

“Hasidic paradigm” already at work in church-state relations?

The controversy surrounding the Satmar Hasidic Jewish sect of New York over its use of public funds for its schools already suggests that Americans are in the middle of a paradigm shift in how religious communities navigate church-state relations, writes Rita Koganzon in *The Hedgehog Review* (Summer). The way that the Satmar Hasidim, the largest group in this mystical and strictly Orthodox branch of Judaism, have received public funding for a school system seen as not measuring up to state educational standards has been front-page news for the past year. The *New York Times* in particular has regularly run investigative articles on how the Hasidim have miseducated children and are not held accountable for their abuse of welfare programs. “Every subsequent article is quick to remind readers of the raw deal they are getting as taxpayers: Hasidim take your money, but they don’t follow your laws,” Koganzon writes. Critics argue that it is not actually clear what the law in question means, as state law requires private schools to offer a “substantially equivalent” education to that provided by public schools, which could be interpreted in several ways.

But more important to the gist of the controversy is that the *Times* and other media and lawyers are relying on what Koganzon calls the “Amish paradigm” in their opposition to the Hasidim. That paradigm, backed up by the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1972 *Wisconsin v. Yoder* decision, holds that religious groups may enjoy broad freedom as long as they do not accept public funds and are isolated enough that they do not run for public office and get other public accommodations. While this paradigm held for almost a half-century, Koganzon writes that this “equilibrium is breaking down, and the Hasidic model is already superseding the Amish paradigm even as opponents of the Hasidim attempt to constrain them with Amish logic.” Since the 1990s, the courts have been expanding public funding for religious activities, and in contrast to the peculiar geographical remoteness of Amish communities, “religious dissenters from secular modernity remain embedded in cities and suburbs and entangled in the same web of civic and cultural institutions that shape the lives of everyone else.” The strong opposition particularly to the Satmar Hasidim “might be more representative of the religious liberty battles to come than the Amish ever were of the battles past. Their insularity opens them to easy demonization, but



Orthodox Jewish family, Williamsburg, NYC (© 2009 Chris Ford | Flickr).

considered from another angle, they offer a model of social cohesion and civic participation in an increasingly fractured, alienated age,” Koganzon adds. The Satmars have adopted the strategy of playing “ball with liberalism while neither being absorbed into it nor undermining it.”

Even the most controversial of the Satmars’ programs, the establishment of the village of Kiryas Joel in upstate New York, an independent municipality inhabited and governed entirely by Satmars that would seem to violate the Establishment Clause, has survived the courts as they have moved away from the doctrine of “strict separationism.” Koganzon notes that the Satmars’ main source of opposition has been secular Jews—from *Times* reporters to lawyers. Aside from mainstream Jewish frustration and embarrassment at the unassimilated nature of the Satmars, she writes that Jewish liberalism has long prioritized free-speech absolutism in the form of “taboo busting,” strict church-state separation, the removal of religion from the public sphere, and “meritocracy as a vindication of individual rights”—values that the Hasidim disparage right in the middle of New York City. While the *New York Times*’s crusade against the Satmars evokes all of Jewish liberalism’s presuppositions, the tide is turning against it. “From different partisan directions, the courts have slowly abandoned [this liberalism’s] interpretation of the First Amendment, elite institutions have rejected its argument for meritocracy, and the culture is turning away from its celebration of exposure and taboo busting. Even demography has turned

against Jewish liberalism—Orthodoxy is growing, secular Judaism is shrinking...Ironically, Hasidism is now closer in form to the emerging ideals of the left and the right than the American Civil Liberties Union of the 1970s. It is the urban, family-centric, anti-corporate, and in some respects anticapitalist, welfare approving, religious-communitarian Benedict Option that has actually worked over half a century,” Koganzon concludes.

(*The Hedgehog Review*, <https://hedgehogreview.com>)

Washington, DC, now fertile ground for nondenominational Christianity

America’s capital city is proving to be highly receptive to nondenominational evangelical churches, Daniel Silliman writes in *Christianity Today* magazine (July/August). Nondenominational churches have been expanding across the U.S. for years now, but the number of these congregations established in recent years has been unique. Silliman writes that although Washington has been considered a “swamp” for church planters, in recent years the city has become “fertile ground for nondenominational church growth. Between 2010 and 2020, the number of these independent congregations in DC more than doubled, from 61 to 145. And the estimated number of people attending them rapidly outpaced DC population growth. By 2020, more than 60,000 District residents were finding their way to nondenominational pews...” There are successful new denominational churches, such as the Evangelical Free Church-based Redemption Hill, and even growing nondenominational churches, such as The District Church, that acknowledge the wider traditions to which they may belong, such as Baptist or charismatic ones.



Worship service at District Church in Washington (source: District Church).

