

Researchers find enduring missionary effect in developing nations

The role of missionaries has long been recognized as consequential, but can the missionary effect endure long after the missions have closed and been replaced by indigenous churches and leaders? That was the question that several scholars examined at the mid-March conference of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture, which **RW** attended at Harvard University. Research on the relationship between missionaries and social change has received attention in recent years, involving their effects on everything from the growth of democracy to racial relations. According to economist Vinicius Okada da Silva of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, it is not the presence of missionaries in general that has a long-term impact on societies but the kind of missionaries active in particular areas. He looked at Jesuit missionaries in the colonial Brazilian Amazon and found that their presence had a long-term effect on human capital. The Jesuits were the most successful missionaries in the region in the 17th and 18th centuries, promoting literacy, the use of new technology, and protecting natives against colonial settlers. Using census and historical records, da Silva found that even after the Jesuits were expelled from the region in the 18th century, literacy rates remained higher in proximity to the Jesuit missions. According to him, this long-term effect was not seen among other missionary orders.

Gabriel Brown of the University of British Columbia looked at missionaries' Bible translation efforts in Africa and how such activity was related to later patterns in education, development, and ethnic identity. Brown used a dataset listing the times and places of Bible translation (particularly translation of the whole New Testament rather than just the Gospels) and the establishment of missions and found that they correlated with areas higher in literacy and years of schooling. Prior to the Christian revival and Bible translation efforts brought by the missionaries, there was a diversity of languages and a loyalty to subgroups that led to conflict between ethnic groups. The missionaries, particularly through the mission schools, created a shared and standardized language and a distinct ethnic identity. According to Brown, greater levels of economic development and higher rates of schooling are found in those areas closest to the translation points. Economist Pablo Alvarez of the Université de Namur in Belgium looked at



Source: www.advancethegospel.org/workshop/missionaries-mission-fields-the-story-of-africa

colonial and post-colonial changes in the Democratic Republic of Congo, finding that the post-colonial Protestant and Catholic missionary aftereffect on villages depended on their distance from the historical mission stations. Proximity to the Catholic and Protestant missions had the strongest impact among Catholic women in terms of literacy and demand for education. But the schools carried generally positive effects on surrounding areas, even for those who did not attend them. There was an increase in parents' demand for schooling, particularly in historical Protestant mission school areas.

Turning to Ghana, Daniel Jaramillo Calderon of the University of British Columbia focused on the long-term effect of missionary activity on non-deadly conflict and demonstrations. He compared districts that historically had a missionary presence with those not having such a history, looking at their incidents of non-deadly conflict and demonstrations. Calderon used a database listing such incidents between 1997 and 2019, along with records of missions established between 1751 and 1932, and was able to control for population density, distance from borders, and ethnic divisions. He found that those districts with mission histories had more exposure to non-deadly conflicts and demonstrations than those without such histories, also

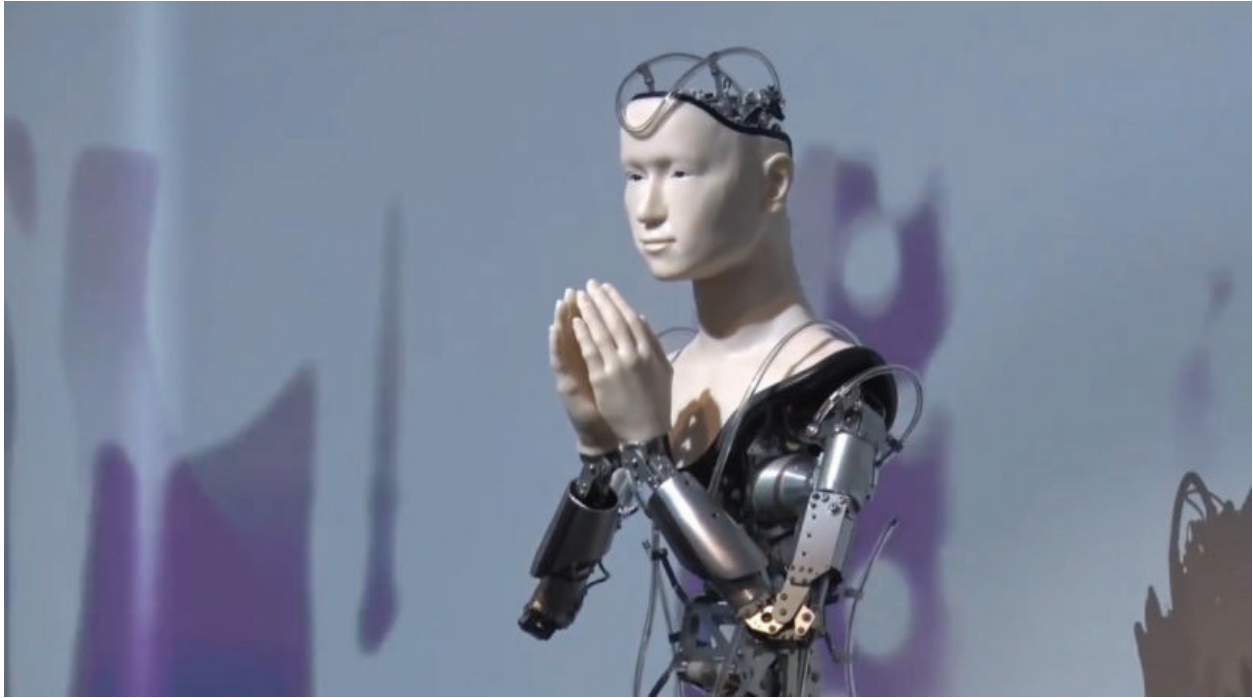
finding that this pattern was not due to Christian-Muslim ethnic conflicts or the effects of colonialism. He proposed that it might be explained either by the way religion can increase polarization between groups or the way it can generate high trust in leaders who can mobilize followers to demonstrate. Given that it was non-violent conflict he was studying, Calderon acknowledged that “democracy” could be another name for this phenomenon.

