

### **Religion a growing threat or enduring asset for democracy?**

The largely affirmative response to the classic question of whether religion is good for democracy seems to have become more qualified over the last decade, articles in the latest issue of the *Journal of Democracy* (October) show. In recent years, scholars studying democracies have sounded the alarm about a “democratic recession” in the face of such challenges as populism, the shrinking of civil liberties, and growing distrust in traditional forms of political leadership. Nilay Saiya of Nanyang Technological University in Singapore cites the rise of “theocratic democracy” as one factor in this democratic recession. He defines theocratic democracy as when dominant religious communities throw their support behind authoritarian political elites who, in turn, exploit religion to reinforce their rule, restricting political rights and quashing alternative sources of authority. In studying 25 of the most populous countries between 1990 and 2018, Saiya found that as religious majoritarian privilege increases “so too does repression of basic democratic rights.” He writes that over two decades, the world’s largest democracies, the U.S., India, Brazil, and Indonesia, have seen serious democratic recessions under the influence of “religious nationalism.” In India and Indonesia, Hindu and Muslim nationalists in government have sought to repress religious minorities, and even in Brazil and the U.S., Christian nationalists have supported efforts to discredit the electoral systems (and, in the case of the U.S. and the Trump administration, restricted Muslim minorities with an immigration ban). Saiya concludes, however, that recent research finds that state control of a religion can actually turn people of faith against the regime as they feel that the government controlled version of their religion is inappropriate and unauthentic.

Another article in the issue offers a more positive take on the role of religion in democracy. Yale University political scientist Kate Baldwin focuses on democratic initiatives embraced by churches in sub-Saharan Africa, measuring civil society advocacy by both churches and trade unions in 34 countries between 2009 and 2018. She finds that the churches advocated for liberal democracy more often than the unions during that period. An example of church engagement in what she calls “narrow” democratic activism is the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops’



Narendra Modi's rally in Delhi, 2013 (source: Wikimedia Commons).

urging of the country's parliament not to rush through changes to an electoral law that might have tilted the playing field in the president's favor. An example of "strong" activism is when Tanzania's Evangelical Lutheran Church charged in 2018 that the ruling party's suppression of political opponents undermined the country's democracy. Baldwin finds that unions did engage in more of the strong activism than did the churches. Catholic churches accounted for about two-fifths of pro-democracy activism; church councils (usually Protestant) accounted for another two-fifths; and individual Protestant churches accounted for roughly a fifth. Baldwin adds that the historic Protestant and Catholic churches with the greatest investments in education tended to have the greatest interest in preserving liberal-democratic institutions. The autocratic exposure risks that running schools create will ensure that these churches "have a greater interest in liberal-democratic protections to protect them from autocrats taking control of their educational empires."

(*Journal of Democracy*, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/>)

## **Oriental Orthodox churches become growth center of U.S. Orthodoxy**

Oriental Orthodox churches in the U.S. are outgrowing their sister Eastern Orthodox bodies, possibly even stealing some of their members, according to a new analysis of this venerable yet largely forgotten ancient church tradition hailing largely from the Middle East, South Asia and



Archangel Raphael Coptic Orthodox Church, Houston, Clear Lake City, Texas (source: Jim Evans, 2020, Wikimedia Commons).

North Africa. At the late-October conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Salt Lake City, attended by **RW**, researcher Alexei Krindatch presented findings on Oriental Orthodoxy from the most recent U.S. Religion Census (2020). The Oriental Orthodox, comprising such bodies as the Armenian, Egyptian Coptic, Syrian, Ethiopian, and Malankara (Indian) Orthodox churches, total about 500,000 adherents and tend to be found in urban areas of the eastern and western U.S., particularly in such states as California, New Jersey, and New York. Krindatch finds that the newest Oriental Orthodox churches in the U.S., such as the Ethiopian and Malankara bodies, tend to be growing fastest. These churches showed a 67 percent increase since the last religion census in 2010, with the Coptic Orthodox seeing a doubling of members since that time. Whereas the Oriental Orthodox were one-quarter the size of their Eastern Orthodox big sister congregations in 2010, they now are about the same size.

