

Latter-day Saints' literary and business cultures retain hold amid challenges

A significant segment of young-adult (YA) fiction is written by Mormon writers, although the growth of LGBTQ themes within the genre is causing strain among these authors and their readers, reports the *New York Times* (September 3). Although it is difficult to quantify, the article by Abby Aguirre reports that “Latter-day Saints are some of the most enthusiastic readers of Y.A. and genre fiction in the country. And many become fiction writers themselves, aided by a tight network of writing programs, conferences, workshops and publishers in the Latter-day Saints community.” The LDS’s Brigham Young University (BYU) and its writing classes are an important incubator of YA authors and books. Aguirre adds that the LDS-infused culture of Utah “fosters a workaday approach to fiction writing, akin to that of the songwriting rooms of Nashville, and it has produced some juggernauts.” She cites best-selling “Twilight” series author Stephenie Meyer, but also the sci-fi and fantasy author Brandon Sanderson (sci-fi and fantasy being another genre with a large proportion of Mormon writers), Ally Condie, author of the “Matched” trilogy, and Shannon Hale, author of the “Princess Academy” series. Sanderson, who also teaches at BYU and runs his own publishing company, attributes the vital fiction publishing scene among Mormons to the emphasis LDS families place on reading. Many LDS people grow up with their parents reading them passages of scripture. But the history of Mormon fiction writing is long. A “home literature” movement was spurred in the 1880s when church leaders urged members to write their own fiction in the face of the growing popularity of novels.

While the strong fantasy element in these works may seem contradictory to outsiders, imagination and romance are not incongruous with the theological speculation and faith lives of many LDS believers, according to authors interviewed in the article. They also said that a key reason Latter-day Saints members tend to write for teenagers and children is a church-inspired distaste for the explicit material that is commonly found in adult fiction. Although the LDS church has no official policy regarding the reading or writing of fiction, members tend to prefer writing “clean” books. But the LDS and Utah’s writing and reading culture have felt the reverberations as YA literature has become more explicit on sex and violence as well as gender

identity. LDS-raised writers are struggling with the greater openness of LDS and ex-LDS young adults on gender and sexual issues, with surveys finding that LGBTQ issues are one factor in youth leaving the church. Aguirre notes that six of the authors contacted for the *Times* article responded that they were no longer active in the church, largely because they dissented from the church's positions on sexual and gender issues. Writing teachers have also resigned from BYU because of clashes over teaching and writing on these issues, though most of the authors said that self-censorship is more common to avoid objections from conservative readers. Prominent book outlets in Utah like Deseret Books have refused to carry some of these books addressing LGBTQ issues in a progressive way.

Meanwhile, disproportionate LDS influence can also be seen in the startup culture of multilevel marketing companies (MLMs), according to

Deborah Whitehead in the *Mormon Studies Review* (Vol. 10, 2023). The LDS involvement has been portrayed in the 2021 Amazon Prime series *LuLaRich*, which chronicled the meteoric rise and fall of the company LuLaRoe, a billion-dollar women's clothing enterprise that was founded in 2013 by DeAnne and Mark Stidham. The show depicted the couple's strong Mormon faith and attributed much of their success to the convergence of several factors related to LDS culture. Whitehead notes that Utah is the world capital of MLMs and direct sales companies, which represent the second largest industry in the state, generating \$8.5 billion in annual revenue. She adds that many factors relating to the LDS can explain Mormons' predominance in MLMs, especially the strong connections formed in their faith communities and the language skills of their members. The many returned missionaries in the state (a year of missionary service being required of active members) represent a supply of foreign language speakers that can easily create international sales forces.



Source: Teal Swan.

But more importantly it is the faith's evangelistic drive, calling members to actively recruit new members and share their "testimony," that translates into MLMs' method of person-to-person sales among one's neighbors and friends. The LDS's positive attitude to social media, encouraging members to use the medium to spread their faith, has given them a facility with blogging (especially among women and mothers) that can be channeled toward work in MLMs. The prominence of women as customers and salespeople in MLMs also lends itself to the value of motherhood and the need for flexible work among LDS women. Ultimately, the LDS emphasis on self-reliance complements the entrepreneurial nature of MLMs while adding a sense of mission and service to the community. But Whitehead reports that this same drive for prosperity has also led to failure and fraud in MLMs, as shown in the higher rate of distributors losing rather than making money and in the multiple lawsuits against LuLaRoe alleging that it made false promises and engaged in a pyramid scheme.

(*Mormon Studies Review*, <https://www.press.uillinois.edu/journals/?id=msr>)

Denominational conventions at an end?