With rise of AI, concerns about ritual automation grow in Hinduism, Buddhism

Just as the rapid rise of artificial intelligence has raised new concerns as well as utopian hopes about a post-human future in work, religious professionals are debating the real prospects of “spiritual robots” replacing worshippers’ performance of traditional rituals, writes anthropologist Holly Walters in the online magazine *The Conversation* (March 13). The concern about what can be called religious automation is particularly acute in Hindu and other Eastern traditions that are based on intricate and daily rituals. In temples across India, a robotic arm is being used to maneuver candles in front of deities; in Kerala, there is even an animatronic temple elephant. This “kind of religious robotic usage has led to increasing debates about the use of AI and robotic technology in devotion and worship.”

“Some devotees and priests feel that AI represents a new horizon in human innovation that will lead to the betterment of society, while others worry that using robots to replace practitioners is a bad omen for the future,” Walters adds. Even before AI and computers, ritual automation has existed in South Asian religions—from wind-powered Buddhist prayer wheels to special pots that drip water continuously for Hindu bathing rituals. There have also been religious stories from Hindu epics about mechanized icons. The anxiety about AI and robots among religious professionals dovetails with the decreasing number of young people willing to devote themselves to religious professions over the past few decades. “Furthermore, with many families living in a diaspora scattered across the world, priests or ‘pundits’ are often serving smaller and smaller communities,” Walters writes.

But the concern also stems from the question of whether the robots represent progress, since they only reflect the religious views of the engineers who program them, as well as the deeper fear that such technology may be better than humans at performing rituals and worshipping gods. This is especially the case for religions like Hinduism and Buddhism which emphasize “orthopraxy”—the correct performance of rituals, at which automation and robots can excel, meaning they can be “spiritually incorruptible.” Walters concludes that “Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions in South Asia are increasingly being imagined as post- or transhuman: deploying technological ingenuity to transcend human weaknesses because robots don’t get tired, forget what they’re supposed to say, fall asleep or leave. More specifically, this means that robotic automation is being used to perfect ritual practices in East Asia and South Asia—especially in India and Japan—beyond what would be possible for a human devotee, by linking



Source: *Image Journal*.

impossibly consistent and flawless ritual accomplishment with an idea of better religion. Modern robotics might then feel like a particular kind of cultural paradox, where the best kind of religion is the one that eventually involves no humans at all.”

(*The Conversation*, <https://religionnews.com/2023/03/13/as-robots-perform-hindu-rituals-some-devotees-fear-theyll-replace-worshippers/>)

Asbury revival’s draw based on psychological healing?

While the revival meetings based at evangelical Asbury College in Kentucky ended by late February, their appeal to a large swath of evangelical young people carried an emphasis on psychological healing that says a lot about Generation Z religion in the near future. Writing in *First Things* magazine (March 3), Biola University professor Kent Dunnington observes that the “Asbury revival is remarkable on many counts: its ‘lo-fi’ register in an age of megachurch pyrotechnics, its resistance to partisan capture, its Gen Z genesis.” The revival started in early February as informal prayer gatherings among students who were lingering after the weekly chapel service. Students started texting one another saying that something special was happening in the chapel, which drew more students to the service, resulting in an outpouring of confessions, intense prayer and singing. Dunnington adds that some spoke in tongues and prophesied, though the meetings were known for their orderliness. There were reports of healings from depression and anxiety. Dunnington writes that he was “struck by how many Asbury students narrated their



Source: Church of God Ministries.

experience of the revival in terms of supernatural liberation from depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-harm, and other mental maladies. Struck because this is, indeed, the defining ‘sickness’ of Gen Z...”