Most of this growth in Oriental Orthodox churches is due to massive and continuing immigration to the U.S. Unlike the Eastern Orthodox, outreach to non-members is not a strong component of



Oriental Orthodox growth, although the Coptic Orthodox have shown some success in reaching newcomers. Krindatch estimates that while about 5 percent of all Oriental Orthodox are converts, 15 to 20 percent in Coptic churches are non-ethnic members. These non-ethnic members tend not to integrate with Egyptian-language churches and gravitate to separate, non-ethnic English-language parishes. Although Krindatch has no hard data on it, he has heard anecdotal reports that some of these new converts are coming from Eastern Orthodox churches, which are seeing an overall decline in membership, especially of young people. It may be that the more youthful and growing Oriental Orthodox parishes, with their many young families, are appealing to Eastern Orthodox youth who see less vitality in their own tradition.

## **Worldwide Church of God dissolves, leaving replica splinter groups in its wake**

While the Worldwide Church of God no longer exists after the schisms and scandals this new religious movement experienced in the 1980s and '90s, its offshoots continue to preserve important features of the movement and show some growth, writes J. Gordon Melton in the *Journal of CESNUR* (September/October), published by the Center on New Religions in Italy. Once considered a “cult,” largely because of its heterodox teachings (such as denying the trinity) and connections to the British Israelite movement (which claims that the direct descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel are in the UK), the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) experienced a downward trajectory starting in the 1980s, mainly related to scandals involving its leader Garner Ted Armstrong. The WCG’s successor subsequently downplayed the church’s distinctive teachings, resulting in more schisms and defections, according to Melton. Moving the WCG in an evangelical Christian direction, most of its followers and leaders reacted by deserting the church for splinter groups that tried to preserve the original WCG teachings.

Tracking down offshoots like the Philadelphia Church of God, United Church of God, Church of God AWA, and Grace Communion International, Melton finds that they have each tried to recreate the WCG, even publishing large circulation magazines modeled after the movement’s original publication, *The Plain Truth*. Some of these groups, such as the Philadelphia Church of God, have sought to reissue founder Herbert W. Armstrong’s book after it was rejected by the WCG, kicking off a huge legal battle. Among the splinter groups, the most liberal has been the Living Church, which is moving closer to mainstream evangelicalism. But the main life of the WCG is now carried by the four large splinter groups cited above, with each establishing a college for ministerial training, a large Internet presence, and issuing full-color magazines; the Philadelphia Church has even established a cultural foundation in the U.S. and an archeological institute in Israel. Melton concludes that each of the four groups started with a relatively small membership (in the 5,000 to 20,000 range) and that they have collectively grown to more than 100,000. While earlier dreams of rivaling such groups as the Seventh Day Adventists and



United Church of God Headquarters Building in Milford, Ohio 2013 (source: Costaricky, Wikimedia Commons).

Jehovah's Witnesses had to be shelved, the "substance of the pre-disruption era has been reconstituted and the churches that are still being nourished by Herbert W. Armstrong's life and work appear to be more than able to carry its founder's vision forward."

(*The Journal of CESNUR*, [https://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/tjoc\\_7\\_5\\_full\\_issue.pdf](https://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/tjoc_7_5_full_issue.pdf))

## CURRENT RESEARCH

● **Against predictions that Catholics would enter the ranks of the academic elite at the same rate as those of other and no religions, a recent study finds that they are significantly behind mainline Protestants and Jews on that measure.** The study, conducted by Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, looked at winners of Nobel Prizes to assess the late Catholic sociologist Andrew Greeley's prediction that Catholics would be just as likely to enter the academic world as others given their identical rate of graduate degree attainment since the 1960s. In a paper presented at the recent meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, which **RW** attended, Beit-





The Nobel Prize Laureates Hall at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Visitor Center (NIH Campus, Bethesda, Maryland, USA), February 2015 (source: Hildabast, Wikimedia Commons).

Hallahmi reported that Catholics represent only a small minority among the most eminent academics, those awarded the Nobel Prize. Out of 638 individuals who have been awarded the Nobel Prize in physics, chemistry, and medicine, only 11 are Catholic, comprising just under 2 percent of the group. For the literature prize, Catholics had significant representation, making up 22 out of 119 awardees. Beit-Hallahmi noted that the pattern of low Catholic representation among Nobel Prize winners is reflected in other past research showing a lower rate of Catholics who are academics. He added that those Catholics who have reached the elite circles of academia have been assimilated and had mostly left the church—contrary to Greeley’s view that even if they did not agree with church doctrine, Catholic scholars would remain affiliated with the church. Beit-Hallahmi concludes that “50 years after Greeley started making these claims, we know that Catholics, who make up more than 25 percent of the population, are indeed well-represented among holders of advanced degrees (27.9 percent), but significantly underrepresented among elite faculty (9.0 percent).”

