

## Revisions on sexual ethics intensifying United Methodist schism?

In what is the largest church schism since the U.S. Civil War, the split in the United Methodist Church (UMC) may have exacerbated divisions between progressives and conservatives to a greater degree than other mainline churches. This may be because the culture wars have intensified [see last month's **RW** interview with James Davison Hunter], but until a few years ago the UMC was not considered the most likely church body to experience a major schism, writes Richard Johnson in the *Forum Letter*, an independent Lutheran newsletter (June). Johnson, formerly a United Methodist pastor, adds that the UMC's global membership and its upholding of the ban on LGBTQ ordination as recently as 2016 seemed to suggest a different course than open schism, such as progressives quietly leaving the denomination. The early-May General Conference, where delegates overwhelmingly voted to eliminate the language in the denomination's Social Principles prohibiting the ordination of LGBTQ clergy and to change the definition of marriage, confirmed the UMC's leftward drift, but by then a sizeable segment of conservatives had already left, with most forming the Global Methodist Church (GMC).

This new church body has reported some 4,500 member churches, which is much larger than the UMC's Presbyterian, Anglican, and Lutheran split-off bodies (and also larger than the United Church of Christ, while being about the same size as the Episcopal Church). Johnson adds that the GMC "will have an easier time becoming established than has been the case with [these other denominations]...It will automatically become a player of some consequence on the American church scene." He notes that a close reading of the General Conference's recent actions "reveals a revisionism that goes beyond just LGBTQ issues." The older language about "celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage" was jettisoned for a statement calling for "social responsibility and faithful sexual intimacy expressed through fidelity, monogamy, commitment, mutual affection and respect, careful and honest communication, mutual consent and growth in grace and in the knowledge and love of God"—without mentioning marriage. Where the church's Social Principles previously taught that "sexual relations are affirmed only within the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage," they now only affirm the "rights of all people

to exercise personal consent in sexual relationships, to make their decisions about their own bodies and be supported in these decisions.”

In his online newsletter *Rational Sheep* (June 7), journalist Terry Mattingly writes that the changes in the UMC will energize “new debates about how to handle...other issues linked to the Sexual Revolution. The key: What is the status of sexual activity outside of the vows of gay or heterosexual marriage?” He adds that the mainstream press apparently did not catch this complicated doctrinal and legal issue, nor that of adultery. “Efforts to retain language requiring ordinands to be ‘celibate in singleness’ or ‘faithful in a marriage’ failed,” he writes, “leaving detailed definitions of ‘immorality’ to regional conferences...The national church instructed leaders at the regional level to begin training local-church laity to prepare to accept future pastors—whatever their sexual and gender identities. While thousands of churches have left the denomination, many others face divisions in their pews—since UMC rules required a two-thirds majority for congregations to exit while retaining their buildings, endowments, etc. No one believes that the UMC’s struggles are over at the local level, a fact that should matter to local print and broadcast newsrooms.” Mattingly also asks how the sweeping changes will affect United Methodist seminaries, agencies, publishers and affiliated colleges. “The denomination’s official news agency has already announced a \$346.7 million budget for 2025–2028, a stunning 43% cut from the previous 4-year period.”



(*Forum Letter*, P.O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753; *Rational Sheep*, <https://tmattingly.substack.com/p/crossroads-what-happens-next-for>)

### **Evangelical church switching and competition driven by roles of evangelism, family ministry?**

Church practices concerning baptism, evangelism, and family ministry and their societal implications may be driving congregational switching among evangelicals, according to Michael Clary, a conservative Reformed writer and pastor. The Substack newsletter *Rod Dreher’s Diary* (June 26) cites Clary in comparing the different trajectories of evangelicals as they have switched between Presbyterian and Baptist churches (there reportedly being considerable traffic between these two church traditions). He writes that Baptists (or credo-baptist and related congregations



Source: White Plains Presbyterian Church (<https://www.wppresby.org/baptism>).

with Baptist beliefs) stress covenantal discontinuities, individual conversion, and regenerate church membership (baptism of believers), leading to a stronger emphasis on evangelism and missions. In contrast, Presbyterian and other Reformed church (or “paedo-baptist”) doctrine stresses covenantal continuities, “covenant promises to households and children, and the inclusion of children in church membership, leading to a stronger emphasis on the family, multi-generational households, and home education.” Clary proposes that the “pipeline of credo-baptist to paedo-baptist defections may be driven by embattled Baptist families who are seeking refuge in theological environments that are more culturally oriented towards catechizing children than reaching the lost. I’m not saying they don’t care about reaching the lost, but they are more concerned about their own children being Christian than anyone else, and it takes more time, intentionality, and resources to raise Christian kids” now than at a time when society was less negative about Christianity.