(*First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2023/03/gratitude-and-the-asbury-revival>)

Conservative churches encounter extremist elements in their ranks

Recent controversy within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) over the influence of a small far-right contingent within its ranks suggests that conservative congregations and denominations may face pressures from such extremist elements as well as from the more liberal wings of church and society. The conflict came into full view on Ash Wednesday, when the First Lutheran Church in Knoxville, Tenn., called the police on a parishioner who was attempting to attend services. The parishioner, Corey Mahler, is a white nationalist who has sought to move the congregation in the direction of his cause. He was ejected from church grounds for causing what his pastor called “harm and division to the body of Christ,” but the confrontation was set in motion a day earlier, when LCMS president Matthew Harrison posted a letter denouncing agitators “propagating radical and unchristian ‘alt-right’ views” and advocating the “destruction of the church’s leadership”; he called for their excommunication, insisting that LCMS churches “categorically reject the horrible and racist teachings of the so-called ‘alt-right,’” and that the

punishment for those who refuse to renounce its ideology “must be excommunication,” according to reporting from *Rolling Stone* magazine (March 3).

Tim Dickinson writes that the denomination’s upholding of “traditional” values has made LCMS vulnerable to infestation by reactionaries who believe the Bible justifies their hate. “The church’s struggle is increasingly common in our extremist age: How do you stop a conservative space from becoming a fascist one?” The LCMS’s faceoff against the “alt-right” came in the wake of a mid-February report by Machaira Action, a new anti-fascist group, that detailed Mahler’s role in the rise of Lutheran fascism—or what it dubs “Lutefash.” Mahler is an unabashed white-Christian nationalist, with ties to Jason Kessler of Unite the Right, which organized the racist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. Mahler was scheduled to be a speaker at

the short-lived Unite the Right II. He insists that he’s at his core a monarchist and that the fascism he promotes is just “the off ramp from democracy back to traditional government,” but he also admitted believing that God’s will is that America be a white ethnostate. He has built clout within the ultra-conservative wing of the LCMS, running the synod’s Book of Concord website to reach what he calls “faithful pastors,” while envisioning “cleaning house” of the church’s current leadership and leading an “influx of hardline young men” into LCMS congregations. He claims to have personally recruited “dozens,” although ultraconservative groups have condemned him.

The Machaira Action report says that the far right is attracted to fundamentalist Lutheranism, in part “because of Martin Luther’s own vehement antisemitism.” Mahler writes of Lutheranism as “the ancestral faith of my Volk” and insists LCMS has been in decline since it “gave up its explicitly German character.” Dickinson writes that the church has been grappling with Mahler’s influence for months, with three pastors issuing a 2022 complaint letter to the leader of the Knoxville church that Mahler attended. Since then Mahler and his followers “continued to wield significant clout in the broader LCMS—including waging a successful campaign to stymie an update to the church’s statements of doctrine that Mahler & Co. lambasted as too ‘woke.’” The



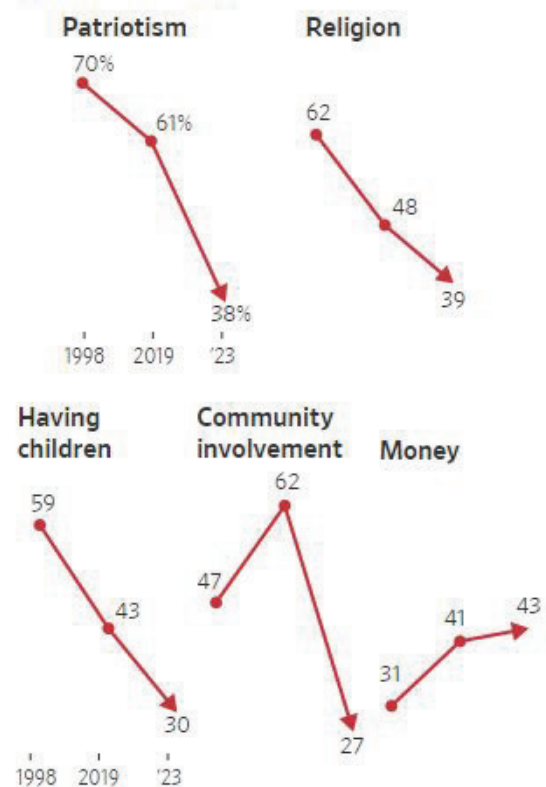
A Lutheran church in Michigan (source: Jakebelder, Wikimedia Commons).

attempted incursion of far-right proponents into conservative churches could also be observed last year, when the headmaster of a classical Christian school in Louisiana who co-hosted a popular Christian podcast was found to be spreading white-supremacist and antisemitic views under a pseudonym. The headmaster and podcaster, Thomas Achord, who was fired from his position, admitted to “wanting to use Classical Christian Education as a Trojan horse for white nationalism,” according to the *Dreher Archives* blog (November 28).

