

From culture wars to cultural nihilism: An interview with James Davison Hunter

*The University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter is best known for his 1991 book, **Culture Wars**. He argued that American society was increasingly divided between “orthodox” and “progressives” on central questions of morality. Hunter calls his new book, **Democracy and Solidarity: The Cultural Roots of America’s Political Crisis** (Yale University Press, \$40), a “bookend” to his earlier work, this time going deeper into the history of the country’s cultural conflicts and its contemporary outgrowths and implications. **RW** interviewed Hunter by email in late May.*

RW: In your new book you focus on how the U.S. has, until fairly recently, been held together by a “hybrid-Enlightenment.” Could you briefly explain this?

Hunter: All healthy societies are bound together, not by the power of a state and its military, but by the power of a culture. Through most of history, cultures were religious in character. Both belief and practice were shared widely, even among those who dissented, for they dissented against what they recognized as a dominant culture.

The Enlightenment was an intellectual and cultural revolution that sought to undermine the authority of traditional religious belief, practices, and institutions in favor of an alternative rooted in the authority of reason. But in America, the Enlightenment was not as aggressively and violently secular as it was in France. It was not reacting against a powerful Catholic hierarchy that supported a sclerotic monarchy. It was moderate, drawing upon a variety of cultural sources, among them, classical republicanism, Lockean individualism, and, prominently, the reformed traditions of Protestant Christianity. It was a hybrid, with these sources blending together in ways that were distinctly American. This hybrid-Enlightenment was the source of political solidarity at the time of the founding.



James Davison Hunter is a historical and cultural sociologist concerned with the problems of moral order in the midst of political and cultural change in American life. (Photo by Dan Addison, University of Virginia Communications, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/culture-wars-author-james-d-hunter-takes-new-science-morality>)

RW: In your earlier work on the culture wars in 1991, you wrote that there were still enough common cultural resources to keep “orthodox” and “progressive” opponents on the same page and speaking the same language. What has changed with the new culture wars we are seeing now?

Hunter: The hybrid-Enlightenment was possible and culturally powerful in large measure because it was opaque. People could read their own tradition and communities into it. References to God or the Creator, for example, were vague enough that they could be embraced by deists, Calvinists, Roman Catholics, Mormons, and Jews alike. Ideals like freedom could be embraced by many different communities, even though they meant something different within them. This “useful misunderstanding” could be sustained over the generations in large measure because the practical morality of these communities remained much the same—a similar, even if vague understanding of family life, gender roles, work, civic decency, public responsibility, and the relative importance of faith and the practices that went along with it.

This remained true for most of the 20th century. In the early decades of the culture war, however, the general moral consensus began to dissolve. Drawing upon and in some respects radicalizing different strands of the hybrid-Enlightenment, moral differences over abortion, gender roles, sexuality, the authority of religion and the like were no longer marginal, but rather mainstream causes of public and political contention. Opponents were still recognizable to each other, but their moral differences became increasingly incommensurable. Each side could speak of freedom, equality, and toleration, but impute fundamentally different meaning to these words.

RW: In this revision of your work on the culture wars, you view these conflicts as becoming more secular. Why is that?

Hunter: Because competing sides of the culture war no longer believe that they can persuade the other side, they have stopped trying. Moreover, they have largely stopped trying to legitimate their positions through an appeal to common American traditions of political philosophy. The culture war, then, has devolved into a contest over competing hegemonic projects where the only thing that matters to each is defeating their opponents. Power is the main thing that matters.

RW: In the place of reasoned arguments or even secular and religious beliefs and worldviews clashing, you write that a kind of “cultural nihilism” based on grievances and even revenge is becoming prominent among both parties in this intensified culture war. Could you explain this?

Hunter: Power may be the main thing that matters in the contemporary culture war, but it still needs to be justified. It still needs to be seen as legitimate if only to those who seek it. Absent any shared sources of cultural or political authority, a new language and a new cultural logic have emerged to rationalize and validate their claims to power. This is what I call the cultural logic of resentment, a narrative of injury that identifies an “antagonist” as the source of that injury and negates that enemy through an ethics of revenge. What this means is that neither side of the culture war can see their adversary as a loyal opposition but only as an enemy, and enemies should be destroyed. One often hears voices on the Left and Right say that the country would be better off if the other side didn’t exist at all. The shared cultural nihilism is fundamentally oriented toward dehumanizing the opposition; it is fundamentally about a symbolic and cultural annihilation. This is the fundamental nature and purpose of “cancellation,” and both sides practice it. So far as I can tell, this is every bit as true on the Christian Right as it is on the Christian Left.

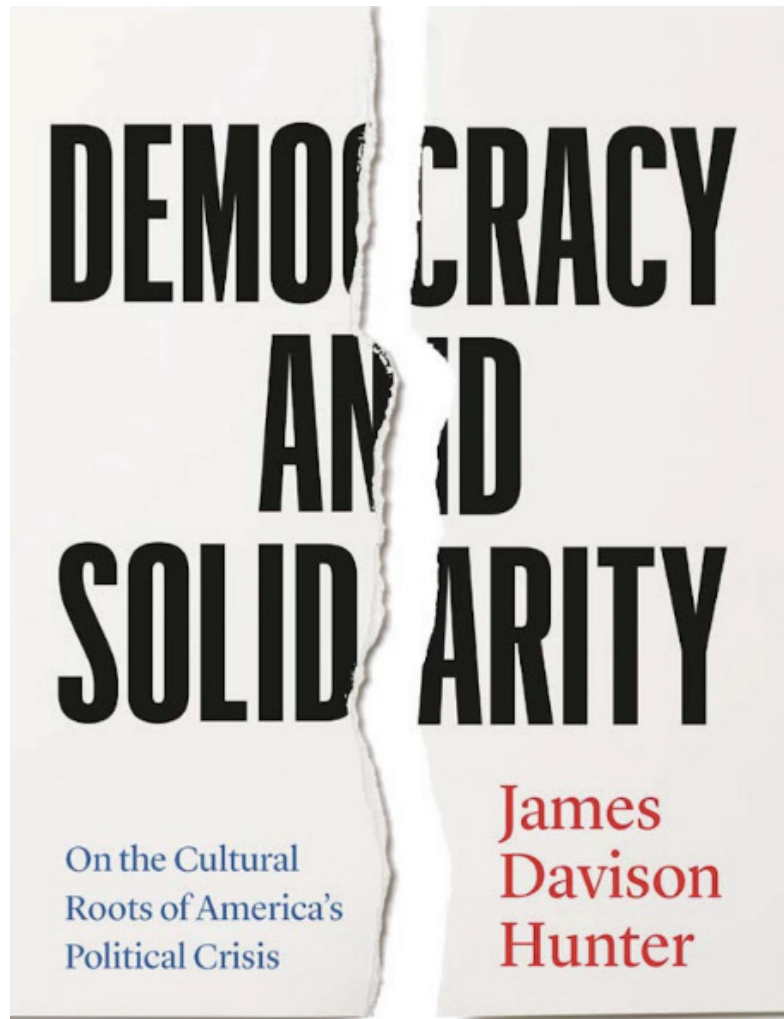
RW: In evangelical circles, one hears much about how conservative Christians are now living in a “negative world,” where older forms of tolerance and neutrality toward Christianity have been replaced by hostility. Do you see this taking place as the culture wars have intensified?