Clary continues that if “this theory is true, then I imagine the trend will continue. It might even grow as Baptist-minded people are realizing they have to go to great lengths to preserve a Christian legacy in their own families, and paedo-baptist churches have a lot of resources to help them,” such as support for home schools, co-ops, and Christian schools. There may be competing ministry priorities as Baptist churches allocate more resources toward evangelism as Christianity declines in the West, while paedo-baptistic churches “allocate more ministry resources to household discipleship for precisely the same reason.” Clary suspects “that baptistic families that are worried about their children will find common purpose with churches outside their own tradition, and then adjust their doctrine accordingly to soothe the resulting cognitive dissonance. These tendencies may increase as cultural hostilities towards Christianity increase. Some baptistic churches may adopt ever more desperate measures to reach unbelievers with anything they'll respond to, leading to increasing syncretization of those churches...Paedo-baptist churches may likewise abandon all efforts to reach the lost in order to focus on keeping their own spiritual house in order.”

## Nudism bares its spiritual side

Nudism may be declining on an organizational level, but new spiritual techniques and meanings are becoming attached to the practice, Rowan Pelling reports in the online magazine *UnHerd* (June 24). The nudist ethos grew out of the German Lebensreform movement, which challenged the destruction wrought by the Industrial Revolution. Yet the German Association for Free Body Culture (DFK) has just cancelled their August centenary celebrations, due to a sharp decline in support—with membership slumping from 65,000 to 34,000 over the past 25 years. The president of the DFK, Alfred Sigloch, said that younger members are put off by older naturists adhering to strict rules, “such as specified afternoon nap or quiet times,” while others are concerned about being photographed naked via a smartphone or affected by the way social media has influenced “the rise of the cult of the perfect body.” But as in Germany in the 1920s, “we are seeing a



Source: Worldpackers (<https://www.worldpackers.com/articles/naturism>).



widespread urge for people to cleanse their bodies and souls via acts of nakedness,” Pelling writes. She reports on those who have joined a movement that combines eco-activism with elements of Wicca, Gaia worship, Tantra, naturism, wild swimming and experimentation with drugs including psilocybin (“magic mushrooms”) and MDMA. “In fact, it’s now so normal for me to be told that a friend—usually female—is going on a retreat that combines two or more of these elements, often in Portugal, that I’m beginning to feel grumpy about not being included.”

(*UnHerd*, <https://unherd.com/2024/06/inside-the-nudist-renaissance>)

## CURRENT RESEARCH

- **American women have recently been showing high rates of disaffiliation from religion, although they are still more likely to stay in their childhood religion compared to men.** In his newsletter *Graphs About Religion* (June 27), Ryan Burge reports that the gender gap on religion remains. “In recent decades, evangelical retention was about four points higher for women than men. It’s even larger for those raised in the mainline. It’s interesting that in the most recent data, female mainline retention was eight points higher than men.” Yet he also finds that non-religious retention for men is significantly higher than it is for women, and that this has been true for the last five decades. When women “raised in an evangelical tradition leave, they are just as likely to become mainline Protestants as they are to become non-religious. It’s a similar situation when women leave the mainline. About 15 percent become evangelicals and 17 percent



Source: Catholic Vote (<https://catholicvote.org/gen-z-women-outnumber-men-abandoning-religion-first-time>).

become nones. The story is largely repeated for Black Protestants and Catholics too. I think this is a really key finding from the data—when men leave their faith, the biggest portion become nones. That’s just not true for women.”