But the reason for the high rate of nondenominational church growth in the nation's capital seems to be largely about public image and evangelism. The high rate of non-affiliation among the local population makes it easier to describe the congregation and its place in the city without reference to denominational traditions and theology. Silliman adds that the images of January 6 protestors holding "Jesus Saves" signs left a bitter taste among DC residents and left evangelical pastors having to explain how they were different. Aside from this, nondenominational churches in DC, whether conservative or progressive, have to reach out to people who work for and against different administrations and see the value of a nonpartisan approach. Silliman cites the example of The Table Church, whose pastor was influenced by the emergent movement and blends Eastern Orthodox theology, Jesuit spirituality, and work on decolonization. The pastor, Tonetta Landis-Aina, says she values the pragmatism and freedom of a nondenominational congregation "to be open and affirming and name theological diversity as accepted and allowed."

(*Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com>)

New Christian hybrid schools growing and competing in post-pandemic landscape

Christian "micro-schools" have been started across the country, "offering a hybrid in-class and at-home education to keep costs down and the odds of survival up in an increasingly competitive K-12 sector," writes Vince Bielski on the *Real Clear Investigations* website (August 17). After years of stagnation, many long-established Christian schools are also increasing their enrollment. Much of the recent post-pandemic rebound in Christian schooling has been prompted by parental opposition to public school shutdowns and by the expansion of school choice programs. The revival follows a long period of dropping enrollments and shutdowns since the mid-2000s. The decline was fueled by disenchantment over unaccredited schools and many schools' preference for preaching Christianity over teaching rigorous courses, Bielski adds. Today the Christian school movement, attended by about 700,000 students in 8,000 schools, has replaced explicit Christian teachings with STEM programs, AP classes, and classical "great books" curriculums. During Covid, it was not only parents' frustration with school closings that fanned the revival of Christian schooling; the move to remote learning gave parents access to their children's lessons that in some cases included progressive and controversial teachings on race and gender.

Bielski adds that "evangelical schools have taken in a fair share of these public school refugees by appealing to the conservative views of parents. In their statements of faith, schools not only stress classic doctrine, such as the Bible as the word of God and the second coming of Jesus Christ. The statements also include the conservative Christian take on hot-button issues, such as it's a sin to deny one's biological sex." But there is also the pull factor of school choice programs that have been approved by 32 states and funded by taxpayers, including assistance for special-needs and low-income students. Eight states have recently approved universal laws making all students eligible for scholarships, regardless of family wealth. Scholars and school officials are



Source: Oaks Christian School.

wondering if the current revival will last. These schools face competition from well-established Catholic schools that have a longer reputation of academic excellence and from charter schools and home schooling. “And there are the old-guard fundamentalist schools that resist accreditation and refuse to accept school-choice funding,” Bielski writes.

(*Real Clear Investigations*, https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2023/08/17/after_years_in_the_wilderness_conservative_christian_education_is_being_born_again_post-pandemic_973263.html)

Clergy shortage in Zen Buddhist communities challenging Buddhist transmission in America

There is a clergy shortage in Zen Buddhist communities in the U.S., leading to new roles for the laity but also greater bureaucracy in some cases and a looming crisis in transmission as teaching and rituals are scaled back, according to sociologist Rebecca S. K. Li of the College of New Jersey. Li presented her preliminary research findings at the late August meeting of the American Sociological Association in Philadelphia, which **RW** attended. Since its introduction to the U.S. in the 1960s, Zen Buddhism has grown to occupy a central place in the Buddhist life of the country, especially among converts. But like many Christian churches, Zen communities have experienced a clergy shortage that has had repercussions for these communities’ offerings and their appeal among both members and seekers. Li studied four Zen communities on the East and West coasts and how they have adapted to the clergy shortage,



Source: Dharma Rain Zen Center.