CURRENT RESEARCH

• **A new poll finds that the share of Americans who say patriotism and religion are “very important” to them has fallen sharply, as has the share who value involvement in their community, hard work, and having children.** While in 1998, 70 percent of respondents deemed patriotism to be very important, that proportion is now 38 percent, according to the new *Wall Street Journal*-NORC poll. Twenty-five years ago, 62 percent said religion was very important; now only 39 percent do. The survey found that the only priority “that has grown in importance in the past quarter-century is money, which was cited as very important by 43 percent in the new survey, up from 31 percent in 1998.” Only 58 percent of people responding to the *Wall Street Journal* poll said “tolerance for others” was very important; four years ago, that number stood at 80 percent, reports *The Spectator* magazine (March 28). But in an article in *Commentary* (March 27), Abe Greenwald cautions against pronouncing doom for American religion and society. He notes that when “asked to rate these values, respondents could choose from ‘very important,’ ‘somewhat important,’ ‘not that important,’ or ‘not important at all.’ If you tally the ‘very important’ and ‘somewhat important’ percentages and compare them to the combined ‘not that important’ and ‘not important at all’ ones, it’s a clear win for tradition and conservative values. On patriotism, it’s 73 percent to 27 percent; on religion, 60 percent to 40 percent; on having children, 65 percent to 33 percent. And on marriage, 70 percent to 28 percent.”

Percent who say these values are ‘very important’ to them



Source: WSJ/NORC poll of 1,019 adults conducted March 1-13, 2023; margin of error +/-4.1 pct. pts. Prior data from WSJ/NBC News telephone polls, most recently of 1,000 adults conducted Aug. 10-14, 2019; margin of error +/-3.1 pct. pts.

On his blog *The Intersection* (March 28), Republican pollster Patrick Ruffini expresses some doubts about the poll's results. He writes that the “dramatically different results we see from 2019 and 2023 are because the data was collected differently. The March 2023 survey was collected via NORC’s Amerispeak, an extremely high-quality *online* panel. In the fine print below the chart, we can see that data from previous waves was collected via telephone survey.” Ruffini writes that the 2023 survey probably does a better job at revealing the true state of patriotism, religiosity, community involvement, and so forth, since respondents are more likely to report their true views online rather than over the phone to pollsters. But he concludes, “The problem is that the data from previous waves were inflated by social desirability bias—and can’t be trended with the current data to generate a neat-and-tidy viral chart...”

- **A new study finds that while sex scandals involving megachurch pastors have an effect on church attendance and giving to the congregation, such “shocks” are relatively short-lived and do not have a spillover effect on charitable giving.** In a paper presented at the March meeting of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture at Harvard University, which **RW** attended, Angela Cools of Davidson College looked at areas within 10 miles of megachurches experiencing a sex related scandal involving their senior pastor. Using the Cooperative Election survey on religious practice and IRS data, she found that there was a five percent drop in attendance and a one percent decrease in congregational contributions. But the effect of this shock to attendance and giving was short-lived, lasting for about two years. Cools did not find that a growth in secular contributions replaced the loss of church contributions. She noted that in some ways the effects of the Protestant megachurch scandals were similar to those caused by the Catholic priest sex scandals, but due to the decentralized and congregational nature of megachurches, their scandals were local rather than national shocks, making them more short-lived and with less broad implications.



Source: Allen Browne, *Seeking the Kingdom*.

● **A new survey highlights the importance of the chaplain’s role in a society with a growing rate of religious disaffiliation.** Brian Grim, on his Religious Freedom and Business Foundation website (March 18), reports on the survey, which was conducted by Wendy Cadge and Amy Lawton of the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab. The researchers found that 18 percent of American adults had been in contact with a chaplain, with the majority of such interactions taking place in healthcare settings. The authors note that a “chaplain may be the only religious professional available to many people” as religious affiliation declines. But the survey found that the “American public does not have a common understanding of who or what a chaplain is,” or how to access them. The survey also found that most people were the primary recipient of the chaplain’s care (56 percent of respondents) and/or encountered the chaplain as a visitor or caregiver (55 percent). Chaplains commonly supported care seekers through prayer (81 percent) and listening (80 percent). The most commonly discussed topics were death and dying (53 percent), dealing with loss (51 percent), and dealing with change (49 percent).