Hunter: There is no question that American public life has become less congenial to American evangelicals, and in a way this is new. Hostility toward religion as expressed, say, in French anticlericalism was never a prominent feature of American intellectual life or elite culture. But it has become so in the last several decades. The consequence of this has been a marginalization of Christianity in America—full stop. This is especially seen in the stigmatization of Christianity and of Christians themselves within the leading institutions of cultural formation—intellectual life, higher education, the arts, journalism and the news media, popular entertainment, advertising, and so on.

But if we're honest, evangelicals were a prominent source of the reigning culture of negation. Christians sought to resist what they have seen as the decline of American society—which was really a transformation from modern to late modern culture—by going negative on “secular humanism,” feminism, gay rights, and so on. In other words, the cultural ground beneath their feet had shifted. America had become post-Christian on its way to becoming post-liberal. Christians reacted by trying to keep America “Christian” and using political means to do so. In short, they were, and still are, trying to use the coercive power of the state to achieve cultural ends. It not only generated a new and deeper hostility among their opponents, but it is a strategy that is guaranteed to fail. Politics can never do the work of culture.

RW: You have written how, based on history, culture wars can become shooting wars. What is the potential for violence or even a civil war in these current conflicts?

Hunter: Culture wars don't inevitably become shooting wars, but you never have a shooting war without a prior culture war. The reason is that culture provides the justifications for violence. In practice, we dehumanize what we want to destroy. To portray someone or some group as less than human allows us to think that they “deserve what's coming to them,” that they are not owed



love or safety or protection. Symbolic cancellation is a prelude to economic, political, and bodily cancellation.

There is no question in my mind that our political culture is moving rapidly toward that point. Competing sides of the culture war have been dehumanizing each other for quite some time. Thus, the data on violence and threats of violence toward political competitors has increased substantially. This does not mean it will ultimately lead to a civil war, at least in any traditional sense. In the late modern world, asymmetrical warfare tends to manifest itself episodically rather than systematically—in political violence, terrorism, and the like.

RW: In your 2010 book, *To Change the World*, you advise Christians to de-emphasize activism and embrace a model of “faithful presence,” where a quieter and more long-term religious influence could engage society. But in your new book you see an “absence of a thoughtful Christian cosmology as its political vision.” So what do you see has gone wrong in Christian communities?

Hunter: I was discouraging *political* activism, activism that is explicitly partisan oriented toward influencing the coercive power of the state. Why did I discourage political activism? As I argued in that earlier book, political activism, in effect, can be a way of saying that the problems of the world should be solved by others besides myself and by institutions other than the church. It is, after all, much easier to vote for a politician who champions child welfare than to adopt a baby born in poverty, to vote for a referendum that would expand health care benefits for seniors than to care for an elderly and infirm parent, and to go to a rally for racial harmony than to get to know someone of a different race than yours. True responsibility invariably costs. Political participation, then, can and often does amount to an avoidance of responsibility.

It is also a very narrow way of construing activism. How, after all, is adopting a child, caring for the infirm, or befriending and helping a person of another race any less a form of activism? One could argue that these actions are more powerful forms of activism, all the more so because they require long-term commitments to tangible change borne from the motive of love.

Don’t get me wrong here. Political activism is an entirely legitimate expression of one’s calling as a Christian. The problem is that it is limited in what it can accomplish, and it almost always carries unintended negative consequences. The thrust of my argument was that Christians need to think more expansively about what constitutes activism and do so in ways that are more consonant with the identity of Christ who was and is love incarnate.

My observation in the new book about the “absence of a thoughtful Christian cosmology as its political vision” is mainly a recognition that Christian political actors (both politicians and their parties) are no longer even trying to justify political action theologically. Attempts to justify the political identity and agenda of Donald Trump with references to King Cyrus don’t count.

Though I strongly disagree with the uses of millennialism in 19th-century Christianity, it did provide a theologically coherent justification for nation-building.

RW: You conclude that while there is much organizational activity and bridge-building to help mend these conflicts on the local level, such efforts of reconciliation and dialogue don't have much influence on the national level. But is there anything that gives you some hope that these conflicts can be de-escalated, particularly on the religious front?

Hunter: The potential for de-escalation is always present and one should always remain hopeful that such efforts, where they exist, can be scaled up into greater influence. The problem is that on the religious left and right, many people have conflated their activism with their faith, effectively seeing these things as synonymous.

Christian Science looking to greater lay and community roles to stem tide of decline

Considered one of the more dramatic cases of religious decline in American history, the Church of Christ, Scientist's freefall in membership is convincing the church's leadership to adopt a new strategy of lay involvement, writes Rolf Swensen in the journal *Nova Religio* (February). From being proclaimed America's fastest growing religion in the 1920s, Christian Science suffered a steep constant decline starting by the 1940s or earlier, marginalized by medical advances and the



Christian Science Mother Church (source: https://www.reddit.com/r/Christian_Science/?rdt=57932).

medicalization of society in general. The lack of social outlets for members, with few theological demands, few missionary and outreach efforts and a bureaucratic leadership are also often cited as reasons for the continuing decline. But Swensen reports that the Mother Church, or headquarters, is undergoing a major shift. Although church founder Mary Baker Eddy left no provision for amending the *Church Manual*, the Board of Directors now “encourages individuals and churches to go to the *Manual* and come to their own inspired and prayerful conclusions.” This is a change from the “pontificating approach of the Directors for more than a century.”