• **There is more “partisan sorting” and politicization among Democrats than Republicans when it comes to issues surrounding “Christian nationalism,” a new study finds.** Jesse Smith



Source: Religion Unplugged.

of Benedictine College presented one of many papers focusing on Christian nationalism at the late-October meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Salt Lake City, which **RW** attended. Using data from the General Social Survey, the Views of the Electorate Survey, and Public Religion Research Institute surveys from 1996 to 2023, Smith looked at the puzzle of why alarm over Christian nationalism has been rising at the same time that Christian nationalist ideas, such as the relation of Christian identity to American identity, have been losing support in society. He found that support for such a Christian nationalist position as that for one to be “truly American” one has to be Christian has decreased sharply for Democrats since 2014, while Republicans have shown much less change in that regard. This was evident among both white and black Democrats, although the reaction was strongest among the former. Smith concludes that the backlash against Christian nationalist ideas among Democrats has been stronger than the intolerance and backlash against secularism among Republicans during this time period. He adds that further study of Christian nationalism should include scrutiny of data from across the political spectrum.

- **A survey on the extent of influence of the far right and Christian nationalism in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) finds some impact of these movements among church members, but also a lot of ambiguity.** The survey, the latest of the Next



Mormon studies conducted by Jana Reiss and Benjamin Kroll, was administered to 830 LDS members in 2022. They found 67 percent of respondents agreeing that the U.S. should be a Christian nation and that the federal government should advocate for Christian values. At the same time, the majority supported the separation of church and state. Support for Christian nationalist ideas was stronger among the LDS in Arizona than Utah. For instance, prayer in school found support among 78 percent of Utah respondents and 90 percent of Arizonans. Acknowledging that such Christian nationalist measures do not fit properly with many LDS teachings and may be too broad, the researchers tried to measure LDS sympathy for far-right groups within the church, asking in the survey about LDS members' support for the far-right LDS organization DEZ Net, an online forum that is said to have the dwindling support of about 300 members. They found that 49 percent of respondents were "not at all" familiar with the group, and only 16 percent were "very" familiar with it. In conclusion, Reiss estimated that "no more than one-in-five Mormons" support such far-right currents.



The U.S. and Utah state flags displayed in front of the iconic Salt Lake Temple of the LDS Church (source: Pastelitodepapa, Wikimedia Commons).

● **As sociologists of religion have long suspected, a survey by Samuel Perry of the University of Oklahoma finds that their subfield is viewed by other sociologists as marginal and even conservative.** This marginalization has been chronicled by religion scholars from several disciplines over the years. Reporting in the journal *American Sociologist* (online in October) on the results of an online survey of 536 sociologists, Perry notes that sociology of religion was rated as the least mainstream subfield. But on other measures, such as popularity and intellectual rigor, respondents rated the field as being on par with other specialties, such as sociology of education, and even ranked it higher than economic sociology. Perry also found that along with their marginal status, sociologists of religion were more often characterized as "religious" and "conservative." Those who characterized sociologists of religion in this way were more likely to downgrade the subfield on nearly every metric. Perry writes that this downgrading was not so much because sociologists of religion were seen as conducting research relevant to the respondents' own interests and beliefs; rather, it was due to a conservatism they suspected in this subfield. Perry concludes that while attitudes about the marginal nature of the sociology of





Arkansas state Sen. Joyce Elliott speaking as a visiting lecturer in Gordon Shepherd's Sociology of Religion class at the University of Central Arkansas, April 2012 (source: Flickr).

religion could be remedied by greater advocacy by scholars in the field, the “possibility of anti-religious bias or antipathy toward conservatives is more difficult to solve.”

(*American Sociologist*, <https://www.springer.com/journal/12108>)

• **The number of annual baptisms in Latin America fell from 8,197,000 in 2000 to 5,135,000 in 2020, according to a report by the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council (CELAM).** It was also found that confirmations and Catholic marriages decreased steadily in the same period as well. The Catholic newsletter, *The Pillar* (October 23), reports that the trends highlighted in the CELAM report are significant for world Catholicism since 41 percent of the world’s Catholics live in Latin America and the Caribbean. The report’s authors conclude that it “is possible to conjecture that the number of Catholics in the region, approximated based on the number of baptisms administered per year, will fall in the near future due to the conjunction of two trends: the slowdown in population growth, and the drop in the number of baptisms administered annually.” They also note that alongside the decline in sacraments administered, there was also a widespread weakening of Catholic affiliation, which seemed “to indicate a loss of weight of the Catholic Church in the Latin American population, a distancing from the



Source: <https://www.solmexiconews.com/mexican-family-tradition-baptism/>

institution.” On a more positive note for the church, the report also noted that the number of priests in Central America and Mexico doubled from 10,957 to 22,016 in 2020.