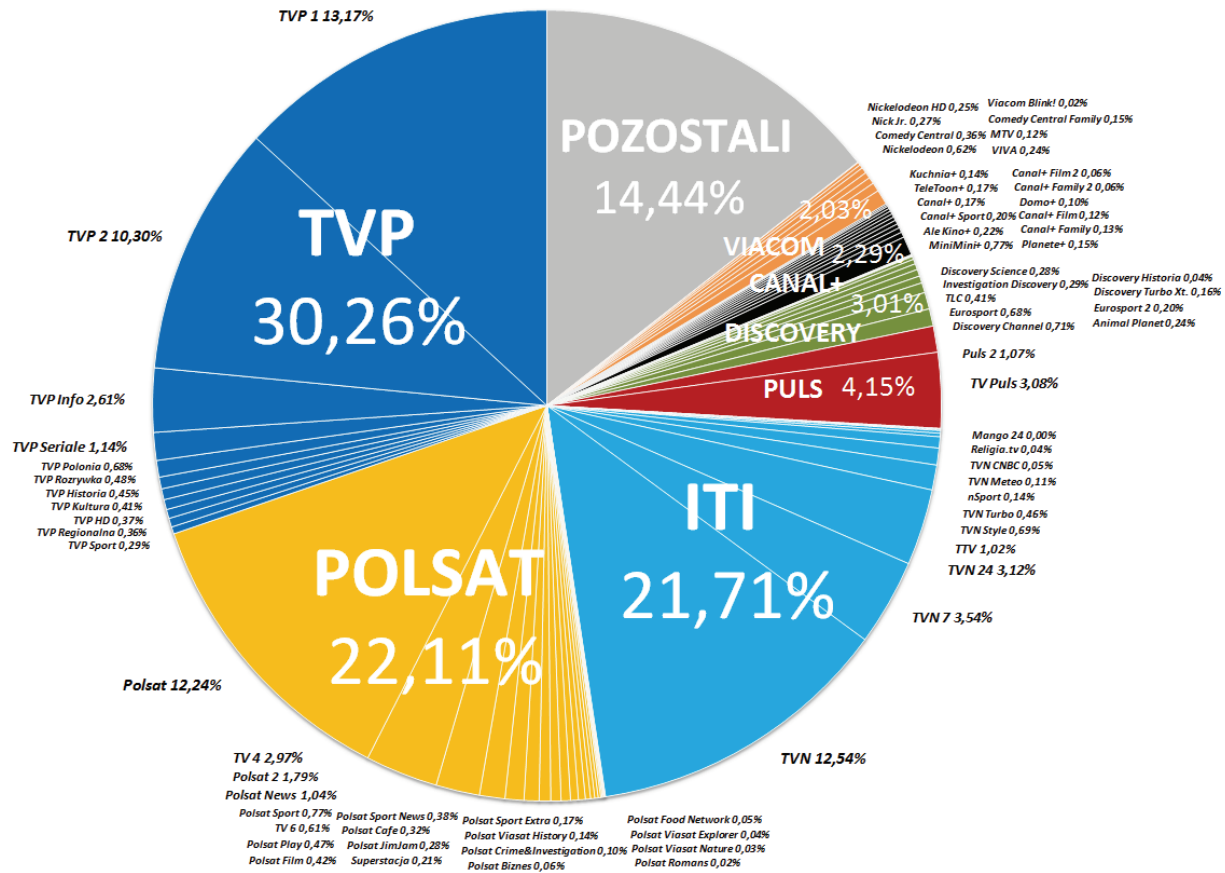
(The study can be downloaded at: <https://chaplaincyinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CIL-2023-Demand-for-Chaplaincy-Covenantal-Pluralism.pdf>)

Type of Support Received	%	N
Prayed with or for you or others	81	166
Listened to you others	80	164
Comforted you or others in a time of need	75	156
Gave spiritual or religious guidance	71	145
Helped you or others navigate a conflict	27	48
Advocated for or with you	24	45
Facilitated a religious ritual	18	38
Directed you or others to resources	17	35
Provided a religious object	17	37

Note: Based on the 18% of people who interacted with a chaplain according to the Gallup definition (N=206). Numbers include “I received” and “Both I and another received.”

Source: Chaplaincy Innovation Lab.

● **A new study finds that religiosity in Poland increased in areas dominated by government controlled populist media and decreased where alternative media was dominant.** The study, conducted by Seyhun Orcan Sakalli of King’s College, London, and presented in a paper at the recent meeting of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture at Harvard University, was conducted against the backdrop of the emergence of the populist government in Poland in 2015. The government took control of much of the media, using it for propaganda, with TVN television as its main channel for airing populist and Catholic views. Polska TV represents a more liberal viewership, airing news more critical of the Catholic Church, such as coverage of the priest sex abuse crisis.



Shares in the television market in Poland in 2013 (source: Truszek, Wikimedia Commons).

Sakalli looked at areas of the country where each network had the most viewers and found that religious participation increased in places where TVN was strong and there was no alternative media, while decreasing in areas where Polska TV was dominant. Sakalli said that in general secularization had been gradually increasing in Poland before 2015, but there has been a reversal in these areas of populist media coverage. To test the relationship between the media and religiosity, Sakalli ran an experiment where subjects were exposed to both populist and independent media, which featured videos critical of the church. Those exposed to the independent media decreased their trust in the church and reported lower donations and participation in Mass. The experimental effects were strongest among rural populations, he noted.

Ukraine's religious restrictions more than wartime emergency measure?

