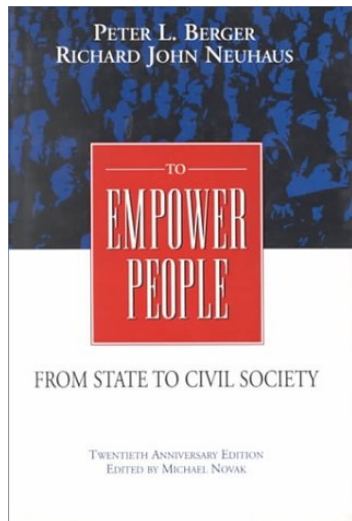


Mediating institutions facing new secular challenges

The ability of “mediating institutions,” particularly faith-based groups, to deliver social services to the public has fallen on hard times due to, among other factors, religious institutions’ declining influence in American society, according to public policy analysts speaking at a recent conference in Washington, DC. The conference, co-sponsored by the Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC) and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and attended online by **RW**, commemorated and assessed the 1977 book, *To Empower People*, by sociologist Peter Berger and Lutheran pastor and theologian Richard John Neuhaus. Considered a classic text on the role of mediating institutions, the book adapted ideas from Alexis de Tocqueville and Catholic teachings on subsidiarity to argue that local institutions like congregations, neighborhoods, families, and voluntary organizations were in the best position to provide social services to Americans. Some critics saw the initiative as largely conservative, trying to bypass big government and its bureaucracy, but speakers at the conference noted that the book was addressed to the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter and that, at the time, both Berger and Neuhaus were self-identified liberals. *To Empower People* either presaged or influenced George H.W. Bush’s theme of volunteering and his “thousand points of light,” the communitarian movement and Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone*, Bill Clinton’s welfare reforms, and George W. Bush’s “Charitable Choice” program.

But since then, the loss of religious ties through non-affiliation and diminishing social capital, as well as the longer reach of government restrictions on congregations, have raised the question of how organized religion can serve as a mediating institution when it has less respect among many Americans. This is especially the case with younger Americans, as growing numbers choose to opt out of both religious and family life, with polls showing a fairly large percentage no longer seeing religion as a force for good. So even if government were rolled back away from the local level, “there may not be the drive or energies” for groups to deliver social services as they once might have, said Catherine Pakaluk of Catholic University of America. AEI pollster Karlyn Bowman said, however, that it was important not to exaggerate the loss of civic life and its



mediating role in society. She cited surveys of neighborhood involvement and volunteerism from the American Community Survey that found a high rate of civic involvement. Some neighborhoods were found to retain religious connections, such as those made up of Latter-day Saints, “evangelical hubs,” and African American communities. Sixty percent of respondents said their neighborhoods were going in the right direction, and the same proportion would not choose to relocate; and 3 in 10 reported volunteering in a religious or non-religious group.

Several speakers sought to locate mediating institutions relevant to American society today, and many of them seemed to be in the educational sphere. Nathaniel Peters of the Morningside Institute in New York cited the growth of classical schools, which are often connected to churches or have strong religious support, charter schools, para-academic organizations, Christian study centers at universities, and other independent organizations as filling the gap in mediating institutions. Ryan Anderson of the EPPC said that concerns about religious liberty have brought together new coalitions of parents and others that could serve a mediating role against government overreach. Scott Winship of AEI said that even as the “federal government has made it difficult for congregations to serve people through new restrictions and regulations,” new kinds of social institutions have emerged as mediating institutions, such as THREAD, which helps troubled students in Baltimore. Pakaluk, who recently authored, *Hannah’s Children*, a book about women choosing to have large families, said that this “five percent” of families and the ways in which they are embedded in “living religious communities” play key mediating roles, as do homeschooling and “micro schools” (which combine homeschooling with traditional schools). But she added that “mediating institutions have to develop naturally. They’re not planned in board meetings.”

Young adults finding Catholic-based volunteer service model a poor fit

The model of full-time volunteer service pioneered by Catholics is finding few takers among the younger generation, reports Christine Lenahan in *America* magazine (April). The Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC), the pioneer of the Catholic post-graduate service industry, is reporting a volunteer shortage. Of the corps’ three community houses in New York, two have closed in recent years. Only two years ago, a cohort of 186 volunteers served in 30 different community houses; by the following year, the JVC “paused its presence” in 12 houses, with 89 volunteers in 2023–2024. Today, four of the remaining houses operating in the U.S. only have two volunteers living in them. The problem is not limited to the JVC. The Mercy Volunteer Corps has seen similar enrollment declines, and the Catholic Volunteer Network, an umbrella organization of

dozens of Catholic volunteer programs networking and sharing resources, has seen a significant decrease in the annual number of volunteers joining its 77 different member organizations, especially since the pandemic. Five of these member organizations have closed permanently. It also is not just Catholic organizations that have seen a drop in full-time volunteering, as the trend is also present in groups like the Peace Corps.