Swenson adds that the most momentous change may be the reinterpretation of the bylaw called “A Rule for Motives and Acts,” which is read on the first Sunday of each month. The bylaw was meant by Eddy to prevent church infighting and subdue “personality,” but was seen as discouraging the “membership from having any thoughts about how the church should be run.” But increasingly the leadership is permitting individuals and branch churches to have more freedom in running their own programs. Sociologist Elise Wolff has noted that “branch organizations [now] have a degree of autonomy that allows them some innovation.” At the 2021 Annual Meeting, church director Robin Hoagland praised the “unique ways that branch churches are meeting their communities’ needs.” Since then other leaders have endorsed community outreach and caring for one’s local community. Swensen also notes how the church’s all-male leadership has recently included two women on its Board of Directors.

(*Nova Religio*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/56/journal/764>)

LDS missions enhance online presence while showing a rebound

The mission service expected of young members in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to change, particularly in embracing significant online ministry and proselytism efforts closer to home, according to Lauren Jackson in the *New York Times* (May 12). In recent years, the traditional missions undertaken by young Mormons have become more inclusive of women and have relaxed dress codes, the length of missions, and restrictions on contact with family. But the move toward a greater social media presence started with the pandemic [see Vol. 35, No. 12 issue of **RW**] and has developed since then to minimize traditional door knocking with missionaries making and posting videos on social media and finding people online with whom to make initial contact through messaging. “So far, the changes appear to be working: In the last three years, as pandemic restrictions lifted and young members responded to an appeal from the church’s top leader for them to serve, the number of full-time proselytizing missionaries has risen by around 25 percent, according to church data,” writes Jackson. Today most missionaries start their training online at home rather than at the church-run boot camps that their parents went to, making the transition less jarring. Being home also gives the new missionaries an opportunity to start with reaching their own communities, Jackson adds. Other big recent changes include a relaxation of the dress code: in some places, young men don’t have the



LDS missionaries online (source: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/missionaries-teaching-the-gospel-to-legions-via-smartphones-laptops?lang=eng>).

trademark ties and white shirts and women (who are not required to go on missions) can wear pants. Furthermore, with smart phones, most young missionaries can now stay in touch with their parents.

American diaspora taking lead in pushing for reform in Zoroastrianism

As Zoroastrianism becomes a global faith due to immigration, the American diaspora is calling for a more pluralistic and reformed approach toward those outside the fold, although it is uncertain how these proposals will be received by the religion's leaders, writes Paulina Niechcial in the journal *Culture and Religion* (online in May). Zoroastrianism is an ancient monotheistic religion originating in Iran and India that has spread throughout the West through immigration. In recent years, the faith has struggled with decline, one reason being that only those born into Zoroastrianism are considered members. Niechcial (Jagiellonian University, Poland) attended the World Zoroastrian Congress (WZC) events in Perth, Australia in 2014 and in New York City in 2022 and studied how these gatherings both reflected changes and generated new demands among the faithful. The WZC is held every four or five years, with its recent meeting in the U.S. reflecting the religion's significant growth and youthful membership in North America (with now



12th World Zoroastrian Congress in New York in 2022 (source: <https://wzc2022.nyc/>).

over 20,000 adherents) and decreases in its homelands of India and Iran (totaling 76,000). Serving both as a festival and educational event, the congress in New York stressed the theme of belonging, even challenging the belief that the faith has an authentic homeland outside the diasporas.

The inclusiveness of Zoroastrianism was also emphasized, showcasing the presence of Kurds from Iraqi Kurdistan who had left Islam for Zoroastrianism. These Kurds' portrayal of themselves as “reverts” who had returned to their ancestral religion made them more acceptable to traditional Zoroastrian communities. Even more challenging to Zoroastrian orthodoxy during the congress was research presented by two young scholars on the identity formation of children having one Parsi Zoroastrian parent and one non-Parsi and non-Zoroastrian parent. One of the scholars touched on an even more controversial subject, the identity of people who did not come from Zoroastrian families but became “Zoroastrian by choice.” Other personal stories told on stage during the WZC in New York argued that Zoroastrianism could not be reduced to a black-and-white division between those born into the religion and outsiders. At the end of the congress,

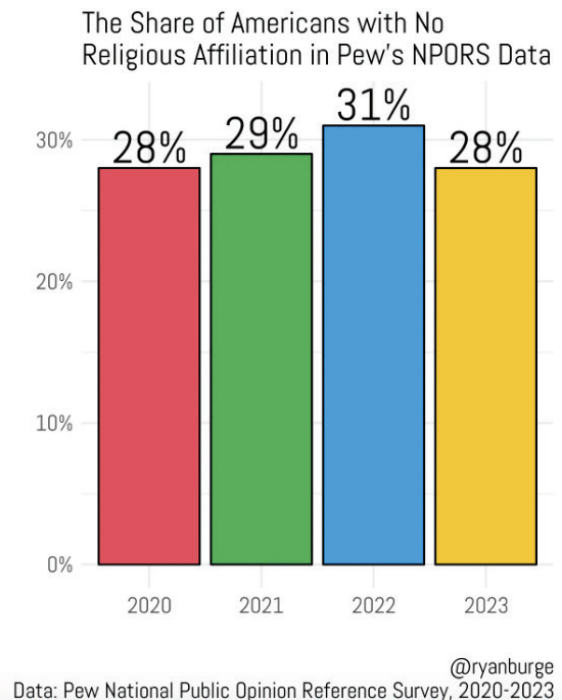
a survey taken during the event showed that 70 percent of the attendees agreed that Zoroastrianism was a set of rules and behaviors, not something one had to be born into. A 2023 survey also found wide acceptance of interfaith marriages (with 77 percent support worldwide and 90.5 percent in the diaspora). Another theme of the conference was about equality, namely the perception of discrimination against women in the religion. The taboo of menstruating women and their exclusion from rituals and the discrimination against women in interfaith marriages (where men are seen as the transmitters of the faith) were questioned.

