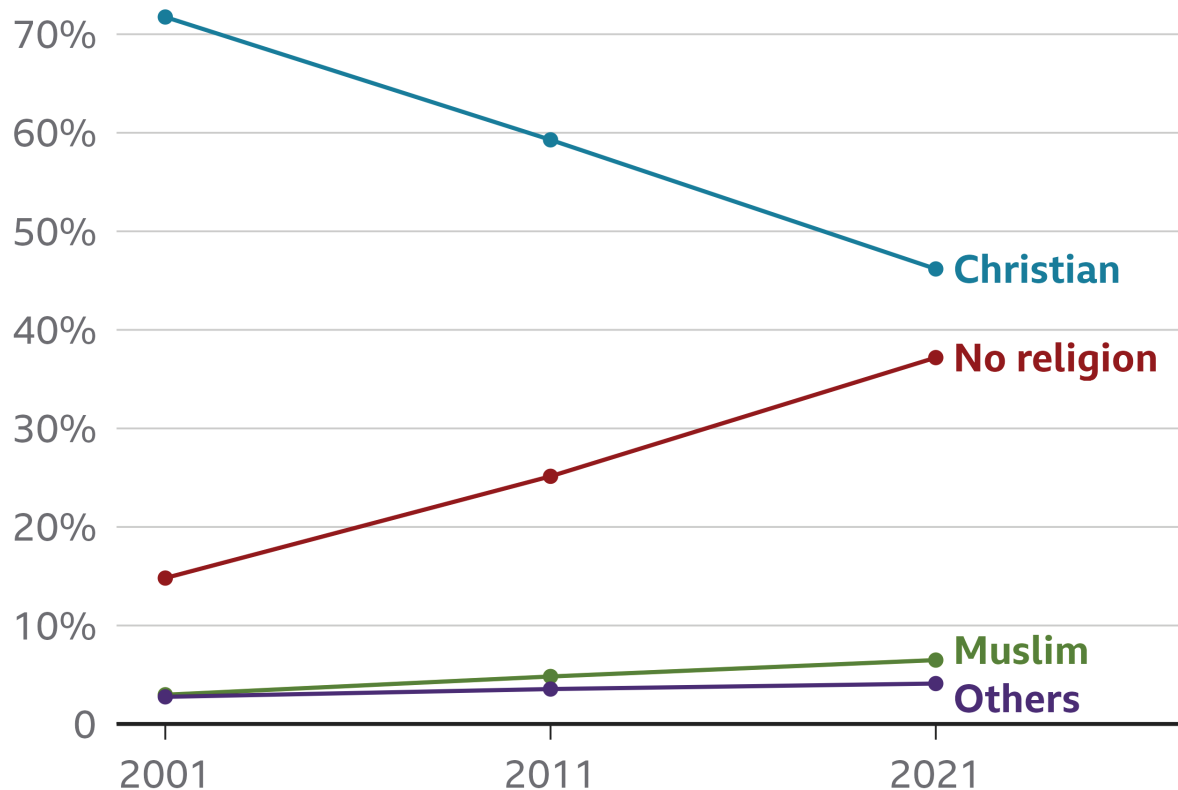
church plants not able to “launch large” (having at least 200 attendees the first day), with the proportion of those doing so standing at only seven percent; in the two years since, the proportion is back to the 20 percent range characteristic of the years before the pandemic. Other findings confirmed the effect of being multisite and engaging in church planting, and vice versa.

(The study on church planting can be downloaded from: <https://www.ecfa.org/Surveys.aspx>)

● **Fewer than half the people in England and Wales consider themselves Christian, according to the most recent census, representing the first time that Christians make up a minority in the officially Christian nation.** The 2021 census, released in late November by the Office for National Statistics, found only 46.2 percent of the population of England and Wales describing themselves as Christian, dropping from 59.3 percent a decade earlier. Meanwhile, the Muslim population grew from 4.9 percent to 6.5 percent, while Hindus grew to 1.7 percent from 1.5 percent. The non-affiliated, or “nones,” have grown from 25 percent of the population in 2011 to about 37 percent today.