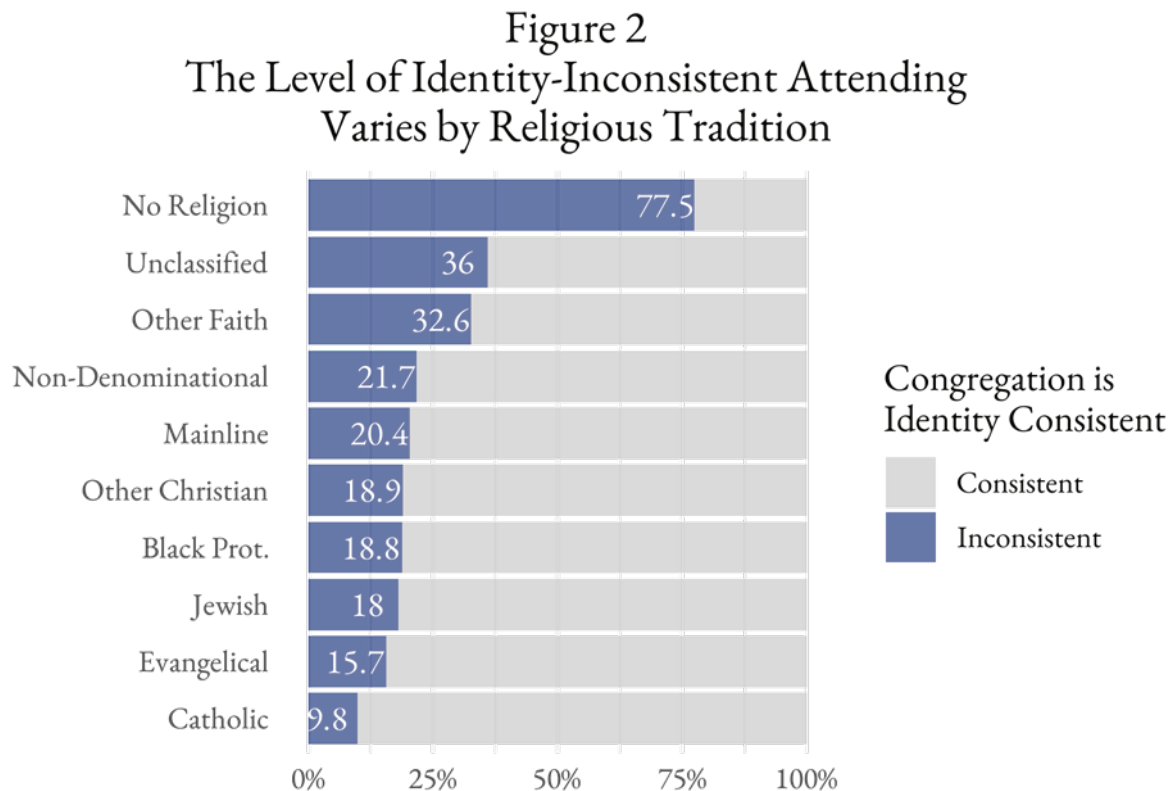
using ethnography and an analysis of archival materials. In some communities she found that there has been a general weakening of the central role that priests play in training other potential priests, which has affected the overall operations of these temples.

There is often a lengthy period of apprenticeship and training for Zen priests and those long years of commitment, often involving the performance of administrative work for little or no pay and with no guarantee of ordination, have lowered the appeal of training for the priesthood. This results in less work for established priests in the training and initiation of novices, but also a shortage of people to do the administrative work needed in these communities. This all contributes to the prospect of the ritual aspects of Zen communities becoming increasingly lax, but also a dearth in Zen teaching, since the priests play the role of primary teacher of the temple. “...Not only will there be a succession crisis in administrative leadership, but the community may also face the prospect of a teacherless Zen community, rendering it even more difficult to attract people to participate in their programs not to mention devoting their lives to a religious community,” Li says. In one community Li studied, administrative roles once filled by novices are now occupied by laity, with a greater emphasis on efficiency and a bureaucratic approach. Another community has increased its strict demands on priests, which may appeal to a smaller portion of Zen students but also creates a strong sense of community. Other innovations among these communities include making it easier for laity to be ordained and minimizing the workload created by the traditional requirement of communal living and allowing priests to take up outside work on a part-time basis.

CURRENT RESEARCH

• **A sizeable segment of Americans are attending worship services at congregations that do not match the religious affiliations they report, a new study finds.** In an article published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in August), Paul Djupe, Christopher R. H. Garneau, and Ryan Burge report on their analysis of data from two surveys they conducted in 2022 and 2023 (with 6,350 respondents acquired through Qualtric panels). They found that about a fifth of respondents were mismatched between their congregations and their stated religious affiliations. Many of the mismatched were found to occupy a “liminal state,” attending worship less often than other worshippers and expressing less satisfaction with their congregations as a whole. This suggested to the researchers that the mismatched may be migrating and not yet have found a religious home, or may belong to more unique congregations than those who are “identity-consistent.” The study questions the conventional method and categories for capturing religious affiliation, noting that there is a complex interplay between affiliation and identity and that “identity does not conclusively govern affiliation decisions and may simply exist downstream of affiliation decisions.”