While civic engagement, racial equality and the environment rank among the highest concerns of Generation Z, they are not volunteering on many of these same issues in a way similar to older generations. Lenahan writes that the trend of declining volunteers in Catholic organizations may be due less to lack of interest than to the model established by the JVC and replicated by other religious and secular volunteer groups: living simply in a community among the poor and working for social change does not register for younger people today. Part of the reason is due to practical concerns, such as student loan debt and mental health issues raised by the pandemic, as well as a reluctance to commit to intensive volunteer experiences. Looming over this decline in full-time volunteering is the sharp downturn in trust that the younger generation has toward organized religion, which remains the seedbed for these intensive forms of volunteering. Some of these organizations, like the Mercy Volunteer Corps, have “re-imagined” their programs to include short-term volunteering. The Loretto Justice Program has replaced their model of voluntary poverty, based on a stipend, with one resembling more of a job, paying participants a living wage.

(*America*, <https://www.americamagazine.org>)

Backlash grows against “Christian nationalist” label, media hype

As the drumbeat about “Christian nationalism” becomes louder in the media and public life as the elections approach, conservative Christians, academics and journalists are reacting against what they see as the broad-brushed and even prejudicial application of that label, according to various reports. Christian nationalism may have various historical incarnations, but most recently it emerged as a description of conservative Christian supporters of Donald Trump who wish to restore the Christian foundations of American life. In a lengthy article on the website *Religion*

Unplugged (April 12), Bobby Ross writes that the term “Christian nationalist” has become so pervasive that it is losing its meaning. Matthew Wilson of Southern Methodist University says “this is very much an overplayed, overhyped concept. It has gotten a lot of cachet with people on the left who want to use it as a cudgel to beat on religiously conservative voters



and portray them as frightening and authoritarian.” Wilson points to similarities between the ways the left has referenced Christian nationalism and the right latched onto critical race theory a few years ago, with both terms becoming “boogeymen” in these opposing camps.

Even liberal political opinion leaders are questioning the uses of the term. Michael Wear, who served as former President Barack Obama’s faith adviser, says the term has become a “vehicle for carrying out a whole range of niche political and theological disagreements that mostly failed to gain traction under other banners—while also serving as a convenient excuse to evade accountability for Religious Right politics prior to the presidency of Donald Trump...” David French, an evangelical critic of Trump, said that by defining Christian nationalism so broadly, “you’re telling millions of ordinary churchgoing citizens that the importation of their religious values into the public square somehow places them in the same camp or the same side as actual Christian supremacists, the illiberal authoritarians who want to remake America in their own fundamentalist image.” Such critics of the wide use of the term cite the varying and often confusing estimates given of Americans sympathetic to Christian nationalism—from more than half of the population, according to Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead, to only 11 percent who are “adherents” and only five percent who self-identify as Christian nationalists, according to the recent survey *Neighborly Faith*.

Many of these differences are about the conflicting definitions of the term. In the online magazine *Public Discourse* (April 4), sociologist Jesse Smith argues that prominent scholars who have popularized the term in its broad sense, such as Perry, Whitehead, and Philip Gorski, have taken aboard a “deep story” about the dangers of Christian nationalism and American conservatism in general that includes everything from the Ku Klux Klan, gun culture, libertarianism, Fox News, QAnon, the Tea Party, conservative Christian preoccupation with sexual morality, religious freedom advocacy, Catholic integralism, and John Wayne fandom—a story that “should strain any grounded sociological imagination well past its breaking point.” Smith adds that these scholars’ encounters with the Trump era have convinced them to suspend the “scholarly virtues of objectivity and circumspection” in their alarm that authoritarian forces are “rolling back progress and imposing a social vision that would make the Nazis and Klansman

feel at home...The survival of American democracy itself hangs in the balance.” He writes that survey research actually shows that “most Americans across the political spectrum affirm the value of democracy...And the idea that the Right is united around any social vision at present is little more than the stuff of wishful thinking among conservative intellectuals and strategists.”

(*Religion Unplugged*, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2024/4/12/overhyped-christian-nationalism-label-draws-a-backlash?>; *Public Discourse*, https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2024/04/93081/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=sociology-in-the-age-of-trump-the-clash-of-deep-stories-on-the-left-and-right)

LGBTQ movement taking on religious trappings through its rituals

While LGBTQ people have had a high rate of non-affiliation, through their parades, holidays, and other rituals, the community has gradually shifted from a protest movement to a “civil religion” with transcendent elements, according to a study in the social science journal *Society* (online in April). Danish scholars Stefan Schwarzkopf, Sine Nørholm Just, and Jannick Friis Christensen, studying prominent observances and rituals like pride parades and marches, write that “they echo the religious rituals that can be found in the larger social environment that the LGBTQ+ movement is embedded in, including processions, exuberant carnivals, silent vigils and commemorative litanies.” Robert Bellah and other sociologists typically viewed the LGBTQ

movement as a lifestyle enclave, but the authors argue that the whole range of rituals that the community now engages in beyond pride parades “connects their participants to a sphere of transcendent meaning.” Because the movement is said by its proponents to be about social action, the researchers refer to these shared religious practices as taking on the characteristics of a civil religion.