Almost four in ten have no religion

Religion in England and Wales, 2001 to 2021

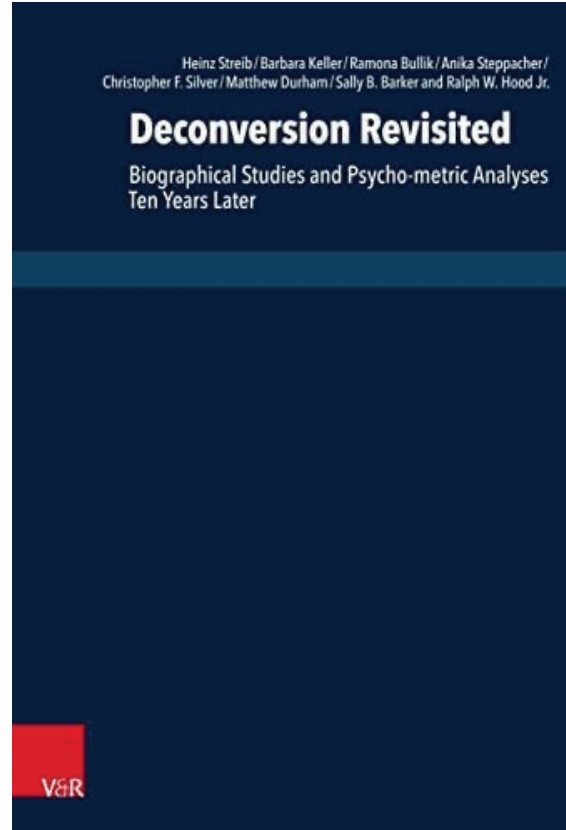


Others include Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish and other religions

Source: Office for National Statistics

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● **An updated longitudinal study of individuals who “deconverted” from their religions finds that they still retain a strong interest in spirituality, even more than those who remained in their faiths.** The study, first published in 2009 by German psychologist Hans Streib, followed 272 participants from the U.S. and Germany, some of who (called “traditionalists” or “stayers”) remained in their religions while others were in the deconversion process (“movers”). Streib and a research team tracked down 45 of these interviewees (mostly the German participants this time around) in their new book, *Deconversion Revisited* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), and found that the pattern of the movers claiming a “more spiritual” self-identification had remained stable. There was also a decline in the “more religious than spiritual” identification. At the same time, those who deconverted in the original study showed greater rates of self-acceptance and finding meaning in life, while those deconverting in the second wave of the study showed lower rates of self-acceptance and finding meaning in life. Because of the small number of interviewees, Streib and his research team caution that their findings are not necessarily representative of the larger population of “deconverts.”



● **A new study of Jehovah’s Witnesses finds that during the pandemic the organization expanded in countries with Internet access, even drawing back inactive members, but suffered greater losses in places remote from Internet connections.** In a paper presented at the November meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Anatolii Tokmantcev of UCLA used Armenia as an example of how the Jehovah’s Witnesses both flourished and failed in the wake of the pandemic. As with other faiths, the Witnesses ceased normal in-person operations during the height of Covid, including door-to-door proselytism, and encouraged virtual meetings. Pre-pandemic, very few Witnesses in Armenia were adept at using smart phones and tablets, but to conduct meetings, public ministry and Bible studies during Covid they became so. Even elderly members were comfortably using multiple Zoom functions at the time of Tokmantcev’s observations in 2021. The online meetings became more social, while the strictness of dress code was loosened as members often didn’t use the video functions of Zoom.

According to the elders, the number of attendees grew because those who had “always been interested but did not want to spend time going to meetings [could] now join by Zoom.” During the pandemic, the number of publishers (or active members) who returned to regular publishing



Jehovah's Witnesses' mobile carts in Venice, Italy, 2019 (Tiia Monto, Wikimedia Commons).

rapidly increased. Some who had been disfellowshipped were reinstated and returned to the organization. Public talks during the meetings were often given by members from other countries and even continents. “As a result,” Tokmantcev noted, “the cohesion of the worldwide JW community that used to be abstract became more tangible and real despite the discontinuation of the local in-person meetings.” Publications and teachings once issued from the Watch Tower Organization became more diverse in origin and nature, including new kinds of music and even TikTok videos. Required hours of “preaching” were maintained through sharing and speaking to friends and family. In short, the “density of practices” associated with being a Witness retained its intensity.