Annual denominational gatherings may continue, but many of the trappings of annual conventions seem to have outlived their purposes, according to the *Forum Letter* (September), an independent Lutheran newsletter. Peter Speckhard writes about the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's (LCMS) recent convention in Milwaukee but suggests that his portrayal of the end of an era may apply to denominational conventions in general. Denominational conventions were vital for meeting up with key people, gatherings that "accomplished more than months of back-and-forth in the mail could accomplish," Speckhard writes. "A visit to a booth of this or that parachurch ministry or publisher was the best way to get current information, see new products, and make contacts. The thousands of private, pre-convention conversations that took place all over the country about the convention's agenda congealed into clear positions and directions for the elections and floor votes...The whole thing mattered theologically, organizationally, socially, and personally." Today, the LCMS convention is an "attempted throwback to a time when conventions mattered, but it doesn't quite pull it off. It offers all the fun of airports and Robert's Rules of Order without any of the suspense of wondering how the votes will turn out."

According to Speckhard, "now the election of the synod president is done online and announced long before the convention. Everything that may be in a booth is already on a website. Every book for sale is probably already on Amazon, and it is probably cheaper there. Everyone's personal news was already shared online somewhere. And all the discussion of the issues on the docket had been happening in real time online for months, arriving at the convention pre-congealed. Nobody needs to listen to the person at the microphone to know the arguments pro and con, and none of the votes on anything except minor administrative posts are close." The large convention worship services, as well as the presentations and greetings, can still tap into



Source: For Such A Time As This (LCMS).

powerful emotions, as did the moving appearance of a bishop from Ukraine at the LCMS event. But Speckhard writes that “just as political conventions used to choose candidates but now are carefully orchestrated pep rallies for the already chosen candidates, so church conventions, at least in the LCMS (and, I suspect, in many denominations), rarely risk anything going off script. This lends a homogenized blandness to the proceedings, like the taste and texture of individually wrapped processed cheese.” Speckhard concludes that while the LCMS “will never be without drama...if the next convention is anything like this last one, it won’t be where the drama plays out. Twenty-first century drama, it seems, no longer fits in the oversized box of the convention hall.”

(*Forum Letter*, <https://www.alpb.org/>)

Jewish chaplaincy provides new settings and roles for Judaism

Just as Christian chaplains are filling in for the roles that traditional congregations and clergy used to play, a new breed of Jewish chaplains is meeting spiritual needs that synagogues once catered to, write Bethamie Horowitz, Wendy Cadge, and Joseph Weisberg in *Contemporary Jewry* (online in September). The researchers also find that Jewish chaplains are shifting the concept of chaplaincy and the training for these positions away from the Protestant norms and expectations that once shaped the chaplaincy. Horowitz, Cadge, and Weisberg note that Jewish



Air Force Jewish Chaplain (Capt.) Sarah Schechter leads Jewish Services, wearing traditional Jewish prayer shawl (tallit), at 332 AEW Jt. Base Balad, Iraq (source: Senior Airman Elisabeth Rissmiller, Wikipedia).

chaplains were already on the scene as American Jews entered such domains as the military, prisons, and hospitals, where Christian norms predominated. Constituting what they call the “first field-wide treatment of American Jewish chaplains,” their research is based on 31 in-depth interviews with Jewish chaplains, as well as a survey. Horowitz, Cadge, and Weisberg estimate that there are approximately 1,000 Jewish chaplains in the U.S., working in healthcare, the military, elder care, prisons, universities, and as community chaplains. In a convenience (rather than random sample) survey that the researchers conducted among 140 chaplains, they found that the majority of respondents worked in healthcare, followed by elder care, the community, prisons, and the military. The longer history of Jewish chaplains working in elder care (mainly among fellow Jews) and the longer existence of Jewish nursing homes make them leaders in this field among other chaplains. The survey also found that about half of the respondents worked full-time as chaplains, with three-quarters of them being ordained. It is particularly the younger Jewish chaplains who receive credentials from clinical pastoral education (CPE) and board certification (BCC).

Jewish chaplains have helped transform the “chaplaincy to include not only serving their co-religionists but also attending to the spiritual-religious-existential needs of all individuals.” In the

last two decades, the Jewish chaplaincy has moved toward professionalizing; nearly all of the 11 major Jewish seminaries require some form of grounding in the chaplaincy for their rabbinical students. Yet, as for all chaplains, there exists a gap between what future chaplains learn in school and what they will be required to do on the ground. The challenges for Jewish chaplains are many, mostly centering around reaching increasingly disaffiliated American Jews and negotiating the differences between the Jewish denominations (particularly with regard to the more exclusive Orthodox groups). The arrangements and services of Jewish chaplains seem to be moving in an orthodox direction; the Jewish Welfare Board in cooperation with its denominational partners require Jewish chaplains to serve kosher food at all events and to refrain from conducting interfaith marriages and same-sex marriages—a point of contention for Conservative and Reform branches, which allow the latter. Horowitz, Cadge, and Weisberg conclude that increasing Jewish involvement in the chaplaincy with its concern for well-being has already contributed an emotional component to rabbinic work “that has not typically been included in framing Jewish leadership. Where do chaplains and spiritual caregivers fit within conceptions of religious life and the nature of rabbinical and other leadership? One can see echoes between today’s chaplains and Hasidic models of...rabbinic caring.”