Schwarzkopf, Just, and Christensen write that the LGBTQ movement first adopted mainstream Christian rituals and “then symbolically connected them to new transcendent social aims and spheres, namely sacred sites, the commemoration of sacred events, the mourning of the dead, and the



eschatological hope for the coming world without oppression.” Elements added more recently to the pride parades, such as the use of music, distinctive costumes, and objects such as the pride flag, have “taken the political character out of pride and replaced it with a religious one.” Critics have said that the pride events have largely been shaped by corporate sponsorship and the commercialization of earlier protests. But the researchers argue that these rituals have emerged spontaneously and “continue to be shape-shifting.” The importance of the “spirited assembly” in the form of the carnival, procession, and vigil, sacred sites (such as the Stonewall Inn, where the gay rights movement took form), and sacred objects (the AIDS quilt) all speak to the “power of the sacred” that is typical of religious rituals that “connect community members to transcendent experiences.” The authors conclude that “it remains to be seen how the movement’s liturgies will adapt to the now widely shared concern over the supposed mainstreaming and gentrification of LGBTQ+ activism.”

(*Society*, <https://link.springer.com/journal/12115>)

Jewish campus groups experience revival after October 7

A growing number of Jewish students in the U.S. are finding camaraderie and support in campus groups such as Chabad and Hillel in the months since October 7, as anti-Israel protests on campuses continue to multiply, writes Deena Yellin in the *Times of Israel* (April 28). Yellin cites Anti-Defamation League figures reporting that antisemitic incidents increased by 360 percent in the months following Hamas’s attack on Israel. Many Jewish college students have reported struggles with anxiety or isolation, with some responding by hiding their Star of David necklaces, removing their head coverings, or retreating to their dorms. Others have found refuge in Jewish gatherings on campus. “Leaders of Chabad and Hillel houses nationwide say they’ve boosted programming in recent months to serve as a hub for Jewish life on campus and refuge for those who want to gather for healing in a time of crisis. They’re helping students cope with their emotions related to the brutal onslaught on Israel as well as to rising on-campus hostility to students perceived as supporting the Jewish state,” Yellin writes. With Hillel chapters serving nearly 1,000 college campuses around the world, the organization is close to breaking its record for highest student participation in its 100-year history, with more than 180,000 students engaged this school year, according to Adam Lehman, president and CEO of Hillel International.

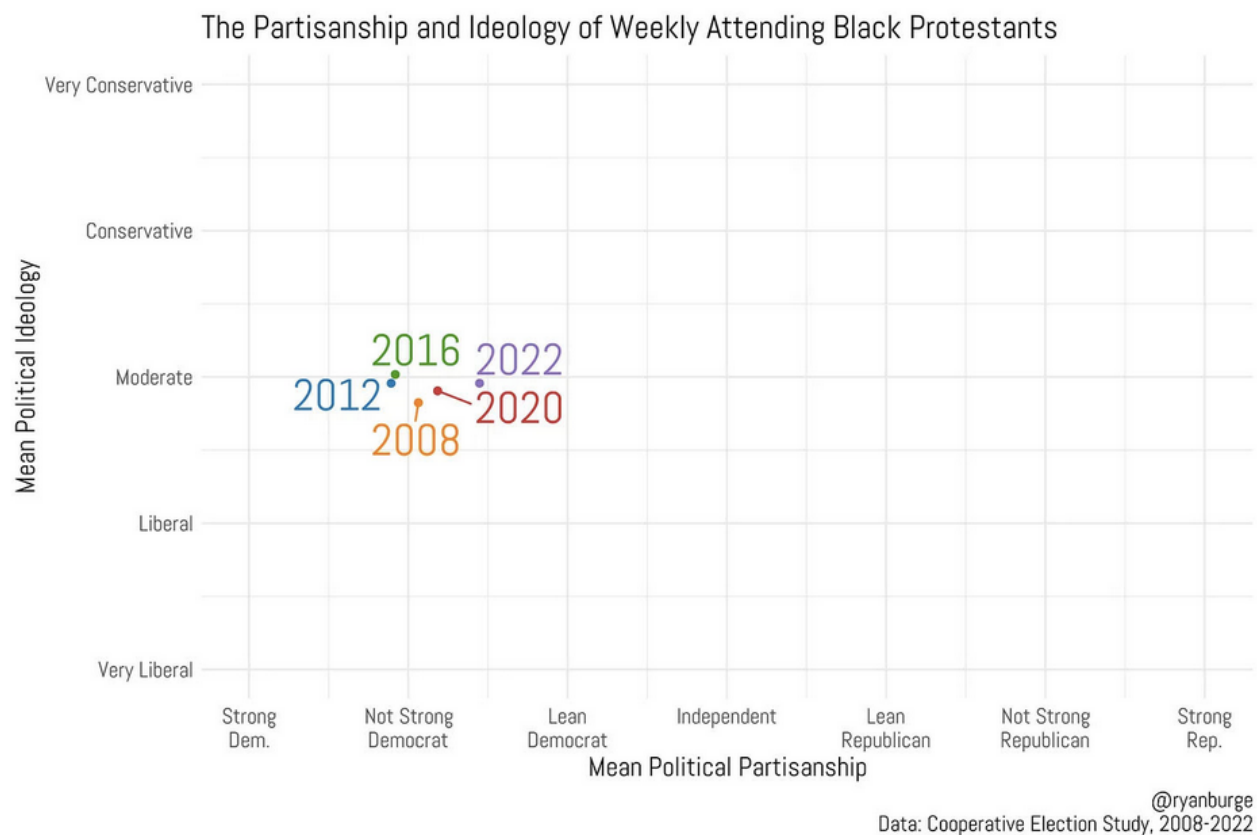
The Jewish outreach organization operating under the auspices of the Chabad Hasidic movement has increased its activities at its centers on nearly 900 campuses around the country and has organized several hundred events following the outbreak of the war in Israel. Chabad official Avi Weinstein said the organization was “able to measure an increase of over 40 percent in new students coming through our Chabad House doors since October 7.” It is unclear as to whether the high rate of Jewish involvement will continue in the long-term. “I can say that it’s not an uncommon phenomenon that there’s intergroup solidarity when your group is under attack...