●**This year’s European elections on June 9 saw a significant increase in support for far-right parties among Catholic voters in France, reports Arnaud Bevilacqua in the French Catholic daily *La Croix* (June 10).** Meanwhile, Muslim voters overwhelmingly supported the left-wing La France Insoumise (France Unbowed) party, with issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and racism being key priorities for this group. The statistical data was provided by a survey conducted by the Ifop Group, one of the five leading survey institutes in France. Two parties considered as far-right went above the 5 percent hurdle: the Rassemblement National (National Rally), with 31.4 percent, and Reconquête (Reconquest), with 5.5 percent. Over 40 percent of practicing Catholics voted for those two parties, more than doubling their support since 2019. However, there were significant differences between regular churchgoers and occasional churchgoers: only 18 percent of regular churchgoers voted for the National Rally and 10 percent for Reconquest; among occasional churchgoers, by contrast, 40 percent supported the National Rally and 10 percent Reconquest.

This rightward shift is attributed to the National Rally’s efforts to “de-demonize” its image and gain respectability. Meanwhile, support for traditional center-right parties declined among practicing Catholic voters, with their support dropping from 46 percent in 2017 to just 14 percent in 2024. Roman Catholics had the highest voter turnout in France, at 60 percent, reaching even



Source: Elke Wetzig, 2017 (Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0).



73 percent among practicing Catholics. In contrast, Muslims had the lowest turnout, at 41 percent. While only 4 percent of all Catholic voters (9 percent among regular churchgoers) voted for the left-wing La France Insoumise, 62 percent of Muslim voters supported the party. Ifop's Jérôme Fourquet writes that although pro-EU and Catholic voters supporting various parties on the left (28 percent) have not disappeared, they are losing ground. "Today, the dividing lines are different, touching on issues of security, identity and the relationship with Islam."

(The full results of the Ifop survey can be downloaded from its website: <https://www.ifop.com/publication/le-vote-des-electorats-confessionnels-aux-elections-europeennes-2/>)

• **A new study finds lack of confidence in church institutions to be a very strong predictor of disaffiliation from Evangelical Lutheran churches in Nordic countries.** In an article published in the journal *Secularism and Nonreligion* (13:1, June), Carlos Miguel Lemos (Portuguese Naval Academy) reports on his study using data from the 2018 Religion Survey of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) to compare Protestants affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran churches and the religiously unaffiliated in Denmark, Finland, Iceland,



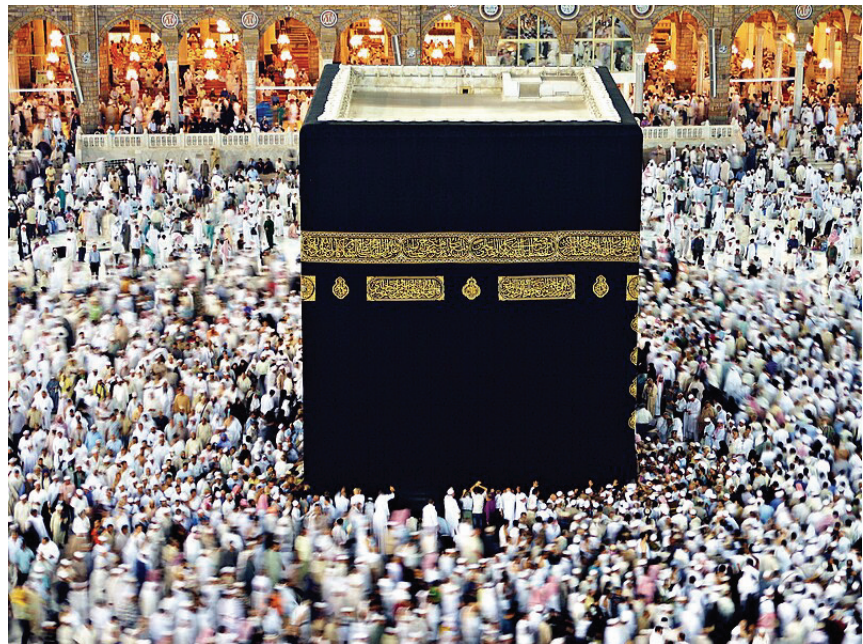
St. Jacobs Kyrka - Stockholm (© 2018 Neil Howard | Flickr).