The even more controversial idea of LGBTQ+ acceptance was also broached, with the presence of rainbow flags and young people singing “We Are the Champions” by Freddy Mercury, a famous bisexual rock singer of Parsi descent. These themes and the suggested reforms in New York were not present at the 2014 congress, which was guided more by India’s conservative Parsi leadership along with some Iranian leaders (who, because of distance and travel restrictions, were less prominent). The later event suggests that the pressures of growing rates of interfaith marriages of Zoroastrians (comprising almost 25 percent of American members) and the decline of the Zoroastrian population could lead to shifts in policy and teachings. Niechcial concludes that like other religious festivals (such as the Catholic World Youth Day), the WZC shows how “church-controlled collective life” is giving way to individual interpretations and experiences. But without a centralized authority, the ferment seen in the recent WZC could be just as much a source of new divisions as of change and reform in world Zoroastrianism.

(*Culture and Religion*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcar20>)

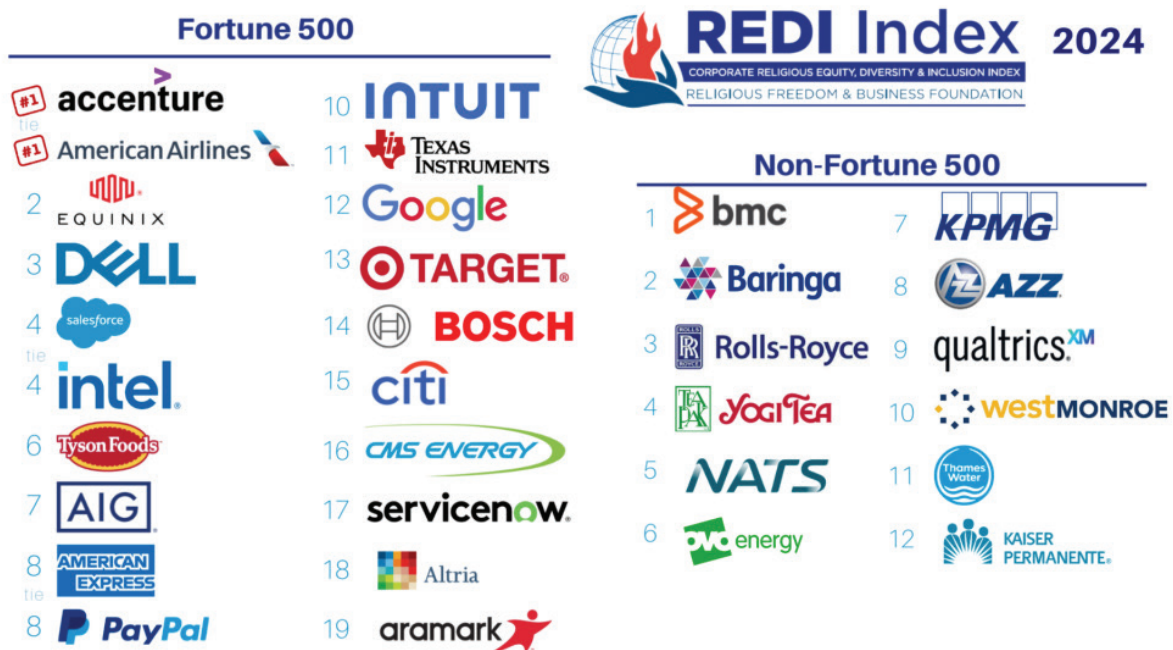
CURRENT RESEARCH

• **A new analysis of survey data suggests that the growth of the non-affiliated or “nones” may be slowing down.** In his newsletter *Graphs about Religion* (May 20), Ryan Burge reports finding a fairly consistent slowdown in the percentage of Americans who claim no religion, based on data from Pew, the General Social Survey (GSS), and the Cooperative Election Study (CES). Pew’s most recent published data showed 28 percent of Americans claiming no religious affiliation in 2023, a slight dip from the previous year, while the CES data, the latest of which was released in May, showed that from 2020 to 2023, the percentage of nones was relatively stable. In 2020, the CES found that 34 percent of those surveyed were nones, while in 2021 and 2023, that



percentage was 36 percent, and in 2022, 35 percent. [The CES has consistently found higher percentages of nones than the GSS and Pew.] Burge writes that, from a “pure statistical standpoint, I don’t know if we can say with any certainty whether there’s a larger share of nones in the United States today than there was in 2019.” But he writes that, although most of the Americans who wanted to give up on identifying with a religion have already done so, future proportional growth in this population will likely come from the older, more religious Americans being replaced by less religious younger Americans. The slowdown in non-affiliation may mean that the U.S. will end up in the future with large numbers of religious people and nonreligious people alike, with neither group making up a large majority. Such a standoff could intensify polarization and have negative consequences for a democratic system that needs cooperation and compromise.

• **Among Fortune 500 companies, those including religion in their diversity programs now make up a strong majority, representing 85 percent of such firms, according to a study by the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation (RFBF).** This is more than twice the number that did so in 2022, and 62 of these companies, or 12.4 percent, now showcase faith-based employee business resource groups, up from 7.4 percent in 2022. Every year the RFBF surveys companies on their faith-based practices and policies [see Vol. 38, No. 6 issue of **RW** for a report on last year’s RFBF conference]. Brian Grim, head of the foundation, said that these numbers represent a “tipping point” in the number of companies embracing religion as a core component