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



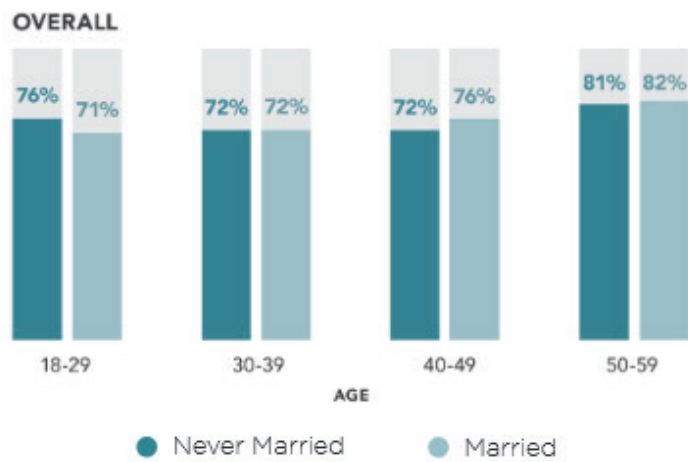
Source: Religion in Public.

● **A nationwide survey of 19,000 Sunday church attendees finds that family structure may be related to religious involvement.** The survey, conducted by the Catholic group Communio, was carried out during worship services in 112 evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic congregations in 13 different states. Eighty percent of all Sunday church attendees in the United States were found to have grown up in a continuously married home with both biological parents at a time when this family formation was becoming less prevalent. This trend held across age groups, including churchgoing young adults under the age of 30. For instance, 80 percent of all never-married Sunday churchgoers between the ages of 25 and 29 grew up in a continuously married home at a time when less than half of this age group in the U.S. population did so. The survey found that 87 percent of all never-married men in church on Sunday grew up in a continuously married home. Boys who were raised in homes with married parents were considerably more likely to attend church regularly as adults. The researchers argue that family decline appears to fuel faith decline. In this perspective, the overall population of the religious nones is unlikely to stabilize until 25 to 30 years after family structure has stabilized. The growing tide of loneliness in and out of churches was also looked at in the study. The survey found that just 22 percent of churchgoers considered themselves lonely. But single churchgoers were over three times more likely to feel this way than their married counterparts.

Just 15 percent of married people in church considered themselves lonely while more than 50 percent of all singles did so, with the higher loneliness reported not among widows, but among never-married men and women between the ages of 30 and 39. The survey also found that about one in five married churchgoers struggled in their marriage. “The gap in relationship satisfaction between married men and women is substantial as women are 62 percent more likely to report struggling than married men,” according to the study’s report. When compared to

SUNDAY CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY FAMILY OF ORIGIN

Percent given are those who grew up in a continuously married home through childhood



Source: Communio.

those who were married, “cohabiting church goers were substantially more likely to report struggling in their relationship. Cohabiting women were 76 percent more likely to struggle than married women and 85 percent more likely to struggle than a cohabiting man. Both cohabiting men and women were far more likely to report being lonely than married men and women.” In sum, a respondent’s family of origin remains an exogenous factor in faith that is not affected by the control variables of changing attitudes or opinions. In other words, the structure of a person’s childhood home is shown to precede in time and place any adult decision to attend church. The researchers conclude that “Causation is notoriously difficult to prove. However, the overall homogeneity in the families of origin from church goers in various generations (Gen Z all the way through the youngest Baby Boomers) is striking. The absence of a proportionate number of church attendees who grew up in homes without married parents across all recent generations suggests movement in family structure is at the heart of the decline in church participation.”

(The study can be downloaded at: <https://communio.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Final-Study-1.9.pdf>)