According to observers speaking at a recent online seminar, Ukraine is on a “very slippery slope” in violating religious freedom since it introduced sanctions and other restrictions last year against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), Moscow Patriarchate. The online symposium, organized by the Greek Order of Saint Andrew and attended by **RW**, took place shortly after the Ukrainian



Pechersk Lavra in Kiev (source: *Wallpaper Flare*).

government led by Volodymyr Zelensky expelled monks from the historic Pechersk Lavra Monastery in Kiev because of their ties to the Moscow Patriarchate. The action was part of Zelensky's changed policy in late 2022 to target religious organizations with ties to Russia, particularly the UOC, after he had earlier stated he would not ban the church. Since last spring, when an assembly of the UOC officially distanced itself from Russia, it has been a matter of debate if the church has actually cut ties with the Moscow Patriarchate, since some bishops have maintained their Russian connection.

Historian Nadieszda Kizenko said that Ukraine's insistence that there be one Orthodox church without Russian ties runs counter to its own history, since there have long existed various competing visions of Orthodoxy and relationships with Russia in the country. Even in a time of war, Kizenko said that there is little evidence of large-scale collaboration between the UOC and Russia. "Finding someone having rubles or Russian pamphlets does not constitute treason." It has not helped matters that the rival Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) has intervened in the controversy by proposing that the Lavra monastery should remain open only if it affiliates with its own church. The decision in late March to expel the monks, teachers, and students from the Lavra Monastery without notice because of their ties to the UOC is another worrisome step, especially since the monastery has hosted refugees from the war and some of the monks' and

students' families and relatives are fighting in the war against Russia. [The abbot of the monastery was arrested in early April.] Recently buses of UOC pilgrims to the second Lavra Monastery were not allowed to worship there.

The Ukrainian state is “going down a slippery slope fast. Being in a state of war does not excuse an attack on religious freedom,” Kizenko said. Russian journalist Sergei Chapnin said much of this policy change is the work of a new religious affairs advisor to Zelensky, who has drawn up the names of priests and bishops suspected of being collaborators without any legal proceedings against them. He said the “anti-Ukrainian Orthodox propaganda is extremely strong in the government-owned media. It’s no way to disestablish the UOC [from suspected Russian ties]. The UOC will continue to exist and will be stronger under pressure from the outside, creating a martyr complex,” Chapnin said. Boston College political scientist Elizabeth Prodromou said that “state solutions to religious conflict don’t work. There needs to be an engagement between both churches [the OCU and UOC] to [work for] unity and religious freedom.” She added that recent government restrictions on Orthodoxy are not limited to Ukraine or Russia and that they bear watching. In a little reported action, at the end of last year the Latvian government passed a law requiring churches to cut ties with any country outside of Latvia.

Populism, religion, and the rise of the post-religious right in France

While previous research has found a “hijacking of religion” by populist parties in Europe, and the use of Christianity—along with secular principles—as an identity marker against Islam, this has not prevented the French Rassemblement National (National Rally, RN) from “becoming increasingly secularist in its policies, personnel and electorate,” according to Tobias Cramer (University of Oxford) in an article published in the journal *Party Politics* (January). In addition to drawing on recent literature, Cramer’s research draws on data derived from interviews with 20 elite leaders, including key RN figures, both on the secularist and Christian side. The author argues that broader lessons can be drawn from that example about the ways in which European right-wing populist movements use both religious and secular narratives in their programmatic agenda. The RN received 18.7 percent of the vote in the 2022 parliamentary



Notre Dame de Paris in 2013 (source: Peter Haas, Wikimedia Commons).

elections in France. In recent years, it intensified its references to the Christian identity of France. But it has also sought “to publicly position itself as the defender of a more separationist reading of *laïcité*,” as secularist principles are called in France.

Cramer observes that both Catholicism and *laïcité* are used “primarily as secularised cultural identity markers against Islam.” Despite Christian rhetorics—which actually emphasize Catholicism as historical heritage, as Christendom, and not as religious belief—the RN shows no convergence with Catholic social doctrine. Bishops are expected to “shut their mouth” on political issues. Christian voices are becoming less heard within the RN. The RN defines its priorities in relation to identitarian issues. “The repoliticisation of religion and *laïcité* in French politics appears less linked to a revival of Catholicism, than to the emergence of a new cleavage between cosmopolitans and communitarians.” Distanced from Christian doctrines, ethics and institutions, the RN makes use of Christian symbols in a secularized way. Cramer concludes that those developments may also apply to the use of Christian symbols by populist right parties in other countries. In Germany, for example, the AfD presents itself as the defender of the Christian West but is reported to perform best “amongst irreligious Germans.”

(*Party Politics*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ppqa>)

Pay-for-service Jewish innovation in Israel, with a little help from the U.S.