Jewish organizations have an opening to make a lifelong difference,” said Leonard Saxe of Brandeis University. These groups have not only offered support and fellowship. Countering antisemitism on campus has been a core piece of Hillel’s work for decades, and the group has organized “vigils, put up hostage posters, hosted Israel-related discussions and organized activities for Jewish holidays such as hamantaschen bakes, which all seemed to take on a new meaning, especially with more aggressive forms of protests, such as the growth of encampments.” John Schmalzbauer of Missouri State University, who led a 2023 study of campus religion, said that groups such as Chabad and Hillel have often served as an oasis for Jews during periods of crisis and conflicts. For example, after Kanye West made his antisemitic statements in 2022, Jewish students sought each other out. Schmalzbauer added, “Our study found that students across all religious groups seek a place with others who have similar experiences. Our researchers found that all students want to be safe and seen.”

CURRENT RESEARCH

• **Churchgoing African Americans’ longtime allegiance to the Democratic party is showing some cracks, according to an analysis by Ryan Burge in his newsletter *Graphs about Religion* (April 15).** “Religiously active Black Protestants have never really been that comfortable with where the Democratic party is headed on certain cultural issues (like abortion), and this may actually result in some shifts in voting patterns in the future,” Burge writes. Based on data from the Cooperative Election Survey, he focused his analysis on black Protestants who attend religious services once a week, confirming that they are not ideologically liberal. When asked to place “themselves in ideological space, the mean score is almost always a 3 on a scale from 1 (very liberal) [to] 5 (very conservative). The average high attending Black Protestant[] is the definition of ideologically moderate.” But they are also “unmistakably Democrats.” On a similar scale measuring partisanship and running from strong Democrat (1) to strong Republican (7), churchgoing blacks have historically scored in the range of 2 on average. However, between 2012 and 2022, their mean score has shifted toward the middle by nearly 10 percent as a proportion of that scale.