Norway and Sweden. Other religious groups in those countries were not considered. Although in a certain sense these are highly secular countries, with low average levels of religious belief, participation and involvement in the national Lutheran churches, religion continues to play an important role in the public sphere as a result of longstanding church-state ties. Those relations have changed in recent decades, however, with the Church of Denmark being the only remaining traditional state church. Lemos notes that, with the possible exception of Sweden, a majority of people in the five Nordic countries are still affiliated with their respective national churches.

Disaffiliation occurs across a wide range of ages, with only the elderly (those 75 years old and up) being an exception. As might be expected, Lemos found early religious or nonreligious socialization, as indicated by parents' affiliation and frequency of churchgoing, to be an important predictor of disaffiliation: "having had just one unaffiliated parent more than doubles the odds of disaffiliating," he writes. On the other hand, ceasing to believe in God and having negative perceptions about the relevance and timeliness of religion were found to be significant, albeit weaker, predictors of disaffiliation. According to Lemos, this seems to confirm previous suggestions by other scholars that "disaffiliation in the Nordic countries is mainly due to disappointment with the religious institutions and not to a loss of faith."

(*Secularism and Nonreligion*, <https://secularismandnonreligion.org/articles/10.5334/snr.166>)

● **The number of pilgrims to Mecca is close to pre-pandemic levels, according to recent statistics.** A total of 1,833,164 pilgrims performed the annual Islamic *Hajj* to Mecca, 1,611,310 of whom were from outside Saudi Arabia, reports Ghinwa Obeid (*Al Arabiya*, June 16). She notes that 22.3 percent of the international pilgrims came from Arab countries, 63.3 percent from Asian non-Arab countries, 11.3



Kaaba, Mecca, Saudi Arabia (source: Basil D Soufi, 2008, Wikimedia Commons).

percent from African non-Arab countries, and 3.2 percent from the rest of the world. Data journalist Anna Fleck, from *Statista Daily*, published several articles on their site about various aspects of the *Hajj* (June 14). She notes that Saudi Arabia issues each year a set number of pilgrim visas. "Quotas are calculated for Muslim-majority countries at a rate of one pilgrim visa



per 1,000 Muslim citizens,” she writes. In 2023, the countries with the highest number of pilgrim visas were Indonesia (229,000), Pakistan (179,210), India (175,025), Bangladesh (127,198), Nigeria (95,000), Iran (87,550), Algeria (41,300), and Turkey (37,770).

Fleck adds that there has been a significant post-pandemic increase in the costs incurred by pilgrims, “in part due to global inflation, as well as a VAT hike from 5 percent up to 15 percent in Saudi Arabia in 2020.” Last year, due to the economic circumstances, some countries could not meet their quotas, with other countries thus receiving additional *Hajj* slots. While the pilgrimage is expensive for believers, it is reported to generate \$12 billion per year for Saudi Arabia, Fleck notes. As part of its efforts to diversify income sources, Saudi Arabia envisions boosting “its numbers of religious tourist arrivals for both the *Hajj* and the *Umrah* [a lesser pilgrimage that can be done at any time of the year] to 30 million pilgrims by 2030.”

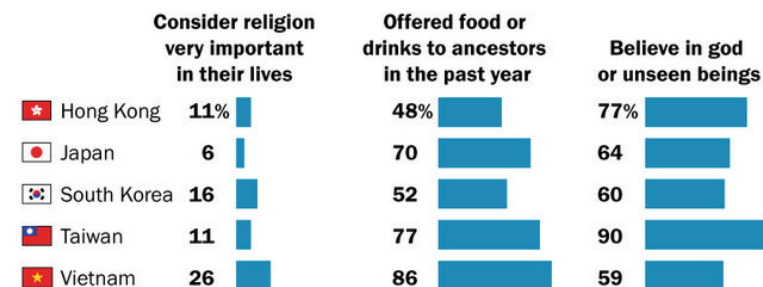
(Statista Daily Data, <https://www.statista.com/chartoftheday/>)