American-style Jewish innovations that draw on business and consumer models are finding some resonance in Israel, especially in secular Tel Aviv, according to a study by Einat Libel-Hass and Adam S. Ferziger. In an article appearing in the current issue of the journal *Modern Judaism*, the authors study prominent Reform and Conservative synagogues in Tel Aviv that have adopted such American-pioneered practices as having the rabbi play the role of a CEO. These fit in with a pay-for-service model (rather than requiring a congregational membership fee) that is popular in Israel. Because the Israeli state subsidizes much of Jewish life—kosher food supervision, divorce and burial regulations, support of prayer houses—synagogues are compelled to appeal to the consumer for added services and features. This is seen in the offerings of the Reform synagogue, Beit Daniel, in Tel Aviv’s urban center, which operates as a religious, educational and cultural service provider to a niche of liberal Jews. Upwards of 100,000 people a year participate in some way in lifecycle rituals and religious and cultural programs of the synagogue. The synagogue has expanded to start various “hubs” (also taken from an American model) around the city and beyond, including in the city of Jaffa, as well as a new merged synagogue led by a Brazilian-born rabbi in central Tel Aviv.

Researchers have previously found that while Israelis may desire American brands, in the religious sphere, the American identities of liberal groups have impeded their growth. But while Beit Daniel may have an American pedigree, the synagogue’s leaders, Libel-Hass and Ferziger write, “recognized early on that they had to adjust it to local Israeli tastes and sensibilities.”

Such tailoring to Israeli preferences starts with the synagogue's homegrown rabbi and his cultural and linguistic fluency and reaches down to the pay-for-service structure that includes celebrating lifecycle events. Close ties with city and other organizations generate revenue outside of traditional synagogue sources. For instance,



Beit Daniel synagogue (The Daniel Centers for Progressive Judaism).

Beit Daniel has an ongoing agreement with the Tel Aviv municipality to provide Jewish enhancement programming through the city's primary and secondary schools. The authors compare the success of Beit Daniel to a neighboring Conservative synagogue that attempted similar innovations but, due to a less charismatic and politically adept rabbinic style and weaker network ties to the city, was unable to “transform from a classical family membership, neighborhood-based synagogue to a wide-ranging service-oriented institution.” There was also minimal motivation among the core lay community to invest in this new kind of synagogue.

(*Modern Judaism*, <https://academic.oup.com/mj/issue>)

Buddhist monks in post-coup Myanmar face division while youth resistance turns secular

Myanmar's Buddhist monks and nuns have mostly stayed on the sidelines since the February 2021 coup, as the resistance pursues a secular agenda that includes violent action, a new International Crisis Group report, *A Silent Sangha? Buddhist Monks in Post-coup Myanmar* (March 10), finds. This contrasts with the significant role played by monks in previous political crises, up to the 2007 Saffron Revolution. While restrictions due to Covid and the fact that many monks returned to the countryside during the pandemic may initially have played a role, a major reason for the change is the divisions that have developed within the Sangha (the monastic communities), in which one can find both supporters of the regime and vociferous opponents, though most avoid taking a public position. This avoidance also reflects a sense that it is unlikely that the monks—even if they were united—would be able to influence the conflict's outcome. Such a sidelining of monastic figures might have significant consequences in the future, the authors of the report stress. The Sangha represents some 600,000 individuals in Myanmar

(comprising ordained monks, novices, and 60,000 nuns).

Formed in 1980, a state-backed Sangha Council attempts to enforce the military's control over the monastic community, issuing in 2007 a prohibition on monks' participation in non-religious activities. It also rebuked radical nationalist organizations led by monks. But the already weak legitimacy of the Sangha Council has been further eroded by its complete subordination to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, even with a number of monks sitting in the Council. "Council members are aware that public perception that a monk is biased toward the military can seriously undermine his following," according to the report.



Monks protesting in Myanmar in 2007 (source: Robert Coles, Wikimedia Commons).

Those monks supporting the regime tend to be older, and some hope that the military will better defend Buddhism than the previous government. Those supporting the revolution tend to be junior monks. Many monks are remaining neutral not only because they are afraid of the consequences of repression, but also because they became disenchanted with the previous administration and because of the use of armed violence by the resistance, which they do not feel the right to support even in response to brutality.