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

CURRENT RESEARCH

- **A new survey finds that college students with a religious identity report significantly higher rates of heterosexuality than their atheist, agnostic and non-affiliated counterparts.** On the website *Get Religion* (September 20), political scientist Ryan Burge analyzes new data from FIRE (the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression), a free speech organization, which runs an annual survey of college students that often features question on religious beliefs, but this year included questions on sexual orientation and gender identity. While recent surveys have found a sharp growth of young adults—often college students at elite universities—identifying as LGBTQ, the FIRE study found that more than two thirds of its sample of 18-to-25-year-old college students identified as a man or woman and indicated that they were straight in terms of sexual orientation. The next largest category was man/woman and “something else” in terms of sexual orientation. About 1 in 10 were bisexual men/women and 1 in 20 said that they were men/women and were gay/lesbian.

The religious group with the highest proportion of heterosexuals was Muslims (85 percent), followed closely by Protestants, Catholics, “Just Christians,” and Hindus. Burge was surprised that only 78 percent of Latter-day Saints in college said that they were straight—7 points lower than Protestants. Additionally, 13 percent of LDS students said that they fell into the “something else” camp. The groups that were the least likely to say that they were heterosexual were atheists, at 55 percent, and agnostics, at 53 percent; those who said that they were “nothing in particular” were only at 62 percent. As for transgender issues, just 1 in 100 Christians said that they were not



Source: Rawpixel.

a man or a woman, and even more secular and liberal groups including atheists and agnostics identified largely as man/woman (97 percent of each group).

(*Get Religion*, <https://www.getreligion.org/getreligion/2023/9/19/gender-sexual-orientation-and-religion-among-american-college-students>)

- **A new study finds that there has been a significant undercounting of congregations in three diverse areas of the U.S., suggesting a wider pattern of stability and growth in American religion rather than decline.** Writing in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in September), J. Gordon Melton, Steven Foertsch and Todd Ferguson analyzed the 2010 U.S. Religious Census (Religious Congregations and Membership Survey or RCMS) and found that its county-by-county congregational counts have underreported congregations by as much as 25 percent, missing new and emerging religious movements and denominations as well as ethnic congregations. Melton, Foertsch, and Ferguson found these undercounts in McClennan County, Texas, Whatcom County, Washington, and Richmond, Virginia (for which there were an additional 100 unverified congregations that were not included because of funding issues). In McClennan County, encompassing the city of Waco, the researchers found that 140 congregations (26.6 percent of the congregations) were not included in the RCMS data. The authors tested their McClennan County findings with the more recent (2020) RCMS and again found a large undercount, though the percentage of undercounted churches dropped to 23.3.



Source: [BoxCast](#).

There was also an increase in the number of congregations in the RCMS from 2010 to 2020, 4.2 percent, with a population growth of 5.3 percent. “This implies that the congregations we are finding in our survey are likely uncaptured because they are the product of migration. A natural birthrate increase would not yield immediate affiliation and establishment of additional religious congregations within a 10-year time period,” the authors observe. Thus these uncaptured churches are those that the RCMS would have difficulty collecting data on—Latino and other ethnic churches and non-denominational and megachurch plants. Melton, Foertsch, and Ferguson conclude that the fact that more than 23 percent of the congregations in these areas were not reported in the RCMS data suggests that religious demographers are missing a “new invisible community” of non-denominational and independent congregations elsewhere. This is consistent “with what is known about religious life in America as a whole—that both total church/religious membership and the number of denominational/religious bodies has been on a 200-year growth trajectory that continues to the present.”

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

- **Reporting on the results of his research on Anishinabe (Algonquin) Jehovah’s Witnesses from Kitigan Zibi (Outaouais, Quebec), Arnaud Simard-Emond argues that more attention should be given to the strong but understudied presence of Jehovah’s Witnesses among indigenous communities across Canada and the United States.** Writing in the current issue of the journal *Social Compass* (June), he notes that conversion to Catholicism among the Algonquins from the 19th century was primarily due to the work of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Most Anishinabe would see the Oblates as benevolent figures, but the perception started to change in the 1940s and 1950s, especially in relation to the painful experiences of physical and psychological violence endured by youth attending residential schools run by clergy. Resentment grew in Kitigan Zibi. The woman who would become the first