While in 2020, the Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 10,652 publishers in Armenia, in the most recent report from 2021, the organization reported 700 more publishers—the first instance of growth since 2010. Yet at the same time, the number was one of the lowest ever recorded in Armenia. Tokmantcev concluded that digitalization was key in understanding these trends. The Jehovah’s Witness world report shows that in the poorest countries—places where the Internet is accessible to less than 10 percent of the population—the religion lost up to 10 or even 15 percent

of its members. “At the same time, the countries with ‘old JW’ communities, such as Great Britain, Armenia, France, and Germany, that used to stagnate in terms of growth, demonstrated impressive growth.”

Religious buildings in Europe find belated protection and support

After a long period of neglect, European religious buildings are finding new patrons and organized efforts at protection, reports Itxu Diaz in the magazine *First Things* (November 18).

“The closure of many religious buildings has propelled them toward an uncertain fate, as they are left at the mercy of patrons, private entities, or local, national, or European public organizations,” Diaz writes. In many cases, the Catholic Church oversees the conservation of religious buildings, often with the assistance of government administrations if they are declared of “cultural interest.” In Spain, the *Hispania Nostra* association, with the help of hundreds of volunteers, has created a “Red List” of endangered historical heritage sites, many of which are religious. These sites are first evaluated by a scientific committee to determine whether they meet necessary criteria to be included in the list. Those structures that are saved by private or public intervention are added to the group’s “Green List,” while those that end up being demolished or



St. Denis church in Saint-Omer (Jean-Paul Grandmont, Wikimedia Commons)

radically altered are added to its “Black List.” Diaz reports that 401 religious heritage buildings are currently deemed to be at risk, while 89 have passed from the Red List to the Green List.

The *Europa Nostra* organization, founded in 2013, similarly compiles a list each year of seven endangered religious sites in Europe, chosen from a pool of nominations, and with assistance from the European Union the selected sites are given immediate attention by public administrations. Among the nominations in recent years have been the wooden Orthodox churches of Maramures in Romania, the complex of the David Gareja Monastery in Georgia, and Saint-Denis Church in Saint-Omer, France. Diaz writes that conservatives more than progressives have been at the forefront of the church preservation movement.

(*First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/11/the-dereliction-of-europes-religious-buildings?>)

American evangelicals export pro-life activism to pro-choice Israel

American evangelicals are exporting the pro-life movement to Israel in the midst of court decisions at home and politics abroad that are signaling a more favorable climate for such activism, reports the *Washington Post* (November 18). Although Israel legalized abortion four



Prolife in Israel: photo of office of Be'ad Chaim (source: *Kehila News*).

years after America's *Roe vs. Wade* decision in 1973 and has been vocal in condemning its overturning last summer, pregnancy crisis centers sponsored by conservative American evangelicals are becoming more prominent in the country, reports Shira Rubin. Centers like the multimillion dollar Be'ad Chaim, which has rapidly expanded in recent years (with 200 employees in its Jerusalem office), are making a public case against abortion in an effort to change the "conversation about abortion and lay the groundwork for a political movement," Rubin writes. Public anti-abortion campaigns, including highway billboards with ultrasound photos and other advertisements, are a growing phenomenon in a country where abortion has not been controversial. Israel's Central Board of Statistics states that 98 percent of women who request the state-funded procedure are able to get one.