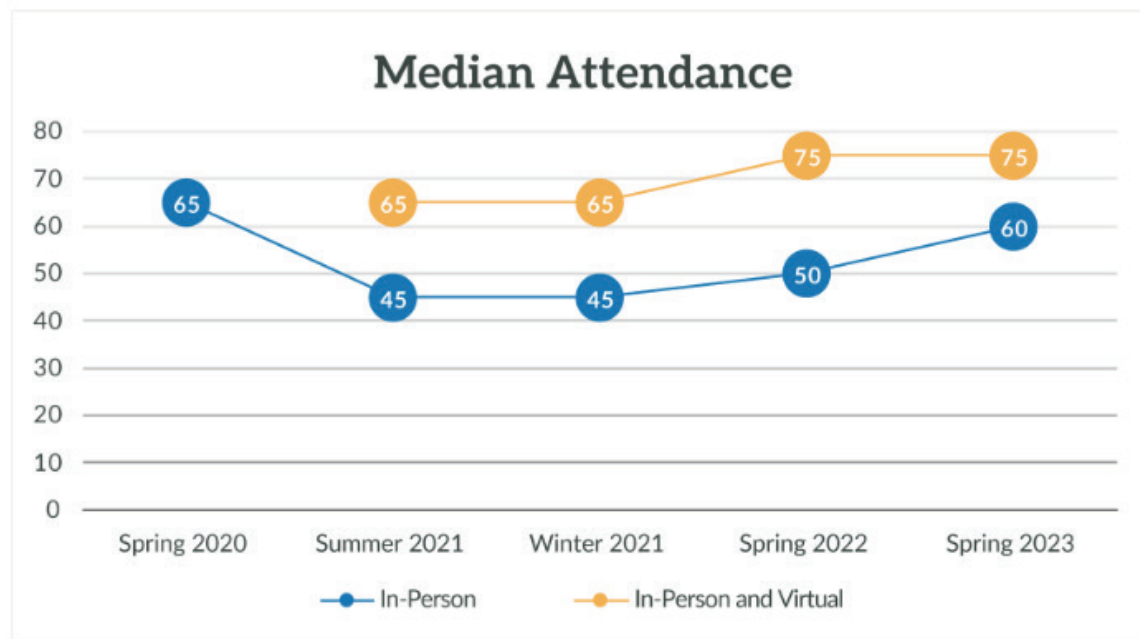
- **A study on clergy leaving their pulpits finds that they are low in number and that those who do leave do so less out of a loss of faith in God and more due to emotional problems and doubts.** The study, presented at the late-August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Philadelphia, which **RW** attended, was conducted by Landon Schnabel of Cornell University. Using data from the National Study of Religious Leadership (2018–2020), Schnabel found that 77 percent of the 1,600 respondents were “very satisfied” with their ministries. Very few (2 percent) often consider leaving the ministry, with 60 percent saying they never consider that option and 30 percent having only thought of leaving once. Although it has been claimed that rising atheism is a factor in clergy dissatisfaction and departures, very few such clergy were found in the survey. But it was found that many clergy (54 percent) have considered other religious-related work outside of the pastorate. Congregational pay and even politics were not significant factors in clergy leaving their churches, but women and younger clergy were more likely to leave. Overall, mental health problems from stress and doubt were the two largest factors in church departures.



Source: United Methodist Insight.

● **There are mixed signals regarding congregational recovery from the Covid pandemic, with signs of a rebound from early to mid-2023, along with challenges, such as ongoing attendance decline, according to a study by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.** As other studies have found, the study, which is the fourth wave of surveys that started in 2020, shows church attendance, income, and volunteering on the uptick while congregational conflicts are down. The new report, focusing only on Christian churches, found that while 50 percent of churches (both online and in-person) are down from their pre-pandemic attendance rates, 33 percent are now above where they were in attendance before Covid. Sixteen percent of attendees are new to church life since 2020. There has also been a “remarkable” increase in income in these churches since 2020, according to lead researcher Scott Thumma. The finding of a lower number of church conflicts might mean that those who were in conflict with their churches during church lockdowns and other controversies have left their congregations since then. But the survey finds that the pandemic did little to reverse the long-term decline and greying of many congregations, though the technology adopted during the pandemic is likely to remain a permanent part of congregational life.

(The Hartford study can be downloaded from: <https://covidreligionresearch.org>)



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

● **Although Christian nationalism has become a broad-brush term for conservative Christians seeking to shape the government according to their faith, a new study argues that the movement is more divided than the media and even scholars have portrayed it to be.** In an article appearing in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in August), Ruiqian Li and Paul Froese analyze two recent surveys, four waves of the Baylor Religion



Source: World Religion News.

Survey and the 2021 Pew American Trends Panel (ATP), and identify two strands of Christian nationalism: “religious traditionalism” and “Christian statism.” While both camps seek the Christianization of America, the religious traditionalists (RT) tend to reject the nativism, racial antipathy, and religious intolerance of the Christian statists (CS). The researchers argue that the white evangelicals who are strong supporters of Donald Trump more strongly intertwine ethnic and national identity with Christian identity, whereas religious traditionalists have “more inclusive, sympathetic, and positive sentiments toward a variety of national, ethnic, and religious groups.” RTs tend to be more patriotic, espousing a “color-blind” attitude toward different ethnic and racial groups, while CSs are low in national pride and exhibit exclusionary tendencies that tend to restrict the boundaries of American membership. While the researchers do not assign any number to these two strands, they conclude that Christian statism seems to be the emerging position; as white Christians lose their status and demographic strength, the goal of a color-blind Judeo-Christian and democratic nation where religions freely compete against each other is giving way to feeling embattled and seeking special protections and favoritism from the state.

- **While especially in recent years it has been assumed that evangelical clergy are more politically liberal than their congregants, a new analysis finds that the vast majority are either politically aligned or more conservative than the latter.** In the journal *Politics and Religion* (16), sociologists Joseph Roso and Mark Chaves analyze the National Survey of Religious Leaders, supplemented with the 2018 General Social Survey, and find that while the



Source: T4G.

contrast between a more liberal clergy and conservative membership still holds true overall, no such political gap exists between evangelical clergy and their members, even though many thought that was the case during the 2016 election. Roso and Chaves found that only small minorities of white clergy said they were more liberal than their members (12 percent) or reported voting for Hillary Clinton in 2016 (29 percent). As for black clergy, they were about as likely to be more conservative than their congregants as they were to be more liberal. Despite research showing a more conservative Catholic priesthood, Roso and Chaves found that the majority of Catholic clergy reported themselves to be more liberal than their parishioners.