• According to a recent Pew survey reported on its blog *Short Reads* (June 17), the religiously unaffiliated are a large presence in Asia, but majorities still believe in gods and the supernatural. In three of the countries surveyed, the religiously unaffiliated were found to be the largest group, with roughly half or more adults in Hong Kong (61 percent), South Korea (52 percent), and Vietnam (48 percent) saying they had no religion; significant segments of respondents in Japan (42 percent) and Taiwan (27 percent) said the same. But the survey also found Buddhism to be prevalent in the region, with 46 percent of Japanese, 38 percent of Vietnamese, and 28 percent of Taiwanese respondents identifying with the religion. In both South Korea and Hong Kong, 14 percent of adults identified as Buddhist. Among the five countries surveyed, no more than 26 percent of respondents said religion was very important in their lives.

Majorities in Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam said that religion helps society by giving people guidance to do the right thing. In Japan, about half of the survey respondents took this position. Christians were

### Few East Asians consider religion very important in their lives, but many believe in god or unseen beings

% of adults in each place who say they ...



Note: Respondents were asked if they have offered food, water or drinks to honor or take care of ancestors in the past 12 months. Respondents were asked separately if they believe in god or if they think there are unseen beings in the world, like deities or spirits. “God” was translated into each language using as generic a term as possible, without referencing any specific religion’s god(s) or goddess(es).

Source: Survey conducted June 2-Sept. 17, 2023, among adults in five Asian publics.

“Religion and Spirituality in East Asian Societies”

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somewhat more likely than other groups to see religion as a positive for society. Most people said they believed in god or unseen beings, like deities or spirits, or that they viewed nature as having invisible spirits. In Taiwan, Japan, and Vietnam, about half or more said they believed that mountains, rivers or trees have their own spirits. But religiously unaffiliated respondents were found to believe in gods or unseen beings at lower rates than Christians and Buddhists, although at least 4-in-10 unaffiliated adults in each place expressed these beliefs. Moreover, religiously unaffiliated people were generally more likely than Christians to believe that mountains, rivers or trees have their own spirits.

(*Short Reads*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/06/17/6-facts-about-religion-and-spirituality-in-east-asian-societies/>)

### Young French Catholics drawn to religious rituals and practices

There is a renewed interest in religious rituals and practices among young French Catholics, contrasting with a broader decline in religious practice and attendance in France and other Western countries, *La Vie* (June 6) reports. In several cities, priests have seen a significant



Group of young French Catholics (source: [http://secretariat.synod.va/content/synod2018/en/news/france--\\_young-catholics-a-minority-but-not-giving-up.html](http://secretariat.synod.va/content/synod2018/en/news/france--_young-catholics-a-minority-but-not-giving-up.html)).

increase in attendance at Ash Wednesday masses, with a few churches even struggling to accommodate the faithful. According to anthropologist Valérie Aubourg (Catholic University of Lyon), this trend is part of a broader “ritual inflation.” Yann Raison du Cleuziou, a political scientist (University of Bordeaux) and leading scholar on contemporary French Catholicism, points out that “you can only see these changes with your eyes,” since they largely escape statistical surveys. He adds that at a Sunday mass, “where older Catholics make two gestures, younger Catholics, as well as French Catholics from overseas or of immigrant origin, make five or six.” Younger and more conservative believers emphasize physical gestures and symbols over verbal expressions of faith that had been put forward after the Second Vatican Council. Factors driving this include a recomposition of Catholicism around more traditional expressions of the faith and a desire for clarity and community among youth in an increasingly secular society, where Catholics are now a minority and under the influence (though not necessarily consciously) of other religions like Islam.

In France today, those not born in Christian families and “with no religious culture imagine what a religion is based on what they see of Islam,” says Raison du Cleuziou. In addition, young Christians see how Muslims keep their fast and feel challenged to emulate this with Catholic Lenten observances. Regarding fasting, the (male only) Exodus 90 program, imported from the U.S., is reportedly attracting a growing number of participants in France. The rituals are not merely a return to the past, but a creative hybridization, incorporating personal expression and modern media. This ritual revival is seen by church leaders as a “gateway” to deeper faith, though there are concerns about over-emphasizing outward forms without inner transformation. Overall, these trends are indicators of a Catholicism in flux, as younger generations seek to mark their religious identity through renewed engagement with sacred rites and practices, and seek more embodied, symbolic forms of religious practice.