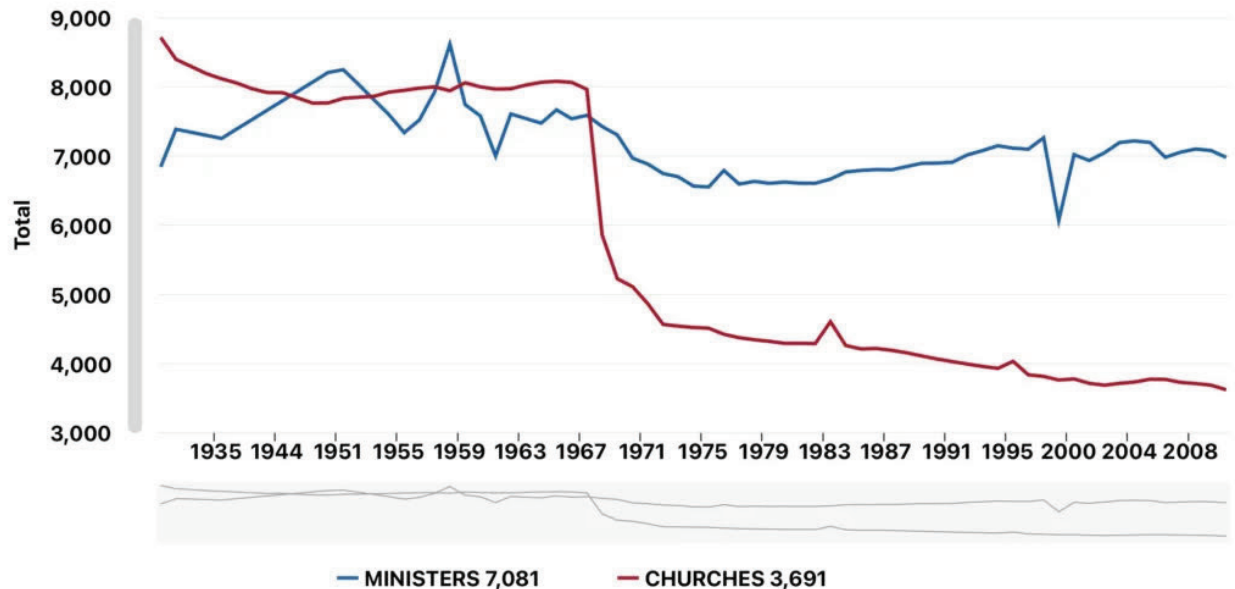
Jehovah's Witnesses at the "Gateway to Nations" event in June 2015 (source: Jehovah's Witnesses).

local convert to the Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) already showed opposition to the missionaries at that time. She converted after being in touch with JW "publishers," who started visiting from time to time for two to three weeks from the 1940s, and she was followed by several other local people in the 1950s. At that time, the Witnesses became the only available alternative to Catholicism in Kitigan Zibi—others would follow later (like Pentecostalism in the 1970s). Beside tensions with missionaries, factors like economic changes and the disruption of traditional territories created conditions favorable for conversion to Jehovahism in the 1950s. Currently, there are no new conversions in Kitigan Zibi, but Witnesses continue to exist in this milieu mostly through intergenerational transmission of the faith, leading some young people to embrace the beliefs taught by their parents.

The original converts in Kitigan Zibi are no longer alive, a fact that leads Simard-Emond to urge Canadian and American scholars not to lose time in exploring the significant presence of Witnesses in indigenous communities. In the United States, there are a number of Jehovah's Witnesses among Navajos, said to have been the first native nation to have established a congregation using their own language. In Canada, there have been Witnesses in aboriginal communities at least from the 1930s in British Columbia. But research on the JWs among indigenous people remains extremely scarce.

(*Social Compass*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/SCP>)

● **Considered one of the original yet often overlooked of the "seven sisters" of mainline Protestantism, the Disciples of Christ (or Christian Church) has seen serious declines in its membership, attendance, and total number of congregations exacerbated by Covid. Citing**



Source: National Council of Churches' Historic Archive CD and print editions of the Council's Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.

recent statistics from ALEX, a subscription-based database for the Disciples of Christ, *Juicy Ecumenism* (September 14), the blog of the conservative Institute on Religion and Democracy, reports that the church's "ability to minister as a denomination of nationwide reach is rapidly fading." As with other mainline Protestant churches, the denomination reached its pinnacle approaching two million members in the mid-1960s. By 1993, that number had halved, and was again halved by the early 2010s. By 2019, the Disciples were down to 350,618 members and an average attendance of 126,217. Covid restrictions intensified the decline, with the denomination reporting 281,348 members and an attendance of 97,402 in 2021, which dropped to 277,864 and attendance of 89,894 in 2022. While many denominations reported some attendance rebound in 2022 after 2020–21 closures, the Disciples experienced a 21 percent drop in membership from 2019 to 2022. Congregations have also declined from more than 8,000 to 3,624. Ministers have meanwhile hovered around 7,000 since the early 1970s.