(*Politics and Religion*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/politics-and-religion>)

- **Latin America is following other regions in witnessing the gradual rise of the non-affiliated (or “nones”), and the trend is closely related to people’s weaker ties to all social institutions, according to demographer Matt Blanton of the University of Texas.** Blanton, who presented a paper at the late-August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Philadelphia, which **RW** attended, based his analysis on the LAPOP survey (2016–2017 and 2018–2019), also known as the Americas Barometer. He found that the nones in Latin America have grown from 8 percent in 2014 to 14 percent in 2018–2019. The nones were found to be more connected to social media and global groups but showed less overall trust in and more alienation from institutions. The nones who were involved were part of social groups that were more leftist in makeup, although at the same time these individuals were less politically attached.



Atheist protestors (source: Chilean Atheist Society).

Blanton said that it is difficult to know whether social distrust and weak ties have led to the religious disaffiliation or whether it is the other way around.

- **Bucking the trend among Jews worldwide, South African Jews are moving toward stricter forms of Judaism rather than more secular expressions, a new study finds.** While Jews in South Africa are polarized between secular and religious ends of the spectrum as they are in Israel, the U.S., and the UK, these other communities have seen switching in secular directions. Analyzing the 2019 Jewish Community Survey, Nadia Beider and David Fachler find that only a slight majority of South African Jews have remained in the subgroup in which they were raised, with a quarter switching towards religion and just over a fifth away from it. “Patterns of switching within the South African Jewish community are all the more remarkable given that the community was already centered around the Traditional subgroup,” they write in the journal *Contemporary Jewry* (online in August). As to the reasons for this South African exception, the researchers note that such religious switching is much more common among the cohorts born in the 1960s and 1970s, who came of age when South Africa was undergoing marked turmoil leading up to the dismantling of apartheid in 1994. Religious switching among



Synagogue in Capetown (source: University of Cape Town).

non-Jewish groups in South Africa has also been more prevalent than in other parts of Africa, although the shift among Jews is much more marked. There is also a more homogenous Jewish community in South Africa (with mainly Lithuanian origins), with dense social networks (due to the insularity of Apartheid South Africa) that allow for the spread of new ideas. Within this mix, a number of charismatic rabbis capitalized on the situation and made “great headway in inducing more secular Jews to embrace a strict form of Orthodoxy.”

(*Contemporary Jewry*, <https://www.springer.com/journal/12397>)

- **An online survey of Iranians found an unusually large number of respondents claiming Zoroastrian identity, leading researchers to believe that such identification was more of a “performative act” and protest against the influence of political Islam in Iran than a genuine profession of faith.** Writing in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in August), Michael Stausberg, Ammar Maleki, and Pooyan Tamimi Arab report on the GAMAAN (Group for Measuring and Analyzing Attitudes in Iran) survey, which surveyed 50,000 respondents, 90 percent of whom lived in Iran. Eight percent claimed to be Zoroastrian—“many



Zoroastrian temple in Iran (source: Wikimedia Commons).

times the number of Zoroastrians” ever recorded in the country. Zoroastrianism is an ancient mystical religion that was once based in Iran but since the 18th century largely migrated to India, leaving only about 25,000 adherents in Iran. But Zoroastrianism has been hailed by Iranians as elevating individualism, rationality, and freedom over the strict communal demands of Shia Islam, even becoming a tourist attraction of national renown. Stausberg, Maleki and Arab argue that in 2020 and 2022 what they call “survey Zoroastrians” were actually disaffected Shia Muslims who were stating their aspiration that Iran return to Zoroastrianism and reject Islam.

A new spring for Basic Ecclesial Communities among Brazil’s Catholics?

After years of decline, Basic Ecclesial Communities are sensing that the time might be ripe for growth again thanks to support from Pope Francis, reports journalist Eduardo Campos Lima in *La Croix International* (July 28). Associated with Liberation Theology as a theoretical foundation, the Basic Ecclesial Communities (abbreviated as CEBs in Portuguese and Spanish) accordingly met with opposition from John Paul II and Benedict XVI, while some key liberation theology figures were silenced. Once powerful in Brazil and other Latin American countries, after experiencing strong growth in the 1970s the space that CEBs had found in parishes diminished. There were up to 50,000 CEBs in Brazil, and there may now be around 20,000 left. At their 15th Inter-ecclesial Meeting of more than 1,000 leaders of Brazilian CEBs in Rondonópolis, Mato Grosso state, “the need to bring more young Catholics to join them was a central element in the debates,” Campos Lima reports.