Pro-life activists feel they have momentum on their side, with the overturning of *Roe*, the November election of former conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has voiced strong support of evangelicals, and the new political prominence of the Religious Zionist Party. Bezalel Smotrich, Religious Zionism's leader, has criticized Israel's abortion policy as a "license to kill fetuses" and has promised to change it. But Rubin writes that many see Jewish law as allowing abortion because it does not recognize unborn life as having a soul. Abortion in Israel has long been a bone of contention for evangelicals who are largely pro-life and pro-Zionist, but evangelicals believe they are breaking new ground. One new initiative called Operation Moses, run by a church in the U.S., sponsors babies' expenses during their first year of life.

Findings & Footnotes

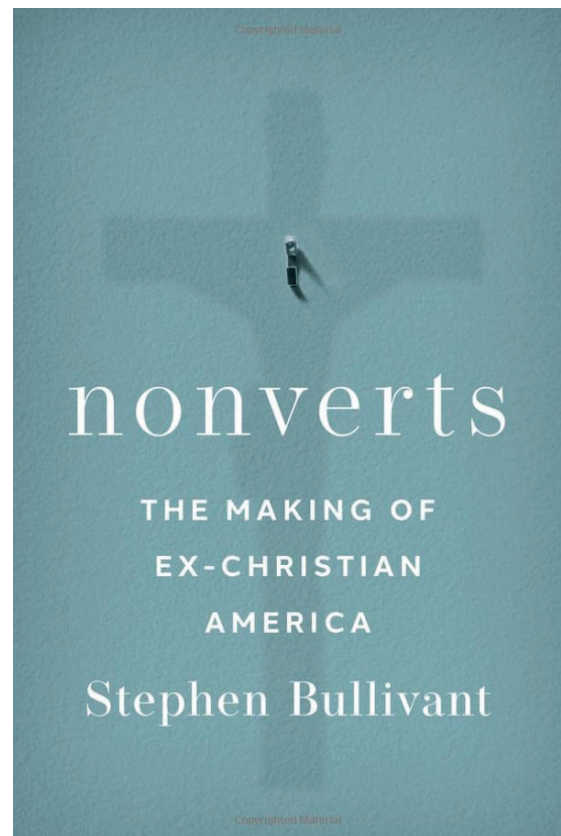
■ Surveys conducted last year by the PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute) and by the American Enterprise Institute had discovered that about a quarter of white evangelicals believed in the conspiracy theories associated with QAnon, such as the allegation "that the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation." This raises questions about the reasons for the higher attraction to such beliefs in evangelical circles. **"Losing My Religion: Evangelicalism and the Gospel of Q"** is the topic of the new issue of the online *Journal of Religion and Violence* (Vol. 10, released in November). The loss of community during the restrictions brought by the pandemic that may have made people more vulnerable to online misinformation was not restricted to evangelicals. But according to Mia Bloom and Rachael Rollings (Georgia State University), QAnon resonated especially among evangelicals because of its dualistic "portrayal of good and evil, and a coming day of judgement," along with beliefs about unseen forces at work. Moreover, "evangelicals also could appreciate the predictive nature of QAnon, commensurate with biblical revelations." Widespread white evangelical support for Trump also encouraged openness toward QAnon theories.



According to Julie Ingersoll (University of North Florida), “by weaving their theological commitments to apocalypticism, conspiracies and persecution narratives into the larger American culture,” evangelicals actually facilitated acceptance of QAnon. The mistrust of a number of evangelicals toward mainstream media also made them less receptive to information that might put QAnon statements into question as baseless claims. Jeremy D. Beauchamp (Georgia State University) stresses that QAnon tapped into beliefs already important to evangelicals. Facing the pandemic, QAnon played “into evangelical fears of government over- reach on people of faith,” he writes. More generally, there is a sense among evangelicals that religion is losing its influence and that an increasingly significant segment of young people are turning away from Christian faith. QAnon seems to offer an explanation for that situation. “As long as that offer of comfort and understanding exists, QAnon will only grow in influence among evangelicals,” Beauchamp writes. Acknowledging criticism of QAnon within the evangelical milieu and changing minds can only come “from inside their faith communities,” not from the mainstream media. For more information on this issue of the Journal of Religion and Violence, visit: <https://www.pdcnet.org/jrv/Journal-of-Religion-and-Violence>