(*The Pillar*; [https://www.pillarcatholic.com/p/study-sacraments-in-decline-in-latin?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.pillarcatholic.com/p/study-sacraments-in-decline-in-latin?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email))

● **A study of youth in Finland finds that religious belief is growing among young men and is associated with a higher level of personal wellbeing, while young women are becoming less religious and experiencing a lower sense of wellbeing.** The study, presented by Kati Tervo-Niemela of the University of Eastern Finland at the recent meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, which **RW** attended, is part of a five-nation Templeton-funded project looking at religious transmission across generations in Germany, Finland, Italy, Hungary, and Canada. Tervo-Niemela’s study focuses on a survey conducted in these five countries (N=8,402), biographical interviews with 63 people (children, parents, and grandparents) in 17 families in Finland, and additionally on a larger quantitative survey of 100,000 young confirmands and volunteers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland that has been conducted annually from 2019 to 2023. The researcher reports that in the five nations overall,





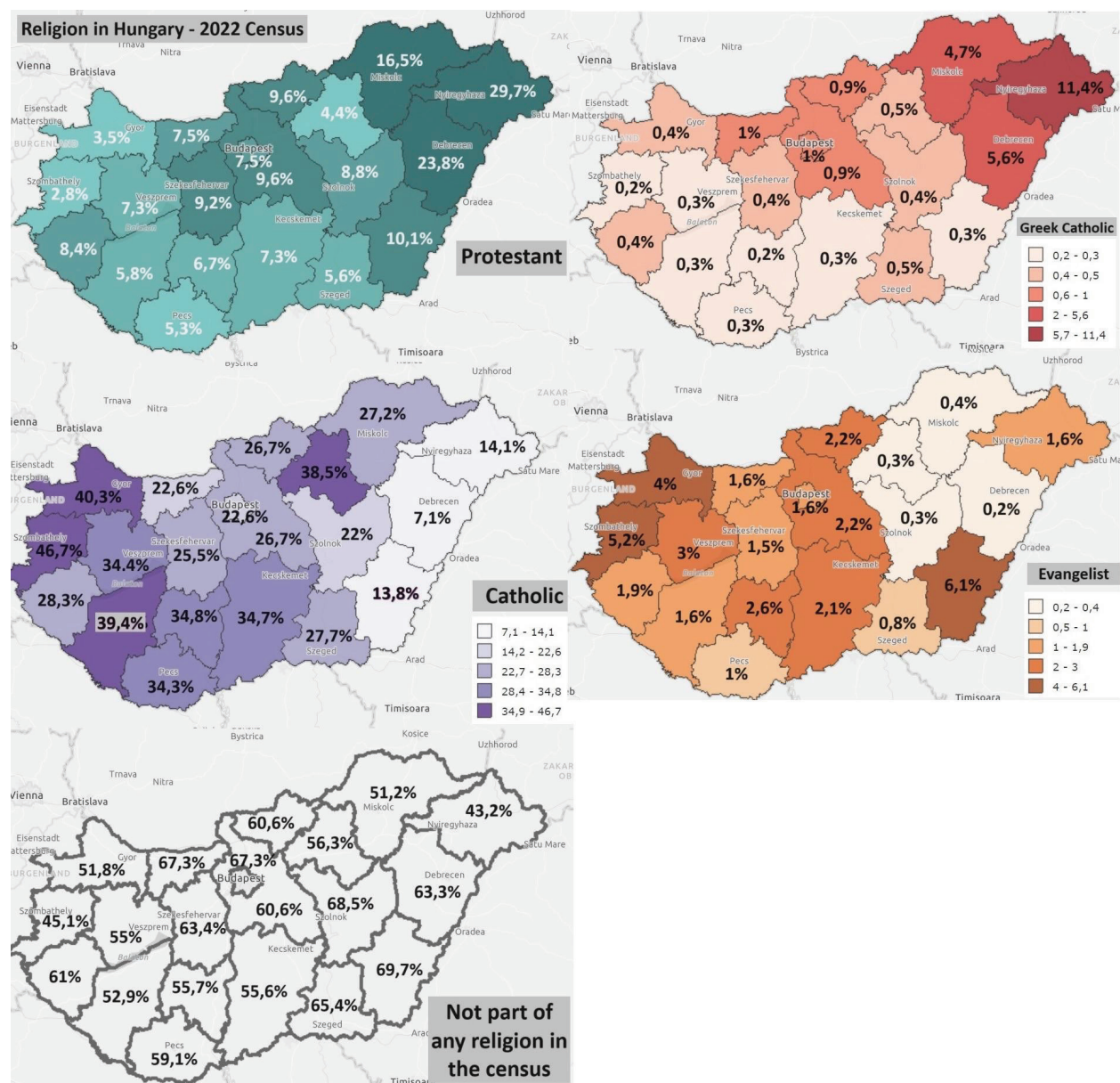
Confirmation Camp in Finland (source: The Blessed Wilderness, 2015).