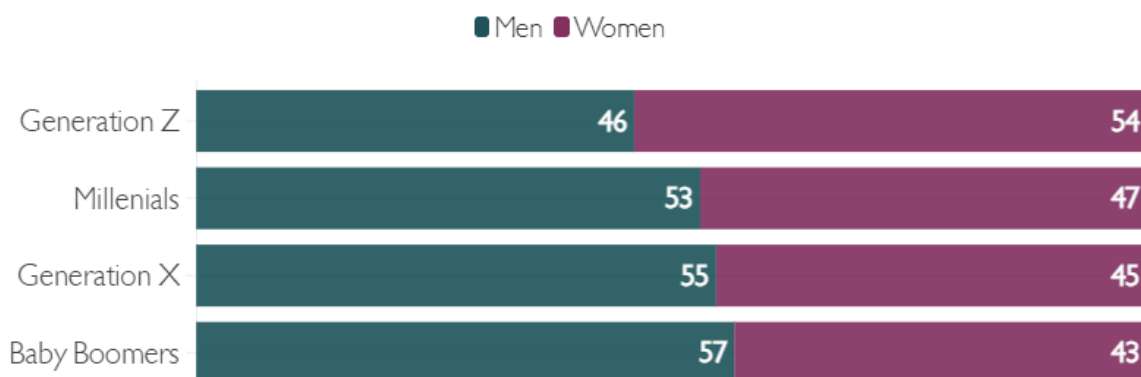


The partisan defection has been taking place among strong Democrats. “In 2008, 2012, and 2016 about 60 [percent] of Black Protestants who attended church weekly identified as Strong Democrats. In 2020, that dipped to 56 [percent] and it’s even lower in the most recent data I have—49 [percent] in 2022,” Burge writes. The movement has largely been toward the Independents, whose share more than doubled from 8 percent of the group in 2016 to 17 percent in 2022. Burge cautions that this shift will not yet put a sizable dent in the Democratic vote among churchgoing blacks (although it did dip from 94 percent for Obama in 2012 to 87 percent for Biden in 2020). “But it does seem like this voting bloc is clearly more moderate than the party as a whole,” giving more moderate responses to survey questions about late term abortion, funding for the police, and especially immigration reform. “That’s likely always been the case,” Burge concludes, “but in the current environment with the possibility of a real racial realignment happening, I wouldn’t be surprised to learn if Biden does demonstrably worse among this voting bloc than in prior elections.”

- **While over the last two decades of rapid religious disaffiliation, men have been more likely than women to abandon their faith commitments, a new survey from the American Enterprise Institute suggests that pattern has now reversed.** “Older Americans who left their childhood religion included a greater share of men than women,” pollsters Daniel A. Cox and Kelsey Eyre Hammond write. “In the Baby Boom generation, 57 percent of people who disaffiliated were men, while only 43 percent were women. Gen Z adults have seen this pattern flip. Fifty-four percent of Gen Z adults who left their formative religion are women; 46 percent are men.” Even the more resilient conservative churches are “facing more of an uphill battle

Women Outnumber Men Among the Young Adults Leaving Religion

Gender of Americans who disaffiliated from religion . . .



Note: Survey of US adults ($N=5,459$).
Source: Survey Center on American Life, 2023.



keeping this current generation of young women in the pews. Sixty-one percent of Gen Z women identify as feminist, far greater than women from previous generations.”

Cox and Hammond add that “younger women are more concerned about the unequal treatment of women in American society and are more suspicious of institutions that uphold traditional social arrangements.” In the 2023 survey that the team conducted, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of young women said they do not believe that churches treat men and women equally. The researchers add that young women are more educated than men their age and report greater professional ambition and concern with personal success and growth, making religion and family life lower priorities. “The result is that young women today, at least on some measures, are less religious than young men,” as reflected in the survey’s finding that nearly four in ten (39 percent) Gen Z women identify as religiously unaffiliated compared to 34 percent of Gen Z men. Cox and Hammond conclude by pointing out the much larger generational differences among women compared to men. While Gen Z men are more religiously unaffiliated than Baby Boomer men by 11 percentage points, there is a 25-point difference among women, with 39 percent of Gen Z women being unaffiliated compared to only 14 percent of Baby Boomer women.

(The study can be downloaded from: <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/newsletter/young-women-are-leaving-church-in-unprecedented-numbers/>)

• **While Pope Francis retains his appeal among most American Catholics, his favorability rating has declined over the last several years, according to a new Pew Research Center survey.** The survey finds that 75 percent of U.S. Catholics view Pope Francis favorably, down 8 percentage points since that question was last asked in 2021, and 15 points below his peak

favorability rating of 90 percent in early 2015. The Pew report finds that the partisan gap in views of Pope Francis is “now as large as it’s ever been in our surveys. Roughly nine-in-ten Catholics who are Democrats or lean toward the Democratic Party hold a positive view of him, compared with 63 [percent] of Catholics who are Republicans or lean Republican.” Francis has generally scored higher favorability ratings than his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI, but lower than Pope



John Paul II. Regardless of political leaning, the respondents considered him to be more liberal than other recent popes, and seven-in-ten also agreed that Francis is an agent of change with regard to a wide range of church and social issues (such as contraception, the marriage of priests,

and allowing same-sex relationships). Whether these changes are considered advisable is associated with the respondents' political leanings. The Catholics who mostly favor a variety of changes are largely Democrats or lean Democratic (57 percent), and many say they seldom or never attend Mass (56 percent). In contrast, the Catholics who mostly say the church should not take these steps are predominantly Republicans or lean Republican (72 percent), and many say they attend Mass at least once a week (59 percent).

(The survey can be downloaded from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/04/12/majority-of-u-s-catholics-express-favorable-view-of-pope-francis/>)

Regionalization plans in global churches reflecting fragmentation or potential schism?