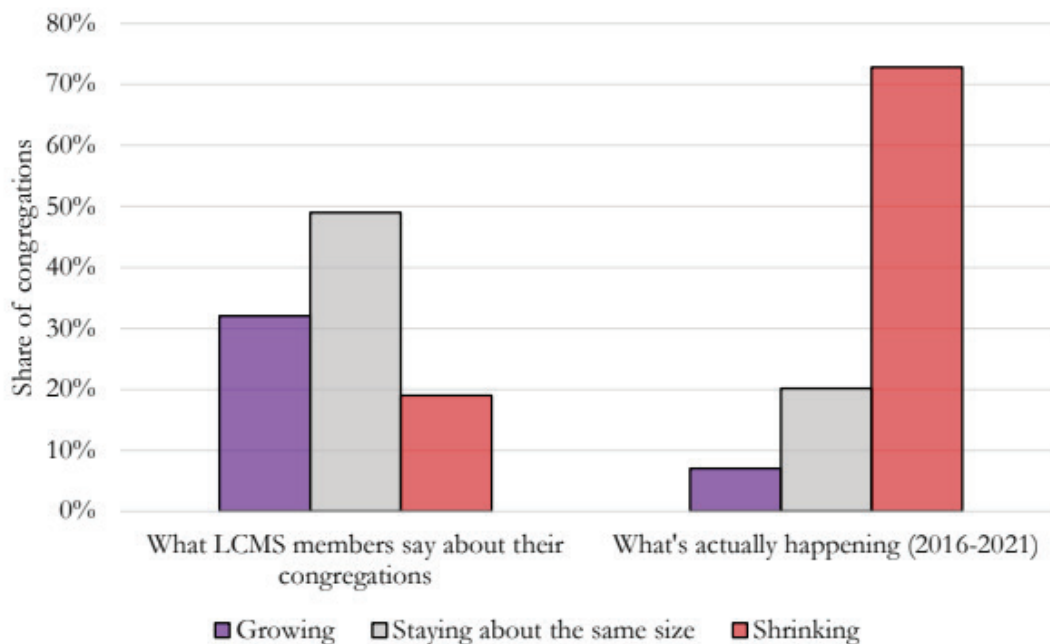
Source: Religious Freedom & Business Foundation (<https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/redi-index-2024>).

of diversity. He added that this year companies were especially attentive to how people of faith responded to global news, including the Israel-Hamas war. This year, Accenture and American Airlines were tied as the most faith-friendly Fortune 500 companies, both earning perfect scores on the index, which assessed over 30 faith-friendly companies via an opt-in survey. The survey evaluated companies in 11 categories, including their religious accommodations, spiritual care/chaplaincy services, and procedures for reporting discrimination.

(For the RFBF report visit: <https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/redi-index-2024>)

- **Congregational growth in the conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) is occurring more among more liturgical and confessional churches than larger seeker-sensitive and contemporary worship congregations, according to a survey reported in the Lutheran liturgical journal, *Gottesdienst* (May 7).** The journal cites the recent Lutheran Religious Life Survey, which was conducted in 2023, focusing on congregational growth trajectories and personal conversion histories. The survey found that LCMS members, especially in larger churches, dramatically overestimate the health of their congregations, being three times likelier to report growth as compared to attendance data and 70 percent less likely to report decline.

Figure 1: Perceived Congregational Growth



Source: Lutheran Religious Life Survey (<https://www.lutheranlifesurvey.church/>).

But those congregations identifying as more liturgical and “confessional,” which means adhering to the historic Lutheran confessions, receive more converts, are experiencing less serious decline in attendance and membership, and may have younger membership profiles. Contrary to previous church growth research, “missional” and contemporary churches and services were found to receive less converts than the more conservative doctrinal and liturgical churches. Smaller LCMS churches in rural areas or small towns received higher rates of converts than larger urban or suburban congregations. Exposure to LCMS parochial schools was found to be a “major factor shaping conversion: many people become LCMS due to their experience in [these] schools, and LCMS children enrolled in LCMS schools may have higher rates of remaining” in the denomination, writes John Bussman. He adds that the synod still invests most of its church growth energies toward missional and contemporary church expressions.

(*Gottesdienst*, <https://www.gottesdienst.org/gottesblog/2024/5/7/interesting-but-not-surprising-results>)

● **A new study finds that the Catholic Church and the papacy, though highly centralized, are still responsive to members’ political views and preferences, and that this tends to strengthen the faithful’s trust in the institution.** The study, by political scientist Jeffrey Ziegler of Trinity College (Dublin) and published in the journal *Politics and Religion* (online in May), was based on an analysis of over 10,000 papal statements and survey experiments conducted in Brazil and Mexico to investigate how Catholics’ trust and participation are affected by the church’s responsiveness to their concerns. Ziegler analyzed 10,445 papal documents from

Table 2. News headlines summarizing papal rhetoric for each issue area

Conflict
1. “Pope pleads for end to ‘homicidal madness’ of terrorism.”
2. “Pope meets with Colombian leaders in wake of peace deal.”
3. “Let’s unite against war and violence, Pope urges at Roman synagogue.”
Economy
1. “Pope says economy must fight ‘throwaway culture’.”
2. “Generate new models of economic progress, Pope urges business leaders.”
3. “‘Economy of exclusion, inequality caused growth of poverty’, says Pope.”
Socio-political issues
1. “Education and play are key to childhood, Pope tells Cuba, US youth.”
2. “Holy See backs global health goals, says ‘leave no one behind’.”
3. “Pope asks: give immigrants compassion, not blame.”
Human rights
1. “Vatican diplomacy zeros-in on human rights in Africa.”
2. “For Pope, it’s imperative: religious liberty is a gift from God. Defend it.”
3. “Pope says promotion of human rights is central to the commitment of the European Union.”
Control (neutral)
1. “Pope marks 80th birthday in Rome, addresses Cardinals at Mass.”
2. “If you’re tempted to gossip, ‘bite your tongue,’ Pope says.”
3. “Love God now—because you might not have tomorrow, Pope says.”