■ If American religion is exceptional in many ways, British sociologist Stephen Bullivant makes the case that the same can be said of those Americans who are rejecting religion. His illuminating book, ***Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America*** (Oxford University Press, \$29.95), is both an empirical study of Americans dropping out of their religions and an interesting snapshot and analysis of the shifting Christian terrain in the U.S. Even those who take issue with Bullivant’s diagnosis of American secularization will learn a great deal from his study of “nonverts”—those who have disaffiliated from religion. Of studies of the “nones” there seems to be no end, but Bullivant brings both his qualitative and quantitative skills to bear on this fast-growing population, helped along by a conversational (though sometimes too chatty) and jargon-free style of writing. Bullivant takes a crack at the puzzle of this fast-growing population of nones—now up to at least 23 percent of Americans—through the lens of the nonvert phenomenon. He notes that only 30 percent of America’s religiously unaffiliated adults say they were brought up as nones, so understanding the population of 41 million nonverts is central to explaining this puzzle.

The fact that even a high-retention faith like the Latter Day Saints is reporting a greater loss of young people today than in previous generations shows how much disaffiliation is a widespread phenomenon. Bullivant looks at nonverts in Mormon, Catholic, evangelical, and mainline Protestant contexts, noting that their “ex-” backgrounds are important not only for describing



where they came from but also for understanding their current and future trajectories (for instance, their association more with fellow nonverts of similar backgrounds). He also writes provocatively of an “ex-effect,” where the involvement of nonverts has had some influence in everything from the reception of Dan Brown’s *DaVinci Code* and the new atheism to strict church-state separation activism, intensifying the culture wars in general. Rather than being merely a matter of checking the non-affiliated box on surveys, Bullivant asks interesting questions about how all these Americans are leaving their very different kinds of religions to actively adopt a “none” identity, indeed using the term as the media increasingly serves it up. This identity doesn’t necessarily mean becoming secular or atheistic.

As Bullivant notes, many nonverts and nones in general “either retain religious/spiritual beliefs and practices from their background, whether whole or in modified form, or else have acquired others somewhere along the way.” It is true that nonverts from strict conservative traditions are likely to jettison beliefs as well as religious identities. Yet it is also true that nones are also becoming more like the general population “for the simple reason that they are becoming more of the general population,” Bullivant adds. The author dissents from the standard view that conservative churches and their involvement in the Christian right and the culture wars has been the main factor in the rise of nones and nonverts. Bullivant’s compelling historical account of how making the break from one’s religion has become gradually more acceptable, in a country where there was once a close fit between being American and having a religious affiliation, suggests that the nonverts would have emerged regardless of politics (or religious scandals for that matter). He argues that it was the Internet more than anything else that accelerated this break for many, forming and reforming “tribes” that overrode older forms of religious transmission (such as based in the family).

All this leads to Bullivant’s sober concluding thoughts about how the decline of Christianity (institutionally and socially) in American society increases the number of nonverts (at least in the short term, since their children will just be nones), leading to further de-Christianization. For these reasons, Bullivant argues that the nonverts and nones are here to stay for the foreseeable future, with studies suggesting that nonreligious retention is strengthening while religious retention is weakening. But these trends can lead to a new countercultural resilience of Christianity, helped along by birthrate and immigration, he concludes.

■ ***Atheism in 5 Minutes*** (Equinox, \$24.95) is a unique and, as the title suggests, concise resource on secularist and non-religious history, culture, beliefs, and practices. The book, edited by Finnish religion scholar Teemu Taira, collects 64 contributions from about 50 writers and scholars, testifying to the amazing growth of scholarship (and scholars) on atheism and secularism in the past decade. The topics, in the form of questions, cover everything from conceptual, historical, and methodological issues in studying atheism (such as “How do we measure atheism?”), to the relation of atheism to various religions (“What is Christian atheism?”), to



concerns more about atheist attitudes and lifestyles (“Do atheist parents have atheist children?”). There are also recommended readings after each of the contributions, which are usually around 800 words. [RW’s editor and co-author Christopher Smith contribute three chapters on atheists and rituals, atheists and men, and atheist organizations.]