(*Juicy Ecumenism*, https://juicyecumenism.com/2023/09/14/dc-mainline/?fbclid=IwAR1ocyGMOir77Q5b-4FoJzIPSf4pqNuhcVITfkh9Hx_nuaeJOYxacV1LNc)

• **A new study finds that social movements that are built on alliances between secular and religious groups and actors are associated with greater strategic capacity and an increased ability to generate media attention, gain access to high-level political officials, address issues at the state and national levels, and gain a reputation for being politically effective.** In their study appearing in the journal *Mobilization* (28:3), sociologists Richard L. Wood, Brad R. Fulton, and Rebecca Sager analyze data from the National Study of Community Organizing Organizations to evaluate the political efficacy of religious-secular alliances in social movements, studying a total of 178 of the 189 such organizations in the U.S. In comparing

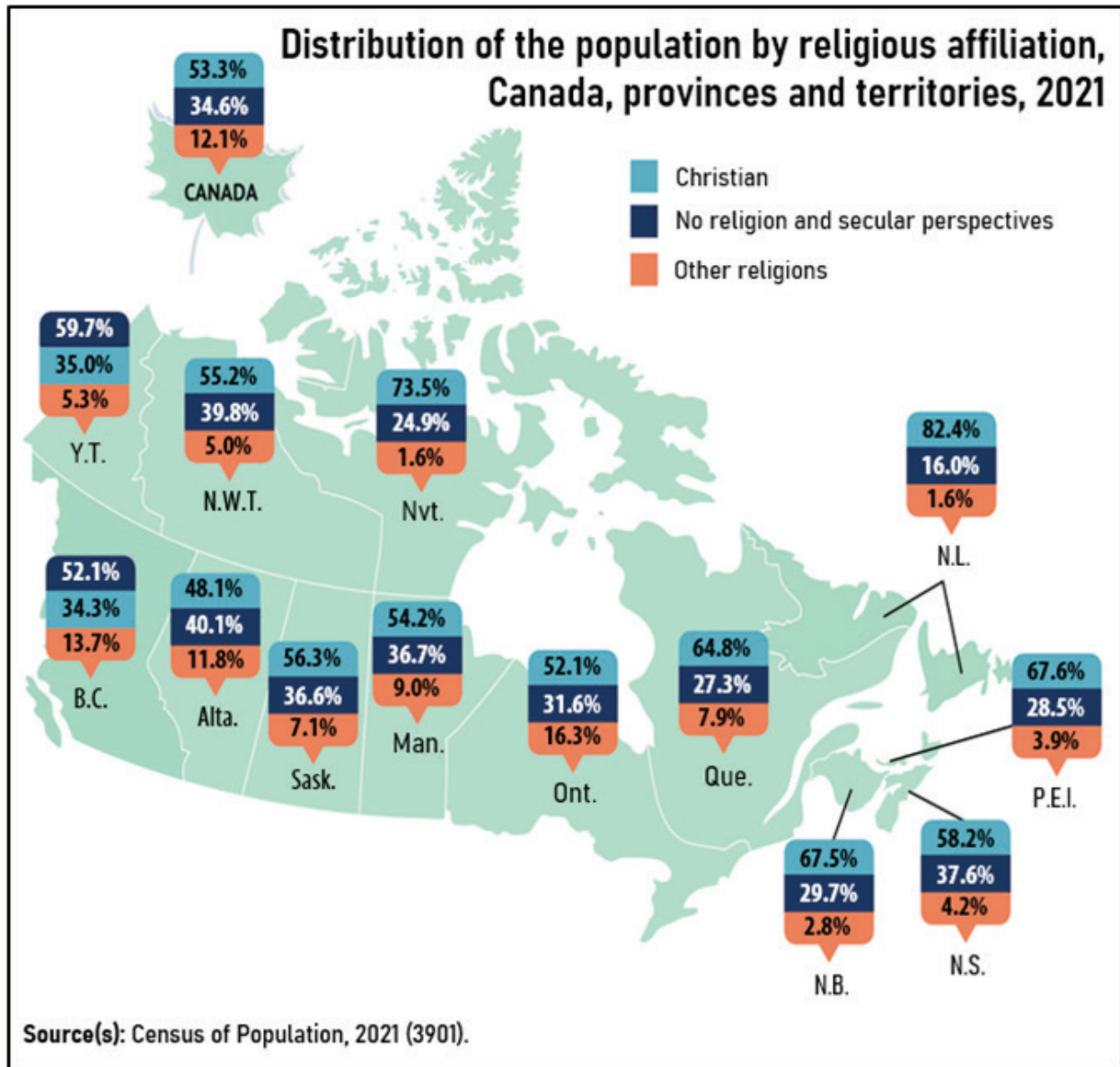


Source: Michigan Publishing (University of Michigan).