there was found to be a slight positive correlation between being brought up in religious families and reported happiness in childhood.

Among the respondents in Finland, Tervo-Niemela found that religious youth had a higher sense of wellbeing than non-religious youth and that there was an increasing gender gap both in religiousness and in wellbeing. Boys were both more religious and had a higher sense of wellbeing than girls, and religiosity among boys was growing. The researcher found that boys' belief in God grew markedly from about 36 percent in 2019 to 59 percent in 2023, with a growth of spirituality and religiosity in the younger cohort (those born in the 1990s to 2002). Meanwhile, girls' belief in God remained stable over the same period of time (going from around 35 percent to 37 percent), with religiosity and spirituality declining in the younger cohort. Tervo-Niemela noted that these are unusual findings, since women have been seen as the traditional standard-bearers of religion and spirituality. The sharp growth in Christian faith among boys also raises questions about the effect of the pandemic on faith and, as one young male respondent

indicated, the possibility that Christianity may offer an affirmation of masculinity that is missing in the rest of Western society.

● For the first time, a majority of Hungarians—56.6 percent—failed to identify with a faith tradition, with 16.5 percent declaring “no religion” and a further 40.1 percent choosing not to answer the question at all, according to the country’s official census of religious identity. Alex Faludy reports in the *National Catholic Reporter* (October 25) that while all of the “country’s main denominations were hit badly, results for the Roman Catholic Church, historically the nation’s majority tradition, were worst of all—a drop of 1.1 million (nearly 30 percent), compared to 2011. The numbers went from an estimated 3.69 million people identifying as Catholics in 2011 to 2.6 million today. Combined with a smaller loss between





2001 and 2011, Hungary's Catholic population has shrunk an astounding 50 percent this century, to just 27.5 percent of the population." Faludy adds that these figures "contrast starkly with the rhetoric of Viktor Orbán, Hungary's far-right prime minister, who has described 'Christian Hungary' as a supposed bulwark against immigration of Muslims and other religious minorities into Europe." The new statistics may pose questions about state support of churches. In recent years, large sums of public money and many state services have been transferred to the churches, with the government supporting the building or refurbishing of about 3,000 places of worship and more than doubling the number of church schools (publicly funded at a level estimated at 3:1 relative to secular equivalents). The large percentage of those not responding to the survey question (as opposed to declaring non-belief) has caused some commentators to wonder if specific problems in Hungary's faith communities may have contributed to this decline in identifying with a religion.

(*National Catholic Reporter*, <https://www.ncronline.org/>)

● **Australians' responses to the International Survey of Catholic Women, one of the most extensive surveys of Catholic women ever undertaken, show a rift between older respondents who were more supportive of reform and change and their younger counterparts who hold more conservative attitudes, according to *The Pillar* (September 29), a Catholic newsletter.** Commenting on the age-based differences, report co-author Tracy McEwan told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "There has been a push back towards conservatism. I think that's been impactful for young adults in the Church." The responses from the 1,769 women in Australia who took part in the survey in 2022 showed a broad pattern of frustration with the pace of reform in the church, but the different age groups did not interpret church reform in the same way. The older respondents referred to reform as changing the church and its teachings in dialogue with ordinary Catholics and the secular world. In contrast, a smaller and younger



Australian Catholic women echoing the global call for church reform (source: The University of Newcastle, September 2023).

cohort tended to reject any modernization of the church and understood reform as a return to orthodoxy and tradition, including reviving the Traditional Latin Mass (TLM).