Global churches such as the United Methodist Church, the Anglican communion, and even Roman Catholicism are increasingly taking a regional approach to address serious divisions and fragmentation, writes Elizabeth Russell in the Christian news magazine *World* (May 4). African members and leaders of the United Methodist Church (UMC), which has already split in the U.S. over issues of gender and sexuality, are proposing to restructure the worldwide denomination along regional lines, giving churches in different parts of the world the freedom to set their own doctrinal standards. This push for regionalization is an effort by members in the conservative global South to keep the denomination united in the face of growing conflicts over theological and sexual concerns. Russell writes that there are two different regionalization plans circulating through the UMC, but both would restructure the church body into seven or eight conferences (such as the U.S., the Philippines, Central and Southern Europe, Northern Europe, Congo, and West Africa), which would have their own rules for ordination, marriage rites, and church courts. Each region would in effect be allowed to revise the UMC's Book of Discipline according to its own teachings and traditions, a move that some church conservatives have criticized.

In the U.S., the UMC has lost about 30,000 members under an official disaffiliation plan that allows these conservative congregations to retain their property. A similar split may be in the wings for conservative United Methodists in the global South after liberal leaders and delegates in the U.S. successfully overturned the Book of Discipline to allow for same-sex marriage and gay clergy at their late-April general conference. But advocates of regionalization believe that conservative members outside of the U.S. maintain enough loyalty to the UMC for such a plan to become a reality. Other forms of regionalization are already present among Anglicans. Long divided between conservative churches in the global South and more liberal member churches in the North, the Anglican communion (representing national churches from around the world) moved further in the direction of regionalization in 2023, when the Church of England approved same-sex unions, resulting in conservative Anglicans releasing the statement known as the Kigali Commitment that rejected the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. While stating that the dissenting churches did not want to be in fellowship with the C of E, "because no



individual denomination in the Anglican Communion has the authority to remove another, the Anglicans maintain a fragile global unity. Even Catholicism is showing signs of regionalization under Pope Francis,” Russell writes. This could be seen in the way bishops in Africa united in opposition to the pope’s document on blessing individuals in same-sex unions, stating they would not engage in such a practice; even Francis backed down in the face of such opposition.

(*World*, <https://wng.org/magazine>)

South Asian revivalist Islamic movements and their political potential

Even apparently apolitical Islamic groups may become politically charged, writes Thomas K. Gugler (Goethe University, Frankfurt) in a report in German published by the Austrian Fund for the Documentation of Religiously Motivated Political Extremism (February). Gugler focuses on lay preachers working within revivalist missionary movements from South Asia, such as the Tablighi Jama‘at and the Da‘wat-e Islamī, whose primary goal is to encourage Muslims to deepen their piety or return to the strict practice of Islam through imitation of the Prophet Muhammad. In German-speaking Europe, most scholars in Islamic Studies pay less attention to South Asian Islam than to Arabic Muslim movements, although a third of all Muslims live in South Asia. The Tablighis have their roots in Barelvi and Deobandi reform movements in that part of the world. Founded in 1927, the Tablighi Jama‘at started its international missions in the 1960s. After several failed attempts, the Barelvis succeeded in organizing their own missionary movement, the Da‘wat-e Islamī, in 1981, imitating the missionary travel that made the Tablighi Jama‘at famous. In both movements, small, strongly knit groups of 5 to 10 highly committed lay

preachers gather for short periods as “caravans” for preaching Islam, seeking to transform “nominal Muslims” into devout followers.



Male followers of Da‘wat-e Islamī are advised to devote one day every week to a missionary tour in the area where they are living. Gugler uses the term “Sunnitization” (*Sunnaisierung* in German) to describe apolitical forms of Islamization (in contrast to political re-Islamization movements) that allow young and convert Muslims to acquire a strong religious identity with a demonstrative rejection of Western cultural goods. Currently, Da‘wat-e

Islamī is developing its preaching work in Austria. In Vienna, female lay preachers belonging to the movement appear to be especially successful, as they attempt to emulate not only the Prophet himself, but also his daughter Fatima as a female role model. Gugler writes that the movement is quite naturally influenced by its South Asian background and by debates there, especially in Pakistan, where severe penalties (up to death) for blasphemy have become an important issue. Punishing blasphemers is understood as pious violence. In that context, the Bareilvi-influenced Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) party was launched some 10 years ago. Gugler suggests that the potential of violence from Bareilvi extremists as well as the political implications of apolitical preaching should not be overlooked—without forgetting also the implications of the growing public visibility of Islamic religiosity for Muslim integration in Europe.

(*Dokumentationsstelle Politischer Islam*, <http://www.dokumentationsstelle.at/>; on the impact of Pakistan’s blasphemy debates in Europe, see also the report by Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “Understanding and Responding to Blasphemy Extremism in the UK,” <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-and-responding-to-blasphemy-extremism/understanding-and-responding-to-blasphemy-extremism-in-the-uk-accessiblesch>)

Jewish community negotiating secular, migration changes in Finland

Representing a rare continuation of Eastern European Ashkenazic Orthodoxy that survived the Shoah intact, the Jewish community in Finland now includes a significant number of Jews who have come from abroad and faces increasing secularization along with new influences. These changes “have led some members [to] opt for increasing adaptations to secular society and some for stricter Orthodoxy,” write Simo Muir (University College London) and Riikka Tuori (University of Helsinki) in the *European Journal of Jewish Studies* (published online in March).