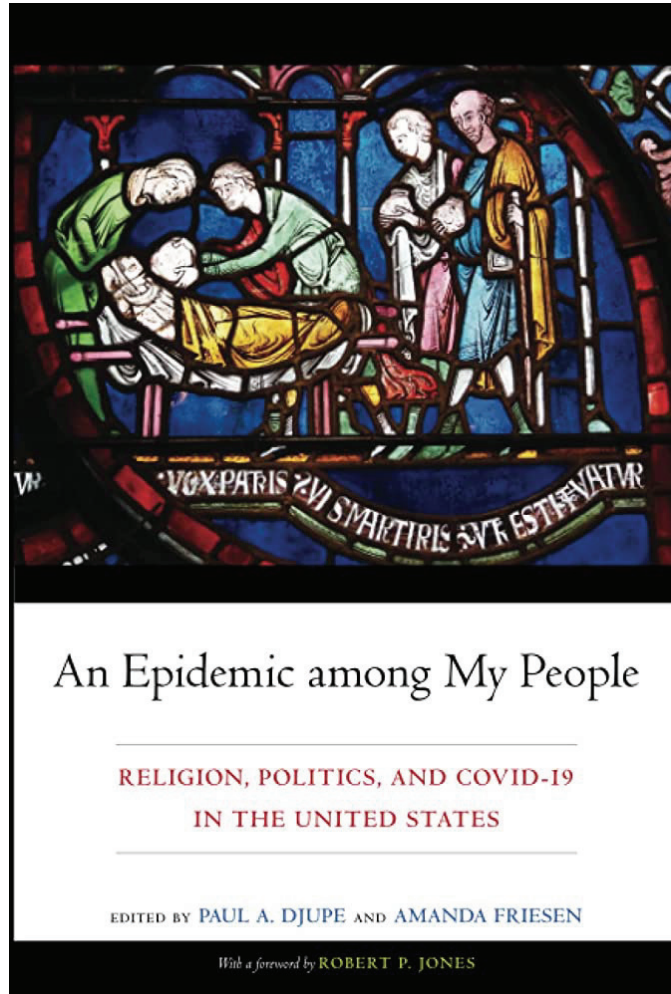
Moreover, a number of young people in the anti-regime resistance movement appear to "have developed an aversion to organized Buddhism and Theravada cultural norms more generally." It should be noted that—contrary to widespread expectations—activist nationalist monks have not come together as a unified force supporting either side. Despite the current developments, the authors warn about premature predictions of a decline of Buddhism. Buddhist monastic communities remain a crucial social institution for supporting people in Myanmar. If the current secular shift among some segments of the younger generation endures, it would likely "foment rural-urban division" or might lead to a conservative backlash if some social forces or the Sangha would feel alienated from future political processes.

(The full report can be downloaded from the ICG website, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/330-silent-sangha-buddhist-monks-post-coup-myanmar>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ The edited collection, *An Epidemic among My People* (Temple University Press, \$39.95), suggests that Covid-19 has a wider impact on religion and society than many might expect. The book, edited by political scientists Paul Djupe and Amanda Friesen, marshals a significant amount of data that documents religious behavior before and after the peak years of the pandemic, not only on standard measures such as congregational attendance but also on political and cultural issues that converged with religion during the health crisis. The contributors note that there has been a continuation of trends that were unfolding prior to Covid—increasing disaffiliation of Generation Z from religious institutions, even as many Americans, especially evangelicals, used their faith for coping with the pandemic. The obvious drops in attendance during and after the pandemic were accompanied by stable religious practices, such as private prayer. It is also the case that highly active evangelicals were able to sustain and strengthen their faith more than other believers in the early phase of the pandemic, as they ventured outside their own worship places that were closed to find churches that remained open.

But other contributions focus on tendencies of conspiracy thinking, “out-group” (anti-Muslim) attitudes, and loyalty to one’s own group, especially seen among evangelicals. Although the chapters are framed around topics such as racialization and gender, the actual survey results seem to show cross-racial commonalities (even if people of color were more affected by the pandemic), with such variables as the “born again” experience having greater influence than racial identity. Other chapters look at the greater tendency of religious believers to hold to conspiracy theories during the pandemic, such as that the virus was intentionally created in a laboratory (which may in fact be at least half on the mark, with some recent research arguing the laboratory origins of the virus), and the role of the prosperity gospel in generating distrust toward public health initiatives during the pandemic (with the prosperity gospel similarly having a comparable impact among both white and black Americans).



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

The first-ever national **House of Worship** in the Bahá'í world was dedicated in late March on the outskirts of Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its design is “inspired by traditional artworks, structures and natural features of the DRC, as well as by the Bahá'í sacred teachings.” The Bahá'í Mother Temple for Africa had been opened as early as 1961, and there has been a local house of worship in Kenya since 2021. The beginning of a program for building national and local Houses of Worship around the world was announced in 2012 by the Universal House of Justice (the international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith). A second national House of Worship is nearing completion in Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea).

Although statistics regarding the number of members around the world have often been vague, with the same figure of 5 million mostly used for more than 20 years, Bahá'í officials reported in 2020 an estimate of around 8 million believers worldwide, based on national data collected. Asia comes first, gathering nearly half of the Bahá'í population in the world, with India leading (with estimates of up to nearly 2 million believers).

But the share in Africa is significant, with more than a quarter of Bahá'í faithful living on that continent. Kenya is said to be the country with the most Bahá'í believers in Africa, and Congo comes second,



Source: Bahá'í World News Service.

followed by Zambia and South Africa. According to Bahá'í sources, over 200,000 people across the Democratic Republic of Congo (not all of them Bahá'í) participate regularly in Bahá'í gatherings. The religious movement has been present in the country since the 1950s. A 40-minute documentary movie, *A Remarkable Response: The Dawn of the Bahá'í Faith in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, has been released on the occasion of the dedication of the national House of Worship: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkfiUBMzefA>. (**Source:** *Bahá'í World News Service*, March 25 and 28)