While a majority of respondents supported the priestly ordination of women, “older respondents were a lot more likely to agree with the ordination of women than younger respondents,” reports *The Pillar* article. The younger respondents were also significantly less likely to support the use of gender-inclusive language in the liturgy and church documents. “Some young respondents spoke passionately about the importance of traditional practices and the impact of the TLM on their faith,” the report’s authors noted. Older respondents were significantly more likely to support the full inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people into church life. While older respondents also supported Catholic social teachings as a good resource for social justice efforts, the younger respondents criticized Catholic social teaching and action as a politicization of faith and doctrinal teaching.

(*The Pillar*, [https://www.pillarcatholic.com/p/study-australias-young-catholic-women?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.pillarcatholic.com/p/study-australias-young-catholic-women?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email))

## **Hamas attacks pushing ultra-Orthodox Jews closer to mainstream Israeli society?**

A growing number of Haredi men are volunteering for the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) following the outbreak of the war against Hamas, which might signal that the “modern Haredi” phenomenon is developing into a real movement, writes Eliyahu Berkovits of the Ultra-Orthodox in Israel Program on the website of the Israel Democracy Institute (October 26). While young religious men studying in yeshivas have been exempt from military conscription since the State of Israel’s foundation, 2,000 Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) men have now inquired about volunteering for the IDF. This trend worries Haredi leaders and goes against the view of one rabbi that yeshiva students should remain in study—although Berkovits is keen on pointing to precedents that have occurred since the birth of the modern State of Israel in which ultra-Orthodox rabbis consented to exceptions in emergency situations. In recent years, only about 1,200 ultra-Orthodox men per year had enlisted in the Israeli army. “The Israeli army has facilitated this process by establishing military units that are designed to cater to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle, including gender separation, strict kosher food and separate prayer services,” *All Israel News* reports (October 22).

Earlier this year, following terror attacks, one could already notice an increase in ultra-Orthodox men carrying guns or applying for licenses, with some rabbis encouraging them to carry those guns with them even on Shabbat and holidays, and especially when going to the synagogue, since places of worship were at risk of becoming targets. But other rabbis have claimed that a man who learns full-time in yeshiva “does not carry a weapon” because doing so could have a negative effect on his faith (*Haaretz*, February 21).





Source: Israel Democracy Institute.

“Many members of the ultra-Orthodox community do not serve in the armed forces because of a belief that their Torah study serves to protect them, an attitude which may extend to gun ownership more generally, explained Dr. Gilad Malach, a researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute.” Since the beginning of the war with Hamas, 41,000 applications for gun ownership have already been submitted and there are plans to ease regulations on the granting of licenses, according to *Le Figaro* (October 26). Ultra-Orthodox Jews made up 13.5 percent of Israel’s population in 2022. Even at this point, only a small minority among them consider joining the IDF, but a number of them find other ways of “joining forces instead with the massive and spontaneous solidarity movement that united an Israeli Jewish society divided by ten months of contestation around justice reform” (*La Croix International*, October 24). According to Tel Aviv University Professor Nechumi Yaffe, head of the Tatia Haredi think tank, “23 percent of Haredim could be classified as modern Haredim,” and an additional 27 percent of the staunchly ultra-Orthodox Israelis “have been seeking ways to assimilate further into the Israeli identity” (*Jerusalem Post*, October 21). “The impression gained from looking at Haredi society today is that the pendulum is now swinging back toward greater integration, at least for parts of Haredi society. These segments are participating more and more in the labor market and in higher education, and even identify as ‘Israeli Haredim,’” Berkovits concludes, while conceding that it is too early to say if this modern Haredi phenomenon will be able to transform into a real movement at last.

(*The Ultra-Orthodox in Israel Program at the Israel Democracy Institute*, <https://en.idi.org.il/centers/1157/1517>)

## Romanian Orthodox Church retains influential place in society

The second-largest national Orthodox church with 25 million members, autocephalous since 1885 and under its own Patriarch since 1925, the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) has played an important role in Romanian society and national identity, and has managed to preserve a high level of social acceptance throughout regime changes over the past century, writes Mihai-D. Grigore (Leibniz Institute of European History in Mainz, Germany) in *Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West* (October). Harshly persecuted during the first two decades of the Communist period after 1945, but also subject to attempts by the regime to use it as a tool of influence and surveillance, the church remains an important symbol of Romanian culture. With 80 percent of the population identifying as Orthodox, the ROC worked successfully to strengthen its legal privileges and status as the dominant church in Romania while recovering its autonomous administration thanks to the removal of legal provisions that had allowed the state to intervene in church affairs. New bishoprics were established and many young clerics were trained. Under the current Patriarch Daniel (Ciobotea, b. 1951) the ROC has pursued a pragmatic partnership model of cooperation with the state rather than explicit privileging, while reinforcing close ties between church and state. On the economic level, it has expanded its financial resources through a complex of media, tourism, commercial activities, and social service and educational institutions.