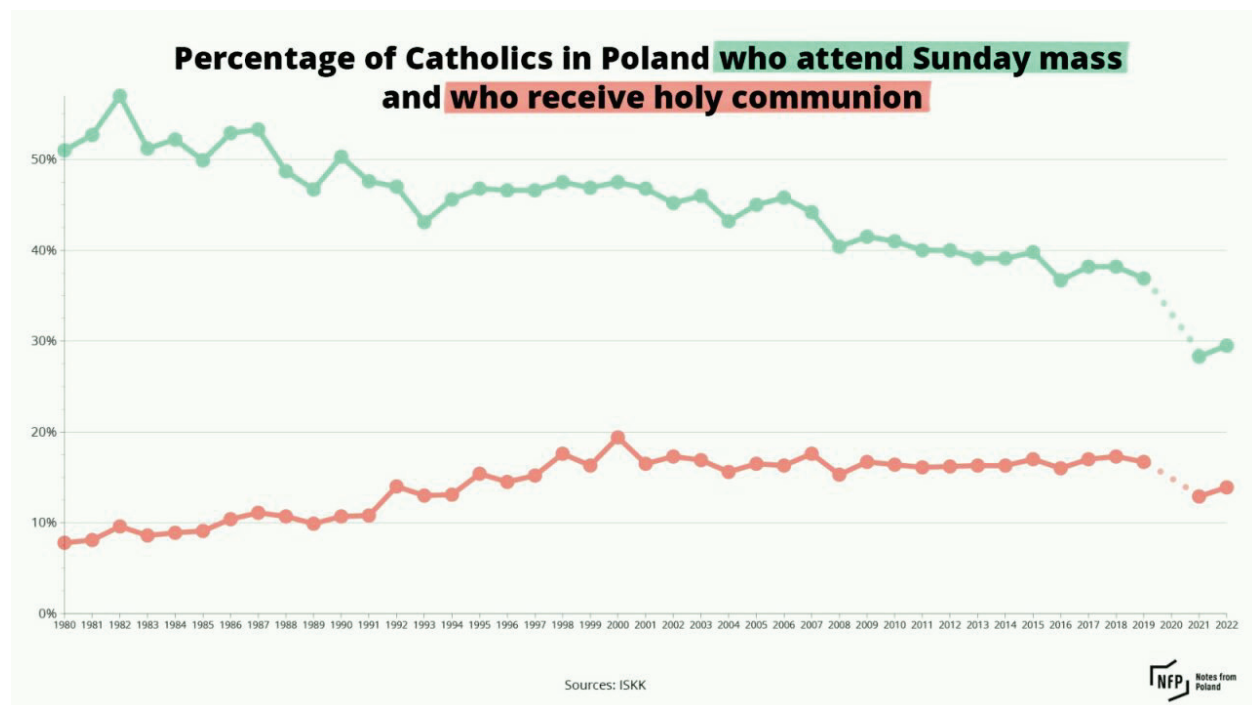
Notes: The survey was translated from English to Spanish (for Mexican respondents) and Brazilian Portuguese (for Brazilian respondents). The original survey experiment was back-translated by two native speakers for each language. The translated versions of the survey experiment text that respondents viewed are available in the Supplementary Materials.

1995 to 2014, most of which were publicized in the media, comparing them to survey data on Catholic public opinion. He found that when a greater proportion of Catholics became concerned about a given issue, papal rhetoric devoted to the same issue also increased.

In the survey experiments, Catholic respondents in Brazil and Mexico were asked to react to news headlines regarding socio-political topics addressed by the pope. Ziegler found that among respondents who were more likely to expect responsiveness, papal messages reflecting their concerns tended to increase their organizational participation and enhance their perception of the church's responsiveness. Unexpectedly, Ziegler found that Catholics who were less active did not view the church as any more responsive when they received papal rhetoric that was responsive to their views. In fact, they were less likely after receiving these messages to trust, attend, give, and volunteer in the church. Ziegler concludes that although there are few mechanisms for members to hold a centralized organization like the Catholic Church accountable, because its unelected leaders still have to rely on the members' support and material resources, they are incentivized to be responsive to their political preferences.

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

• **A recent survey finds that the proportion of non-believers in Poland has risen to its highest-ever level of almost 14 percent, while the percentage who attend mass each Sunday has dropped to an all-time low of 34 percent.** According to *Notes from Poland* (May 23), the survey was conducted from January to April and released on May 21 by the Public Opinion



Source: <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/12/19/church-attendance-in-poland-rose-after-pandemic-but-remains-well-below-pre-covid-levels/>

Research Center (CBOS), a leading public opinion research institute in Poland. The last Polish census, conducted in 2021, had found 71 percent of the population identifying as Roman Catholic, down from 88 percent a decade earlier. But in the recent survey, when asked about their denominational identification, nearly 89 percent of the respondents continued to describe themselves as Roman Catholics. Whatever the exact figures, Polish researchers have been reporting a weakening in religious faith in recent years, which has been attributed to factors like indifference, loss of interest, and anger over the church's political involvement and revelations of child sexual abuse by clergy. The church's support for an unpopular near-total abortion ban and its close ties to the previous conservative government have also contributed to the decline.

The proportion of Catholics who attend Sunday mass regularly has fallen from about 58 percent before 2005 to 39 percent in 2024. The trend of declining religiosity accelerated since the onset of the pandemic, with the fastest declines seen among young people and those with higher education. The Catholic Church's own figures—released by the church's statistics institute at the end of last year—are even lower, with Sunday mass attendance dropping from 36.9 percent in 2019 to 29.5 percent in 2022 (*Notes from Poland*, Dec. 19). The differences in the data from two reliable sources indicate the need for caution about using such figures as more than indicators, with both pointing, however, to the same trend. This pattern may be accompanying other signs of secularization. In May, the mayor of Warsaw banned the display of religious symbols such as crosses from city hall, making it the first city in Poland to do so (*Notes from Poland*, May 16). While the rules do not apply to religious symbols worn for personal use, “crosses cannot be hung on walls, something that is common in state offices in Poland. Staff also cannot display religious symbols on their desks.”

(*Notes from Poland*, <https://notesfrompoland.com/>; CBOS website, <https://www.cbos.pl/EN/home/home.php>)

Ordination of deaconess in Africa stirs Orthodox world, but consequences are unclear

Claiming to fulfill a 2016 decision by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria to revive the ancient order of deaconesses, Metropolitan Seraphim of Zimbabwe caught the Orthodox world by surprise by ordaining Angelic Molen (a married woman with two children) as a deaconess (*St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess*, May 2). Molen was first ordained as a reader and a subdeaconess, and her ordination service utilized the rite used for deacons, with the masculine pronouns changed to feminine, rather than choosing an ancient text for the specific ordination of a deaconess, Carrie Frederick Frost reports in *Public Orthodoxy* (May 17). “Because Deaconess Angelic is the first deaconess of our own time, Metropolitan Serafim elevated her to the rank of ‘archdeaconess’ on May 4,” Frost adds. While there were indeed instances of deaconesses in ancient times, as well as some instances in contemporary Orthodox



Deaconess Angelic Molen (credit: St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/good-reads/ordination-of-deaconess-angelic/>).

contexts such as some women's monasteries in Greece, deaconesses have not been meant to fulfill the same functions as male deacons. Theologians interviewed by *Orthodox Times* (May 12) insisted that these deaconesses were made by chirothesy (laying on of hands) and not chirotony (ordination). In the case of Deaconess Angelic, the difference is that she will have liturgical and pastoral duties, doing everything that deacons do in Orthodox liturgical services as well as responding to local needs concerning women. The announcement was received with caution.