Source: Congregation of the Mission.

Celso Carias, a professor of theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and a longtime CEBs leader, thought that the CEBs would not soon be able to recover the relevance they once had and that there would be resistance against efforts to rebuild them in a more centralized and more clerical Brazilian church. At the same time, “we have a great ally in Pope Francis,” he said. The pope actually sent a video to the July gathering urging the CEB members “to keep working for an outgoing Church.” Moreover, 50 Brazilian bishops attended the gathering. One of them explained that “many people continue to prefer a closed Church, a Church that only looks to itself. We have many barriers to overcome.” Nevertheless, the mood at the assembly was clearly one of planning to rebuild the CEBs.

Churches find place in pluralistic and secularist Sweden

Sweden’s reputation as a leader in secularization trends still holds, though it seems less monolithic when looked at regionally, according to an article by Paul Glader on the website *Religion Unplugged* (August 11). The article focuses on evangelical and Pentecostal churches and the innovative methods they have adopted to reach secular Swedes, but also reports on the spread of a Swedish Bible Belt across the country, where megachurches are present. Glader writes that the Swedish Bible Belt is not only limited to historic areas such as Jönköping County but has also branched out “via Sjuhäradsbygden in southern Västergötland toward Gothenburg (Göteborg), and the Gothenburg archipelago has an offshoot to the west, south toward the Väckjö area, toward Skåne’s Örkellunga and Hässleholm.” While the whole of the Småland region is



Filadelfia church in Stockholm (© 2010 Haxpett | Wikimedia Commons).

often mistakenly assumed to be part of the Bible Belt, it is more like a set of “Bible buttons,” with pockets of evangelical faith interspersed with areas that have remained state-church dominated. Outside these “Bible buttons,” Muslim communities are growing quickly, while traditional free churches are showing signs of membership loss; the Pentecostal churches had a slight decrease of 546 members since 2017. The Catholic Church is actually the one growing the fastest in Sweden, followed by the Orthodox churches. The Catholic Church gained 7,285 members since 2017, with 126,286 total members in Sweden. The Macedonian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, and Romanian Orthodox churches all grew to total 32,455 members.

By contrast, the Church of Sweden had roughly 5.6 million members in 2021 but had declined by 365,301 members since 2017. Among Muslims, the United Islamic Societies nearly doubled from less than 15,000 members in 2017 to 30,000 members in 2021. Another Sunni Muslim community called the Islamic Cultural Union in Sweden grew from 10,755 members in 2017 to 18,557 members in 2021. The Islamic Shia Communities have grown to 36,774 members in 2021. Both free and Lutheran churches that engage with neighbors, young families, and seniors show growth. Journalist Inger Alestig said that it is quite normal for churches to have cafes open to the public and located in city centers where people pass by. They do not see those offerings as

particularly innovative. They noted that, just as in America, when free churches close in central urban areas their buildings are sometimes turned into hotels or homes. Alestig said some churches are also merging in parts of Sweden. In rural parts of Sweden, schools and shops might close but the local church often remains and “becomes the place where people can meet.” And in those parts of Sweden, “the church and the priest are central to peoples’ well-being, and so it becomes relevant in the life of society.” With regard to politics, observers are not finding that the populist and Christian nationalist parties, such as Sverigedemokraterna (the Swedish Democrats), are having a huge appeal among evangelicals, although the new party is trying to recruit evangelical voters and is “perhaps winning a few of them on culture war issues such as abortion, stronger national defense and limited immigration,” Jacob Rudenstrand of the Swedish Evangelical Alliance said.

(*Religion Unplugged*, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2023/8/3/churches-flourish-in-one-of-swedens-bible-belt-cities-by-caring-for-neighbors?>)

Soccer in Saudi Arabia also about religion

The recent soccer player-buying spree by Saudi Arabia also involves both geopolitical and religious dimensions, writes James M. Dorsey in his Substack newsletter *The Turbulent World*



Match scene of Lebanon vs Saudi Arabia (Asian Cup 2019) (© 2019 El Loko Foto | Wikimedia Commons).

(August 5). There is no doubt that salaries motivate high-profile players—some of them Muslim, but not all—to move to Saudi Arabia, but religious affinities with a country that is at the heart of Islam should not be ignored, especially as “European clubs have a mixed record of accommodating Muslim players’ religious needs, such as fasting during Ramadan and daily prayer times.” The ambition of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is to turn the Saudi Professional League into one of the world’s top five leagues, Dorsey remarks. This has to do not only with economic diversification but with efforts to support the Kingdom “in a competition for religious soft power in the Muslim world.” Saudi Arabia hopes to shape its image as “leader of the Muslim world and beacon of moderate, tolerant Islam,” Dorsey writes in another article (August 21).