The building of a huge new cathedral in the capital, Bucharest, near the Parliament building (the former palace of the last Communist dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu) symbolizes both the ideal



People's Salvation Cathedral under construction in Bucharest, June 2023 (source. Wikimedia Commons).



union between ethnic “Romanianness” and the Orthodox faith and victory over the country’s atheist past under Communism. The cathedral is not yet completed, but the cost has already reached some 200 million euros, with more than 70 percent of it paid by the state. According to Grigore, religious education in schools has played an important role in reinforcing the link between Romanian identity and Orthodox Christianity. The ROC has cleverly kept neutral in the intra-Orthodox conflict over Ukraine between the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow. This also has to do with the ROC’s religious-political agenda regarding the small, Romanian-speaking neighboring country of Moldova, writes Grigore. The ROC wants the entire Orthodox population of the country to come under the Romanian Patriarchate, including the pro-Russian, secessionist region of Transnistria, but at this point only a minority of Orthodox in Moldova are affiliated with the Bessarabian Orthodox Church under the Romanian Patriarchate. The ROC wants to prevent a Ukrainian scenario involving the emergence of an autocephalous church in Moldova.

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

## **Boko Haram increasingly turning on fellow Muslims in Nigeria**

Boko Haram, known for its Islamic jihadist terrorism in Nigeria, has slowly evolved from an organization under siege by the government to one estranged from its Muslim rivals and now actively targeting fellow Muslims with violence, writes Abubakar Abubakar Usman of the Asia Middle East Centre for Research and Dialogue (Malaysia). Writing in the journal *Contemporary Islam* (October), Usman notes how Boko Haram was one of many Salafi-jihadist factions seeking to establish a territory governed by Shariah law in northern Nigeria, establishing schools throughout the region and seeking alliances with like-minded Muslims. After 2009, driven by state repression, the group took on a covert role marked by exclusive membership methods and expansive violence that spread from Nigerian armed forces to civilians, particularly those of other faiths and especially Christians. But in its attacks Boko Haram would still often try to justify its actions to other Muslims. When the group attacked a UN office in Abuja (the capital city) in 2011, it sought to justify its targeting of some Muslims by saying they were working in cooperation with infidels. This concern for its image among other Muslims, including Sufi orders, changed in subsequent years after the group orchestrated the assassination of no fewer than six Islamic scholars who had criticized Boko Haram. Few Muslim groups sympathized with such an attack and Boko Haram’s animus increasingly targeted fellow believers who criticized it, as well as Sufi orders as a whole.

After 2013, Boko Haram drew a clear line between those whom it deemed authentic Muslims and those deemed unbelieving and fake Muslims, including even other Salafi jihadists. Its criteria for deciding if a Muslim is a friend or foe included living among unbelievers or having



Source: Institute for Security Studies.

any association with the government. The group also embraced ISIS, sharing its willingness to attack and kill Muslims who opposed its actions and agenda, with several branches flying the ISIS flag. Following a schism in the movement, Boko Haram later metamorphized into an ISIS offshoot known as the Islamic State in West Africa. But it was Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy across the region that pushed the group toward an increased ruthlessness in its choice of targets, basically proclaiming that anyone outside its group and its teachings were open to attack. The shift from a relatively moderate Salafist group to its post-2009 violent and intolerant identity correlated with a change in leadership, with Muhammad Yusef displaying greater intellectual acumen and restraint compared to his successor Abubakar Shekau. While Muslims have been blamed for Boko Haram's rise, understanding its anti-Muslim turn "can disrupt this blame cycle and encourage a united front against [Boko Haram]" and a more general unity among divergent Muslim groups, such as Sufi, Shia, and mainstream Salafi, Usman concludes.