Because of the diversity of scholars and disciplines, there are differences in definitions even of atheism and secularism (is it just the absence of belief in God, or a more positive statement arguing that God does not exist?). In the conclusion, Taira assesses the future of atheism, noting that predictions about the growth of either religion or atheism have rarely been on the mark. He observes that there is a demographic disadvantage in atheism, as non-believing parents have fewer children than religious ones, but also that religious non-affiliation (which is distinct from atheism) has a greater retention rate among young people than religion, which could serve as fertile ground for atheist growth.

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

1) The Republican Party and the Christian right are finding new support among Native Americans under the influence of **Pastor Robert**, a liaison to the First Nations peoples in New Mexico for the Republicans. Estimates of the Native American response have varied, but most observers see the once solid Democratic hold on this population slipping. The Washington Post even recently reported that support from Democrats’ “diverse voter base...slipped across the board,” and “a majority of voters who are American Indian or Alaska Native favored Republicans this year.” Pastor Robert, a full-blooded Navajo, confirmed that the GOP made gains in New Mexico. He estimates that Republicans account for about 30 percent of the 173,667-resident Navajo Nation reservation. While other Republicans had historically neglected the First Nations, Pastor Robert noted that Donald Trump included them in his campaign and legislative efforts. He led faith-based events for Trump during his



Source: Rising Doves Ministries International.

2020 election campaign. Pastor Robert says most Native Americans are traditionally oriented, similar to Hispanic voters (who have increasingly voted Republican), believing in God, going to church, and believing in family and freedom.

But he adds that it has been difficult to reach the Navajos and other First Nations. He now views the political strategies imposed on the First Nations as a combination of fear and dependency. Native Americans, he explains, have been ingrained with generational beliefs, trauma, and government control, especially through environmental regulations. Evangelical churches are likewise passive and tend not to bring politics to the pulpit, not speaking out on issues such as open borders, violence, lawlessness, drug addiction—“not even abortion.” Pastor Robert says Republicans running for state politics aren’t typically brought to the reservation, but he’s been changing that. In December 2021, the Navajos hosted and organized a Republican gubernatorial forum for the first time. He also employs the radio in English and in Navajo since it reaches the whole reservation, including Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona. The strategy Pastor Robert views as being the most effective, though, is a community center for “the Navajos that offers a welcoming place that promotes conservative principles, enables people to access Bible studies, and teaches them about the evils of socialism.” (Source: *Spectator World*, November 21)

2) The first annual **Religion Forum** was recently held during the G20 Summit, meeting to discuss how religion can serve as a source of global solutions in the twenty-first century, rather than, as usually highlighted, a source of problems. The forum was held in Bali, Indonesia, a location intentionally chosen



The head of World Muslim League at the Forum (source: MWL).

for being among the strongest Islamic-based democracies. The first meeting of the forum was organized by the world's largest Islamic organization, Indonesia-based Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which holds to a democratic and pluralistic form of Islam. In a controversial move, the NU's leader and chair of the forum, Yahya Cholil Staquf, invited secretary general of the Muslim World League (MWL), Shaykh Mohammad bin Abdulkarim Al-Issa, to co-chair the fledgling event. The Saudi-based MWL has long been associated with an ultraconservative or "fundamentalist" form of Islam, but the organization has moderated and encouraged religious tolerance under its current leadership, and the forum wanted to encourage that shift. The forum itself covered such issues as how to deal with religious diversity and how to challenge elements of religious traditions that may jeopardize tolerance without rejecting core teachings. In a communiqué, the forum called for building a worldwide alliance based upon common civilizational values, adding that it seeks to "prevent the political weaponization of identity" and "curtail the spread of communal hatred." Whether it achieves those lofty goals, the facts that the G20 has recognized that religion is important for its strategy of promoting economic stability and development and that the forum showcased a reformist brand of Islam are seen as major accomplishments. (Source: *First Things*, November 17)