organizations with secular-religious alliances against those without such partnerships, the researchers find that the former groups have a complementary relationship that improves their efficacy. Because secular and religious organizations are distinct and do not overlap with each other in who and how they go about community organizing, they do not compete and can therefore learn from each other, allowing for productive alliances. Such resource sharing allows these alliances to better address issues affecting poor communities at the state level. In this complementary relationship, the religious organizations profit from the electoral skills that the secular groups offer, while introducing new approaches to the “moral framing of political issues.” Wood, Fulton, and Sager add that in more religiously influenced settings, such as in the South, religious organizations might also bring electoral skills to the table. However, the authors also found that these alliances were associated with lower mobilizing capacity, suggesting that there is a trade-off in such partnerships.

(*Mobilization*, <https://mobilization.sdsu.edu/>)

- **The non-affiliated, or nones, make up an increasing share of Canada’s population, but there are different kinds of nones in the various Canadian provinces and not all of them share the same secular outlook, writes Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme in the journal *Studies in Religion* (52:3).** Religious nones are one of the fastest growing demographics in Canada; according to one survey by Statistics Canada, 47 percent of millennials between the ages of 15 and 34 say they have no religion, compared with 33 percent for members of Generation X.



While the debate continues about whether this means a loss of institutional belonging among nones or a sign of ongoing secularization (or both), Wilkins-Laflamme focuses on how Canadian nones are different according to the regions and provinces of Canada they live in, using data from the 2019 Millennial Trends Survey to understand this regional variation. She finds that British Columbia respondents are least likely to have received a religious upbringing, adding that British Columbians also show higher rates of being “spiritual but not religious” and are more likely to discuss religion and spirituality with friends.

Going to the far east of the country, in Atlantic Canada (such as New Brunswick and Newfoundland) organized Christianity is still the norm and nones experience more stigma in disaffiliating, but many still retain some beliefs and some pray occasionally. In the western prairie provinces (such as Alberta and Manitoba), there are also remnants of belief and practice,

but there is also a higher rate of agnosticism among nones there. In Ontario, nones have a higher rate of uncertainty and disinterest when it comes to belief systems and worldviews and have the highest rate of infrequent attendance at religious services. Quebec, in contrast, has the highest rate of polarization of nones in Canada between more anti-religious atheists and those who practice “many self-identified spiritual practices.” Wilkins-Laflamme concludes that the different positions that Canadian nones take toward spirituality and religion complicates the picture of a widespread movement toward secularism in the country.

(*Studies in Religion*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sir>)

- **The Christian Brethren, an evangelical body with roots in Britain and Europe, has become a global force, with a successful ministry to children, according to the newsletter *Future First* (October).** The Brethren, who are related to the Plymouth Brethren, though less separatist and more open to cooperating with other Christians, is known for its role in developing premillennial teachings on the second coming of Christ and for its absence of clergy. The newsletter cites statistics collected prior to the quadrennial international gathering of Christian



Christian Brethren Assembly in Tamil Nadu, India (source: [JustDial](#)).

Brethren, showing a global attendance of 3.6 million people across 40,000 churches or assemblies (those gatherings not yet considered churches are called “preaching points”). Although the churches have an average attendance of 57 adults, they have an impressive average of 32 children. That average is three times the number in the UK and is mainly the result of the Brethren’s presence in Africa, where many churches have more children than adults. Like other churches, the most growth for the Brethren is found in Africa and Asia, with rapid expansion in the latter region, doubling their attendance from 155,000 in 2015 to 300,000 by 2022. Although the Brethren lack clergy, they rely on “workers” as leaders, about four-fifths of whom are full-time. The last three years have seen the numbers of workers increase from 14,200 in 2019 to 16,500 in 2022, an average annual increase of 5 percent. Three-quarters of the workers serve in either Asia or Africa, which may be a contributing factor in the attendance growth in these continents.

(*Future First*, www.brierleyconsultancy.com)

Dealing with the Soviet past and democracy in the Russian Orthodox Church

Besides ambiguities in the Russian Orthodox assessment of the Soviet regime, even its rejection of the Soviet past has rarely translated into an engagement with a democratic agenda, writes Alexander Agadjanian (Yerevan State University, Armenia) in the current issue of the *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* (5:2, dated 2022, but just published). Agadjanian starts by discussing the veneration of the New Martyrs (martyrs and confessors who suffered under the Soviet regime). After the fall of the communist regime, the Moscow Patriarchate followed the émigré Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) in canonizing modern martyrs, about 1,800 of them at this point. Despite expectations and efforts by the Patriarchate, with the exception of the widespread veneration of the last Tsar and his family, the cult of the New Martyrs has not developed deeply and “not acquired a really central role in the Church.” Agadjanian joins some other scholars in suggesting that one reason is an unclear perception of how the Soviet past “might be used, unused, or misused.” The church shares a convoluted memory of that past with Russian society as a whole.