(*Contemporary Islam*, <https://www.springer.com/journal/11562>)

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

1) Vietnamese-American Catholics have become a source of vocational growth and vitality in the American church and the **Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement (VEYM)** has served as their nerve center. While Vietnamese Americans make up only 1 to 2 percent of the American Catholic population, they represent 12 percent of seminarians. The VEYM has 136 chapters, often connected to Vietnamese parishes, and a membership of 25,000, with 2,500 leaders in different divisions, such as youth leaders and Knights of the Eucharist. VEYM activities include Bible studies, Eucharistic adorations, rosary devotions, and weekend camps, which generate significant commitment and involvement, leading to





Source: Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement.

religious vocations in many cases. A survey of 385 youth leaders and 105 priests associated with the movement found a majority to be born in the U.S. (though 42 percent were born in Vietnam) and a high rate of weekly Mass attendance (61 percent compared to 19 percent of U.S. Catholics as a whole). Twenty-four percent of respondents attended Mass more than once a week, compared to only 4 percent of U.S. Catholics. Among priests, 72 percent considered the VEYM helpful in their vocation, with 44 percent of non-priest leaders saying they have considered religious vocations. The high rate of member and leader satisfaction with VEYM and its role in encouraging religious vocations have prompted U.S. Catholic bishops to consider replicating similar movements for other Catholics. (**Source:** *Paper authored by Thu Do and presented at the late-October meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Salt Lake City*)

2) A small but growing movement of conservative Protestant churches is rediscovering the Psalms—“the whole Psalter, including the mean parts of the mean Psalms,” notes Peter Leithart of the Alabama-based **Theopolis Institute**. Anglicans, Catholics, Orthodox, and many Lutherans retained the Psalter, but in much of the Protestant world the Psalms lost this prominence. Contemporary Christian musicians sing Psalms, but normally in selective fragments. Connected to the Calvinist Theopolis Institute, “a handful of churches here and in the UK are no longer content to sing or chant Psalms but insist on ‘roaring’ them, to echo the Lion of Judah who composed them. A brief search will turn up multiple YouTube and Twitter sites devoted to Psalm-singing, including some from the chant Psalter that the Theopolis Institute is working on,” Leithart adds. Yet there is a connection between Psalm-singing congregations and the more publicized trend of Christian nationalism. The Psalms “cultivate a distinctive ecclesial ethos” where politics is never far off. Psalm 2 praises Yahweh for enthroning his king who scatters his enemies in Zion. For years, anti-abortion protesters have sung Psalm 94 outside abortion clinics. Leithart notes, “You want





Source: The Reformed Presbyterian Global Alliance (RPGA).

to know what's energizing a new Christian right, what's lending the air of swaggering confidence?...Check out what they're singing." (Source: *First Things*, October 27)

3) While many evangelical churches—from small congregations to megachurches—use generic contemporary Christian music and praise songs that avoid denominational doctrine, the **Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA)** is fighting the trend with its recent project to incorporate church teachings into its hymns. The CMA was started in the 19th century as a missionary association by the evangelist A.B. Simpson, who also wrote 150 hymns. The new project, made up of CMA musicians and songwriters, seeks to produce music with such CMA themes as world missions and urban evangelism. This comes at a time when Christian music production is increasingly



dominated by a few names, with most songwriters catering to a non-denominational following. Alliance leadership is encouraging the trend and hopes the project will be the beginning of a music revival that helps their 1,600 churches grow deeper in CMA theology as they worship. The project is also adapting Simpson's hymns to modern sensibilities, trying to edit out some of the founder's colonialist sentiments. (Source: *Christianity Today*, October)

4) The main target of Hamas's terrorist attack in October, the **Tribe of Nova** festival was not merely a rave party but an expression of contemporary quests for alternative spiritualities, says Swiss expert Manéli Farahmand, director of the CIC (Centre d'information sur les croyances - Information Center on Beliefs, Geneva). Spiritually oriented people not



only embrace a range of alternative or holistic disciplines, such as modern yoga and energy-based techniques such as reiki, but also actively participate in conscious movement, dance and music practices. For the first time in Israel, Tribe of Nova proposed a festival based on the model of the Brazilian festival Universo Paralello, born in Bahia some 20 years ago. According to Farahmand, this festival occupies an important place in transnational networks of new spirituality. Such festivals claim "alternative" values: peaceful and harmonious inter-species coexistence, unity in difference, love, peace, reference to the heart and not to external rules, transcending borders between ethnic groups, nationalities and religions. Meditation, art, and ecology all have a place in this appealing environment for SBNR (Spiritual but Not Religious) people. Journalist Marc Bornomelli observed that "festivals of this kind involving electronic music are a frequent feature on the itinerary of new spiritual seekers." In this festive context, first experiences perceived as "mystical" take place, whether or not psychedelic substances are consumed. For the moment, however, there is no indication that the festival had been targeted by Hamas militants because of its spiritual orientation. Rather, it seems to have provided an opportunity to attack a large youth gathering near the Gaza Strip. (Source: *Le Monde*, October 28; *Centre d'Information sur les Croyances*, <https://cic-info.ch>)