The statement released by the Patriarchate of Alexandria itself on May 11 was expressed in somewhat embarrassed tones. While confirming its 2016 "decision in principle to revive and activate the institution of deaconesses within its pastoral jurisdiction," the statement added that the decision had been "referred for further examination to establish the details concerning the attire, method of ministry delivery, and liturgical role of deaconesses in the contemporary life of the Church." It noted that Metropolitan Seraphim, "being an experienced missionary to Africa, proceeded with the implementation of the initial decision of the Holy Synod" without waiting for the study to be completed. But Metropolitan Seraphim claims that the Patriarch himself gave the green light in 2023 to his request to ordain a deaconess. The May 2 ordination will certainly

boost the discussion on deaconesses in some sectors of the Orthodox Church, but its wider consequences are still unclear and it remains to be seen whether further ordinations will take place along the same lines. That the initiative appears to have been taken by a bishop on an individual basis is seen as a danger to the already threatened unity of the Orthodox Church, according to Metropolitan Saba of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America (*Orthodox Christianity*, May 17). The current context is indeed a sensitive one, with the Moscow Patriarchate recently creating its own network of parishes on the African continent—in part by integrating former clergy of the Alexandria Patriarchate—and eager to position itself as the herald of “traditional” Orthodoxy in contrast to supposedly modern interpretations of the faith.

(Initial report by the St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess, <https://orthodoxdeaconess.org/the-deaconess/contemporary-orthodox-deaconesses/bishop-ordains-orthodox-christian-woman-as-deaconess/>)

Russia drawing the spiritually disenchanted to a new “American dream”?

A small but growing number of disenchanted Americans have expatriated to Russia in search of a more traditional society, often with Christian motivations, reports the *Free Press* (May 7). Peter



Source: <https://www.thefp.com/p/american-men-seeking-american-dream-in-russia>

Savodnik writes that these expats are at the “nexus of a growing movement of Americans chasing the American dream. In Russia.” The reasons given for this move often involve the view that Russia is becoming the next bastion of Christianity after the U.S. has moved in increasingly secular and liberal directions. In interviewing 20 of these American expats who have arrived in Russia in the past four years, Savodnik finds that they made the move “because they no longer believed the one person they once thought could save America—Donald Trump—could still save it. America, they felt, was beyond saving now.” One expat, a 49-year-old YouTuber from Florida, said he believed God had called him to Russia, adding that the country “feels like our positive vision of 1950s America.” Savodnik adds that the “Americans flocking to Russia told me they did so to save their children and their children’s children.” While not providing an estimate of the new expats, he writes that they have moved to Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well the “wild east”—Siberia. One retired computer engineer who lives in Yalta in the Crimea said he moved because “the U.S. is a political mess.” “Socially, things are a mess. Spiritually, things are a mess.” Few of the expats interviewed were bothered by the actions of Vladimir Putin or viewed him as a dictator. They were generally favorable about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, believing that the U.S. had a role in instigating the war.

(*Free Press*, https://www.thefp.com/p/american-men-seeking-american-dream-in-russia?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)

India’s schools contending over influence of Hindu nationalism

India’s schools are becoming the latest battleground over the influence of Hindu nationalism. The web magazine, *The Revealer* (May 8), reports that in April, India’s top educational body, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), made changes to textbooks that removed references to the Babri mosque, a medieval mosque destroyed by Hindu nationalists because of their belief that it was a former Hindu temple. “Educators across the country are taking note and voicing concerns” as schools are becoming targets of curricula revisions, particularly in history and science (including challenging evolution), under an increasingly Hindu majoritarian polity, Sabah Gurmat and Kaushik Raj write. It’s now a routine in thousands of schools across the country to start the school day with 30 minutes of Sanskrit prayers worshipping Hindu gods. A segment of these schools are run by RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the Hindu ideological organization that was a precursor to the BJP Party now ruling the country.

“Across India, there is a growing sense of segregation in the classrooms, where once-secular institutions now find themselves teaching texts replete with omissions and revisions. Meanwhile, schools run by Christians and Muslims now find themselves under overt attack. Authorities have cracked down upon missionary and convent-run schools that are otherwise popularly sought after for an English-style education. Elsewhere, school teachers and staff have faced suspension and



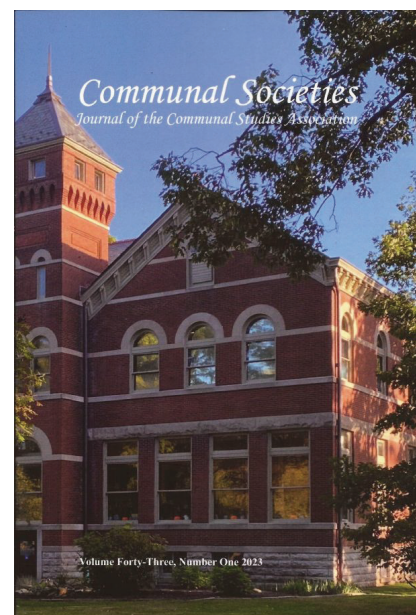
Image: Amarjeet Kumar Singh/AA/picture alliance (<https://www.dw.com/en/india-is-the-bjp-altering-school-curriculum-to-promote-hindu-nationalism/a-61932435>).

threats based on allegations of ‘forced conversions,’” Gurmat and Raj report. They add that more than 12 Indian states have legislation that criminalizes such supposed forced conversions. The Catholic Bishops Conference of India has recently issued guidelines about the “emerging challenges due to the current socio-cultural, religious, and political situation” in the country. These include urging schools to strictly avoid any appearance of proselytism and encouraging them to have students recite the preamble to the Indian constitution to show their national loyalty.