There had been strong democratic aspirations in the church and in society in general in the 1990s, but “the democratic discourse was strongly compromised by general economic instability.” Over the following decades, antidemocratic trends increased, and the understanding of the Soviet legacy was transformed in church circles. When Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) called Stalin a “monster” in 2009, he received both support and criticism, a response that Agadjanian remarks would never have occurred in the 1990s. He explains that, while of course the Soviet anti-church terror is acknowledged, “state violence, however terrible, seems to be reinterpreted in terms of cosmic divine economy, as performing what we can call ‘fertile



Source: Kremlin.ru, 2007 (Wkimedia, Creative Commons).

sacrifice’ that God admitted for higher purposes.” There is also the “idea of collective reconciliation, with patriotic overtones.”

In Russia, where there is an emphasis on the nation’s continuity with pre-communist “historical Russia,” the issue is how to integrate aspects of the Soviet past. The “Great Patriotic War” (the fight against Nazi Germany during WWII) remains a key event, seen as a victory of Russia and not of communism. A reappraisal of the Soviet past has emerged, with a continuity myth weaving “the Soviet period into the millennial historical fabric.” While well aware of anti-Christian repressions, there is an Orthodox discourse tending “to evade a clear rejection of the Soviet past as a whole.” True, one can find a number of individual voices—for instance on online forums—rejecting the Soviet past as completely incompatible with Christian values, but this does not mean that democratic values are seen as the best alternative. The communist terror is condemned by the church, but the Soviet period “is recoded into the image of a conservative order” overcoming the initial revolutionary chaos. On the other hand, Agadjanian writes, liberal democratic values never receive religious legitimation. He concludes that “Christian democratic discourse has been traditionally underdeveloped within the Russian Orthodox language game.”

(*Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies*, <https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/journal-orthodox-christian-studies>)

Ukrainian Muslims feeling destruction and rifts from the war

With the war impacting all religious groups in the country, it has also affected Ukrainian Muslims, who have responded with humanitarian initiatives, the development of the military chaplaincy, and calls for help to foreign Islamic organizations, writes Oleg Yarosh (National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine) in *Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West* (September). Before the war, there was an estimated population of more than 500,000 Muslims in Ukraine (Donbass and Crimea included), making up around 1.3 percent of the population. More than half of them resided in Crimea alone, since the most important part of the Muslim population is made of Crimean Tatars; the other largest groups of Ukrainian Muslims are Azeris and Volga Tatars. Ukrainian Islam encompasses a variety of groups and orientations, and besides ethnic groups there are local branches of transnational Islamic organizations: there is Al-Ahbash, for example, which started in Lebanon, while the Council of Ukrainian Muslims (Arraid) is associated with the Council of European Muslims (previously known as the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe, with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood).

After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, some 20,000 to 35,000 Crimean Tatars moved to other areas of Ukraine, some of them being members of Salafi groups or Hizb ut-Tahrir afraid of being persecuted. This led to a spread of Salafism in other areas of Ukraine. On the other hand, a number of Muslim organizations signed in 2016 a "Charter of Muslims of Ukraine" promoting the participation of Muslims in Ukrainian society and politics. In reaction to some criticism



Muslims in Ukraine celebrates Eid al-Fitr in shadow of war, May 2022 (source: Anadolu Ajansi).

alleging that the charter's authors had deviated from Islamic tradition, it was followed by a "Social Concept of Muslims of Ukraine" that explained the Islamic roots of their approach. According to Yarosh, this contributed to a positive dynamic among Ukrainian Muslims before the war. The war has massively impacted the eastern and southern areas of Ukraine, where a majority of Ukrainian Muslims used to live. Eight mosques and Islamic centers have already been destroyed. There are 2,000 to 3,000 Muslim soldiers in the Ukrainian armed forces, and there are battalions of foreign Muslim volunteers from the Caucasus and from Turkey. Established in 2014, the Muslim chaplaincy in the Ukrainian armed forces has developed since the war started. Ukrainian Muslim leaders have condemned Russia's invasion, while Russian Muslim leaders support it. Ukrainian Muslim leaders have also called on Russian Muslim minorities to resist the Moscow regime. On the other hand, in the territories occupied by Russia, Russian Muslim organizations have been expanding their control through newly founded local Islamic structures. The war is thus leading to divisions between Russian and Ukrainian Muslims.