Karim Zidan, an Egyptian-Canadian journalist interviewed by Dorsey in the August 29 issue of the newsletter, said that one should also be aware of the “bread and circus” aspect of the current sports investments by Saudi Arabia, which help to distract its youth and keep them “sedated in satisfaction.” Saudi Arabia had already made attempts to play the soccer card and to buy some top players from Brazil in 1978. But the current efforts are part of a much broader overhaul in the country. “Politics and sports, particularly soccer, are inseparable Siamese twins with domestic and geopolitical connotations, nowhere more so than in the Middle East,” Zidan said. Besides Saudi Arabia, Qatar has also been prominent in the area of sports, willing to pay huge amounts for acquiring famous soccer clubs.

(*The Turbulent World*, <https://jamesmdorsey.substack.com>)

Yoga flourishes in Syria, with regime’s blessing

In regime-controlled areas of war-torn Syria, there are now 620 centers where people can practice yoga and meditate for free, reports Petra Ramsauer in the newspaper *NZZ am Sonntag* (August 6). The International Day of Yoga on June 21 is now officially promoted in Syria and provides the opportunity for public yoga events. While there were already yoga centers in Syria since the early 2000s, many more have opened since the beginning of the war in 2011. Ramsauer writes that this is part of a wider strategy by the Syrian leadership to support its claims of wanting to build a secular and religiously tolerant country. Himself a member of the Alawite community (which makes up around 10 percent of the population), President Bashar al-Assad is eager to be seen as a protector of religious minorities, especially Christians—even if the war has led many of them to leave the country—also hoping that this can create goodwill toward his regime in the West. “As well as encouraging yoga, he has let evangelical Christians open churches in houses where converted Muslims can worship,” reports *The Economist* (July 13). There is another dimension of international relations involved, with the Indian Embassy supporting the creation of yoga centers as a low-cost way to strengthen relations with Syria. The yoga practitioners are given much latitude. The Syrian Sports Federation has a yoga committee and advocates its practice also as a way of healing the trauma of war and of dealing with the

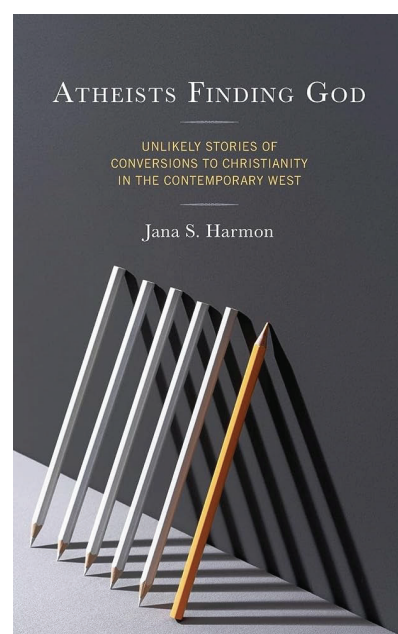


International Yoga Day in Damascus, 2017 (source: Prokerala).

economic crisis. Due to those circumstances, the interest expressed by Syrians in yoga (and in other spiritual paths) cannot merely be attributed to the regime’s initiatives. *The Economist* notes that similar trends can be observed among Syrian refugees.

Findings & Footnotes

■ Although recent research and media accounts have focused on the process of losing one’s Christian faith, following the growth of the unaffiliated, there is a countercurrent of new research looking at how atheists are becoming Christians. Of course, there have long been popular treatments of Christian conversions in the form of apologetic literature, but the new book *Atheists Finding God* (Lexington Books, \$100) by Jana Harmon represents a more scholarly approach to this subject. This is not to say that Harmon’s book pretends to be disinterested or objective; her own evangelical faith shapes her analysis, as she views the conversion accounts she studies as “transcendent experiences” leading interviewees to the



truth of Christianity. That said, Harmon finds interesting patterns among the 50 ex-atheists she interviews, including the finding that two-thirds of them were certain about their atheism, convinced they would never abandon that position. It was only after some catalyst “disrupted the status quo” and caused dissatisfaction that they were led to question their own atheism or begin investigating Christianity. As to how they became atheists, most cited difficult experiences in life that they could not square with a just and good deity. Many developed intellectual objections to God after such experiences. About one-fourth of the interviewees had some exposure to nominal Christianity, while 18 percent attended church regularly, and only 10 percent expressed some form of belief in childhood or adolescence. The book’s concluding section studies how the narratives about these ex-atheists’ lives have changed. Many of them held on to skeptical beliefs about Christianity even after having converted, but gradually most saw themselves as apologists for the rationality of evangelical beliefs.