(*The Revealer*, <https://therevealer.org/how-the-hindu-far-right-is-overhauling-indias-schools-and-textbooks/>)

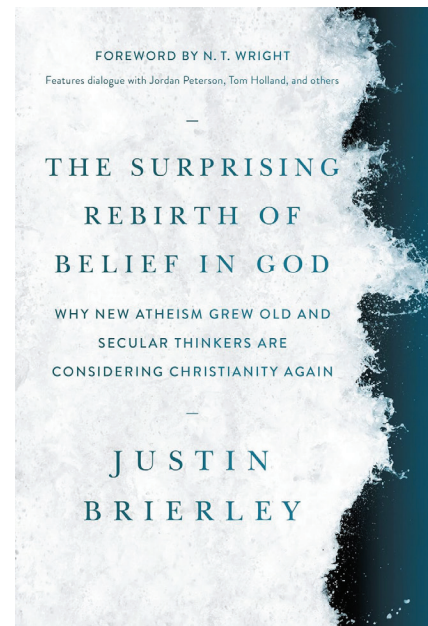
Findings & Footnotes

■ The current issue of the journal *Communal Societies* (43:1) carries several interesting articles on the past and future of communal movements in the U.S. Historian Carl Guarneri retraces the history of communal groups and movements, arguing that classic interpretations of them as mainly responses to socio-economic conditions ignore more important cultural and religious factors, such as millennialism. Guarneri sees the last major communal revivals starting in the 1960s, but expects that because these movements tap into enduring concerns about individualism and materialism, they will “remain an attractive option for a minority of Americans.” In another article, Dan McKanan of Harvard Divinity School argues that rather than focusing on the success or failures of



communes, more attention should be paid to how they transition over generations. He writes that communal movements either continue as “self-enclosed societies,” they “evolve beyond community,” or they experience a “creative symbiosis.” These movements frequently shift to the second category, expressing more individual forms of belonging (the Bruderhof and Hutterite movements, belonging to the first category, are notable exceptions), but McKanan doesn’t necessarily see such individualism as spelling their demise. Those following the creative symbiosis route tend to lower the boundaries of belonging to the group but retain communal features, such as with the kibbutz and Catholic Worker movements as well as monastic orders that now allow oblates (laity) to become members. For more on this issue, visit: <https://communalstudies.org/journal/>

■ The recent news that Richard Dawkins, a fervent atheist, has now become a “cultural Christian,” as well as the conversion of atheist human rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali to Christianity, have spurred talk of atheists and agnostics increasingly being on the precipice of religious faith, even if they don’t take the final plunge. The UK newsletter *Future First* (June) notes that the recent book by Justin Brierley, *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God* (Tyndale Elevate), has attracted attention in reporting on the phenomenon of how key agnostics’ beliefs about God and religion have changed over time. Based on interviews, the book finds that some have converted to full Christianity, though not all have yet reached that far. Brierley seeks to explain “why new atheism grew old” in the lives of his interviewees “and secular thinkers are considering Christianity again.” The book is in some ways an apologetic account of Christianity and theism, looking at the key challenging points of the Christian story and the rediscovery of the Bible’s relevance, and argues that the alternative story offered by science and materialists can never match the strength and wonder of belief in God.



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

1) Faced with declining membership, a number of Roman Catholic dioceses in the western hemisphere are considering reducing the number of parishes in order to coalesce around a smaller number of places of worship. But the **Archdiocese of Baltimore** (MD) is contemplating a rather radical move with its project to eliminate two-thirds of its parishes in the city itself. Established as a diocese in 1789 and elevated to an archdiocese in 1808, it is the oldest Roman Catholic diocese in the U.S., comprising the City of Baltimore and the counties of Allegany, Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, Harford, Howard, and Washington. The Baltimore experience is reported to reflect the situation in many traditional Catholic strongholds across the U.S. East Coast and Midwest. The archdiocese’s website highlights general demographic shifts and declining attendance, particularly in the city of Baltimore,



Baltimore Archbishop William Lori (source: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/11/09/lori-baltimore-archdiocese-bankruptcy-sexual-abuse-246461>).

where the population has declined 38 percent since 1950, and where parishes occupy more than four times as much space per parishioner as the rest of the archdiocese. Buildings are in need of repair, funds are dwindling, and COVID-19 has greatly accelerated the decline in attendance, with “city-parish pews falling from 20 percent full in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, to 9 percent full in 2022,” according to *La Croix International*.

After two years of study, by mid-April, as part of a plan called “Seek the City to Come” (Hebrews 13:12–15), the archdiocese recommended reducing the number of parishes in the city and some surrounding communities by two-thirds, from 61 to 21. After discussions with the faithful and adjustments, the final plan revealed on May 22 should result in 23 parishes with 30 worship and ministry sites, about half the current number of churches available for Sunday Mass. As might be expected, there have been mixed reactions from the local Catholic community. The archdiocese wants to present its move in a positive light, but many are skeptical of its claims that the measures will strengthen its presence. A strong argument in favor of the move is the imbalance between the city and the rest of the archdiocese, since statistics show that of about 500,000 Catholics in the archdiocese, only about 14,000 worship in Baltimore city, and only 5,000–8,000 are residents of the city, while the city is home to about a third of the archdiocese’s parishes. Archbishop William Lori said “that the mergers are not related to the archdiocese’s bankruptcy filing [in 2023] amid a slew of clergy sex abuse lawsuits.” After the parish

mergers, the proceeds from each sale of buildings and properties will go to the surviving parishes. (Sources: *La Croix International*, May 6; *Associated Press*, May 23; *Crux*, May 3)

2) **Micro-services** are not entirely new, but they are part of a renewed attempt to lure people back to churches in the UK, especially after losses of worshippers since the pandemic. These services typically last about 15 to 20 minutes and are designed to help busy people fit prayer into their daily lives. “We’re trying to offer something new, something different for people,” said Rev. John Gillibrand, vicar of St. David’s Church in Swansea, who launched the initiative. “I believe in theological reflection, and in the period after COVID and what happened then, I’ve been thinking about the potential problems people face. This is an area that has a lot of commuters and is an old industrial community. People are under pressure, and one-hour services can be a long time to take out of their lives. We have been looking at timing, and the additional problem people face going home and then having to come out again. We’re trying to make it easier for them.” The service, taking place on Mondays, is simple, with a Bible reading, reflection on the reading and then prayer, about five minutes each. There is no talk about church community affairs or needing to follow a liturgy. The basic idea of providing a short service is not new, with cathedrals frequently holding short meditations and prayers during the day. Other clergy from churches across the country have expressed interest in the initiative. (Source: *Religion Unplugged*, May 13)