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

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

1) This summer, the film *Sound of Freedom* found both a worldwide audience and a place in the culture wars because of its religious and political associations. At the box office, the movie actually beat the supposed summer blockbusters, the final farewell to the "Indiana Jones" character and another installment of the "Mission Impossible" series, earning about \$190 million in the domestic market. But it



quickly found a special place among evangelical Christians and conservative Catholics. *Sound of Freedom* is a classic action-thriller about a disillusioned American special agent who quits his job at the Department of Homeland Security and masterminds a rogue operation to smash an international child sex-trafficking ring. But it became an “outsider” kind of movie because its main character is a devout Roman Catholic (even though there is only one scene where this becomes obvious, when he gives his St. Timothy medallion to one of the at-risk kids) and because of the faith-based focus of its distribution company, Angel Studios.

The fact that the film’s star, Jim Caviezel, who famously played Jesus Christ in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, had been making some sympathetic statements in press events on QAnon themes that went beyond the very real issue of child sex-trafficking (statements involving Hillary Clinton, for instance) was enough to have the movie labeled as “That QAnon Movie” by Hollywood critics. One of the film’s screenwriters, Rod Barr, argues that the character and plot of the movie are from real life and that if Caviezel and Angel Studios were replaced by a more mainstream actor and distribution company the film would not be controversial at all. The Catholic element is not unusual in films in the recent past. While Barr had denied that *Sound of Freedom* is a “faith-based” movie (a term used in Hollywood to mean Christian), he has since embraced the label, saying, “Let’s make faith part of our cultural discussion.” (Source: *Commentary*, September)

2) Without a large membership, **Secular Sabbath**, a new-style spiritual “club,” has received considerable publicity, probably due to the significant number of celebrities it has drawn (as well as their children). The members-only club hosts bimonthly events, usually in Los Angeles but also in far-flung places like Iceland, Mexico and, at the end of the year, Antarctica. The community’s 32-year-old founder, Genevieve Medow-Jenkins, says that the group is a continuation of Esalen, the holistic spiritual retreat in California where she spent her youth. She became disenchanted by the commercialization and high costs of Esalen and since 2016 has been leading spiritual retreats and “pop-up” spiritual experiences at spas, private homes, and the popular desert town of Joshua Tree, Calif. For a \$180 annual membership, club members can engage in breathwork, cacao ceremonies, and “soundbaths.” Medow-Jenkins sees the club as an alternative to established religions, hoping to draw the growing number of religiously non-affiliated to such an informal center of spiritual practices and teachings. The club is distinctive for its lack of rules, not even holding its events on the



Secular Sabbath gathering (source: Secular Sabbath).

traditional Jewish Sabbath (Medow-Jenkins has a background in Judaism but disaffiliated because of what she viewed as its judgmental attitudes). Members speak of the “cafeteria approach” of Secular Sabbath, where they are free to adopt a spiritual practice that suits them. Medow-Jenkins says the club has a “couple hundred of its members,” but has received a good deal of publicity on such social media sites as Instagram. (Source: *The Free Press*, September 25)

3) The village of **Kutba Bamaniya**, among others in the Punjab region of India, has been experiencing a revival of mosque building and rehabilitation in recent years by a unique coalition of Hindus and Sikhs. In a region that is 57.7 percent Sikh, 38.5 percent Hindu, and less than 2 percent Muslim, the villagers of Kutba Bamaniya, led by Sikh leader **Buta Singh**, have embarked on a mission to not only restore their ancient mosque’s physical structure but also preserve the legacy it represents. The mosque has become a beacon of unity in a region that experienced the destruction of mosques and other religious structures during the partition of India in 1947 and a significant drop in the Muslim population (from over 40 percent at the time of India’s independence to less than 2 percent today). Efforts to restore religious sites damaged nearly seven decades ago have been ongoing in the area. While Muslims in the village had migrated to Pakistan during the partition, a few families stayed behind, making the decision to restore the mosque not only an act of rebuilding but a gesture to reclaim a shared history and reaffirm unity.

“The mosque’s construction was a collaborative endeavor, reflecting the spirit of all communities involved,” Singh says. “We urge the people of Punjab and India to emulate our communal harmony.”



Source: Paderborner 'SJ' Blog.

Regrettably, we haven't received government support. The creation of both the gurdwara and the mosque was solely through our collective efforts." Over 165 mosques have been restored in recent years. The local communities residing near damaged religious places have often taken it upon themselves to restore and maintain these sites, bringing together Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and other religious groups to build and preserve a shared heritage. Interfaith groups have likewise come together to restore and maintain religious places. **(Source: *Religion Unplugged*, September 18)**