The researchers interviewed 101 of the 1,300 members comprising the country's Jewish congregations.

The Jewish community in Finland was founded in the 19th century by Jewish members of the Russian army deployed in Finland and staying there after being discharged, with the first congregation organized in Helsinki in 1858. The community continued with the same population until the 1980s, when the demographics changed to include immigrants from Israel and Russia as well as new converts, who now make up a large part of active participants. The descendants of the original community had a basic knowledge of Judaism, but did not strictly observe Jewish dietary and other precepts. While remaining attached to their Jewish identity, and despite belonging to formally Orthodox congregations in which they still hold positions of power, they tend to be more secularized, mirroring the low religiosity of the surrounding Nordic society. While long frowned upon, intermarriage has become frequent among them, with their spouses refraining from converting. Among the “new Orthodox,” there are both some young members of the original group, who are rediscovering their Jewish identity through an Orthodox framework, and Orthodox Jews who have moved to Finland as adults. The influence of Chabad Lubavitch, as well as of the religious Zionist Orthodoxy offered by Bnei Akiva emissaries, have also played a role. Among the new converts (since the mid-2000s), many come from a Finnish Christian background.



While mainly attending synagogue only on major feasts, descendants of the original group remained attached to Jewish life rituals. However, especially with the rise of intermarriages, circumcision has become a debated issue. While being uncircumcised was prohibited in Jewish kindergartens and schools, circumcision ceased to be a prerequisite in 2018. As active synagogue-goers, the new

Orthodox are not satisfied with merely replicating the past but want to make sure there is a halakhic background for what is practiced in the community. With the support of the above-mentioned international Orthodox organizations, they have prompted a stricter observance, transforming the previous liberal atmosphere in the community. They have also challenged existing customs, and “previous nonissues such as the serving of wine by Jews alone and banning the tearing of toilet paper during Shabbat have gained prominence,” Muir and Tuori write. Increasingly, newly arrived members are Israelis, “many with Sephardic backgrounds,” and “some Ashkenazic melodies have been replaced with Sephardic ones.” While some members

of the original group do not like such changes, others welcome them as contributing to a revival of the community. New converts have to find their way among these different approaches, sometimes mixing different elements. “In a relatively short period of time [the community] has shifted from its homogenous Ashkenazic roots towards a Sephardicized hybrid, mostly due to rising Israeli influences.”

(*European Journal of Jewish Studies*, <https://brill.com/view/journals/ejjs/aop/article-10.1163-1872471x-bja10078/article-10.1163-1872471x-bja10078.xml?ebody=pdf-117260/>)

Between tradition and innovation, women ulama issuing fatwas in Indonesia

Women Islamic scholars in Java, Indonesia’s most populated island, are challenging male authority through fatwa-making, thus enriching Islamic jurisprudence, promoting inclusivity within Indonesian society, and marking a significant shift towards gender justice, writes Nor Ismah of Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University in *Melbourne Asia Review* (April 20). There has been a growing interest among scholars about the place of female religious leaders in Indonesia (see **RW**, April 2021). Besides Ismah’s doctoral thesis on women issuing fatwas, several recent articles have dealt with female ulama in Indonesia, a country currently reported to have the largest population of Muslims worldwide. In her article, Ismah shows that there is already a long history of women’s involvement in issuing Islamic legal opinions and guidance, known as fatwas, within organizational contexts. Muslim women’s organizations like Aisyiyah and Muslimat have played a crucial role in empowering women and promoting their participation in religious dialogue and fatwa-making. However, the participation of women in major fatwa-making forums remained very limited.

But this male dominance is getting increasingly contested. The inaugural Indonesian Congress of Women Ulama (KUPI) in 2017 was a landmark event that challenged male-centric and patriarchal authority within Islam, introducing innovative concepts like *ulama perempuan* (female Islamic scholars) and *keulamaan* (clerical capacity) of women. Ismah explains how KUPI has developed a fatwa-making methodology that integrates traditional approaches with a justice-oriented framework, emphasizing values like compassion, equality, and reciprocity. “At its inaugural congress, KUPI issued three fatwa addressing child marriage, sexual violence, and environmental disasters impacting women.” KUPI has welcomed approaches integrating “classical Islamic scholarship, modern methods, and feminist discourse to reinterpret texts in a gender-sensitive manner,” instead of choosing the path of feminist critiques directly challenging traditional scholarship. But Ismah acknowledges that such efforts have also had to face resistance from some male ulama who view the gender justice agenda as contradictory to Indonesian Islamic values, as well as challenges related to the legitimacy of female authority in fatwa-making. “They argue that existing Islamic women’s organizations in Indonesia...are adequate to support the empowerment of Muslim women.” To address these challenges, KUPI and its



supporting organizations have implemented strategies to mainstream their knowledge and fatwas through grassroots programs, digital media platforms, and advocacy efforts.

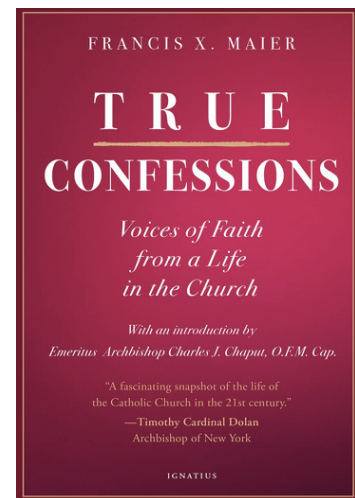
(*Melbourne Asia Review*, <https://www.melbourneasiareview.edu.au/the-increasing-role-of-womens-fatwa-making-in-indonesia/>; see also Arifah Millati Agustina and Nor Ismah, “Challenging Traditional Islamic Authority: Indonesian Female Ulama and the Fatwa Against Forced Marriages,” *Journal of Islamic Law*, <https://e-journal.iainptk.ac.id/index.php/jil/article/view/2319>; Nor Ismah, “Women’s Fatwa-Making in Indonesia: Gender, Authority, and Everyday Legal Practice,” *International Journal of Islam in Asia*, https://brill.com/view/journals/ijia/4/1-2/article-p75_4.xml)

Findings & Footnotes

- Francis X. Maier’s new book *True Confessions* (Ignatius Press, \$24.95) is unusual. Although the author is a well-known conservative Catholic journalist, he doesn’t editorialize (aside from the Introduction) but rather turns the spotlight on Catholicism in the U.S., attempting to paint a portrait of the American church that might be missed in surveys. He interviews about 30 bishops, 16 priests and religious, and 57 lay people. The picture of the church one gets from reading the book is one of some disorientation about the rapid changes in the church—with church closings, mergers, and the new style of Pope Francis and his ambivalence about the American church—but also concern about declining numbers of Catholics and the stigma the church has acquired because of the sexual abuse crisis. In fact, Maier provides interesting interviews of church

bureaucrats and lawyers regarding the traumatic effects for victims and the financial strains from lawsuits that have led to a breaking point for some dioceses.

The theme of cultural conflict and marginalization is common among the accounts of the laity; some members appear to agree with the late Pope Benedict's forecast of a smaller yet more committed and countercultural church. Maier's intent to exclude the "extremes" of left and right (even if he does interview more leaders and lay people leaning conservative, with his former boss, conservative Cardinal Charles Chaput, assuming a prominent part in the book) may not make the book representative; the reader won't hear about the push for women deacons (let alone priests). But as surveys and a recent in-depth Associated Press article (<https://apnews.com/article/catholic-church-shift-orthodoxy-tradition-7638fa2013a593f8cb07483ffc8ed487>) suggest, active Catholics increasingly swing right in doctrine and politics. Maier's chapter on what Catholics are "doing right" offers a noteworthy overview of Catholic innovations (again, most coming from the conservative side of the spectrum), bringing some contrast to the forecasts of decline. The chapter profiles actors like the campus group Focus, Chris Stefanick, a leading lay evangelist, and his group Real Life Catholic, and the Napa Legal Institute, which works on religious freedom issues. Another chapter looks at the investors, such as Timothy Busch (founder of the Napa Institute), who have stepped in and funded these new groups, often in the absence of official church support.



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

The Society for American Civic Renewal (SACR) has caught the attention of journalists and social critics for seeking to revive a fraternal order for men of a Christian and conservative bent. The group's founders, Scott Yenor and Skyler Kressin, argue that the only places left for male bonding in American society are in sports or men's church groups, but such groups either domesticate or isolate men from making contributions to civic life. The society was also started in 2020 to combat the loneliness and "deaths of despair" that have been found to be prevalent among American middle-aged men. The group seeks to develop deep friendship and community involvement based on a shared Christian faith, belief in natural law, and a commitment to traditional marriage. The society is ecumenical, promoting fellowship across denominational lines. The society's activities include holding dinners, lectures, roundtable discussions and special events that can range from seminars on ethical investing to dressing professionally. The founders say that their gatherings, which are by invitation only, have led to the formation of new businesses and partnerships. The society has come under attack from

critics on the left who charge that the secretive nature of the organization carries a political agenda with theocratic tendencies that recruits members from the upper crust of American society. Supporters and members of the society argue that the organization, with about 12 branches nationwide, is only advocating for what fraternal orders in the U.S. have done for 150 years. (**Source:** *First Things*, April 5; *Talking Points Memo*, March 9)