(*La Vie*, <https://www.lavie.fr/ma-vie/spiritualite/aujourd'hui-le-geste-reprend-le-pas-sur-le-verbe-comment-expliquer-lattrait-des-jeunes-catholiques-pour-les-rites-94815.php>)

## **Tibet appealing to Western countries over succession of Dalai Lama**

The Tibetan government-in-exile is seeking European support on the issue of the succession of the Dalai Lama, reports *Intelligence Online* (June 6). With the 14th Dalai Lama (b. 1935) getting older, the question of his succession is turning into a crucial concern for the worldwide Tibetan community, which is anxious about keeping the Chinese government away from the process when the time comes. According to *Intelligence Online*, this was the key issue discussed during the recent European tour (in May) of Penpa Tsering, Chairman of the exiled Central Tibetan Administration. Tsering spoke at length on the subject of reincarnation at every stage of his European tour, including in Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, and France. He would like to see European governments follow in the footsteps of the U.S., where in 2015, Congressional Resolution 337 called “on the United States Government to underscore that government





The 14th Dalai Lama in Antwerpen, Belgium, in 2006 (Yancho Sabev, Wikimedia Commons).

interference in the Tibetan reincarnation process is a violation of the internationally recognized right to religious freedom.”

It is known that the Dalai Lama intends to speak on the topic just after his 90th birthday in 2025. While his plans for countering the moves of the Chinese Communist government are not yet known, it seems that support from the U.S. and Europe is deemed necessary for those plans to go ahead. While some officials whom Tsering met remained cautious about supporting a resolution on reincarnation, it should be noted that during the 39th session of the joint Human Rights Dialogue between the European Union and China, held in Chongqing (China) on June 16, the EU “stressed that the selection of religious leaders should happen without any government interference and in respect of religious norms, including in the case of the succession of the Dalai Lama” (EU Press Release, June 17).

(*Intelligence Online*, <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/>; “China: 39th Human Rights Dialogue with the European Union took place in Chongqing,” [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/china-39th-human-rights-dialogue-european-union-took-place-chongqing\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/china-39th-human-rights-dialogue-european-union-took-place-chongqing_en))

## Anti-euthanasia activism in Spain setting the tone for future Catholic political battles?

The next front for conservative religious activism is likely to be the fight over euthanasia, and the model for such activism may be seen in Spain's growing network of religious and political organizations fighting against the right to assisted dying, two researchers argue. In the journal *Religion, State, and Society* (online in May), sociologists Joseba Garcia Martin and Ignacia Perugorria look at how the Covid-19 pandemic served as an opening for a host of Catholic-inspired organizations to mobilize, targeting Spain's establishment of assisted dying policies in 2021. Activists and Catholic bishops charged that thousands of elderly Covid patients who died in Spanish nursing homes were euthanized. The researchers found that a network consisting of the Catholic bishops' conference, the rightist party Vox, and activist organizations expanded the "anti-rights" field in Spain, surpassing more moderate organizations that were inspired more by such movements as Opus Dei and the bishops' conference of previous years.



Source: The Central Minnesota Catholic (<https://thecentralminnesotacatholic.org/spanish-church-vows-to-resist-new-anti-life-laws/>).



The new activism is inspired by American pro-life groups. The pandemic intensified the rhetoric against right-to-die initiatives, with activist groups such as Vividores using the Internet to wage their battle. Although the euthanasia law ended up being approved and groups such as Vividores were deactivated, Martin and Perugorria argue that their mobilization has set a pattern for future activism. It also sheds light on the “incipient anti-euthanasia mobilizations sprouting in other European countries (e.g., Ireland, Italy, and Portugal) and may also foreshadow the strategies of anti-rights organizations in countries such as Argentina and Uruguay, where debates around the regulation of euthanasia are beginning to emerge,” they conclude.

(*Religion, State, and Society*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/crss20/current>)

### Christians seeking Aramaic identity in Israel meet obstacles

As a way to adapt to Israeli nationalism and gain favors from the Jewish state, a group of Christian churches are stressing their Aramaic rather than Arab identity, Marta Wozniak-Bobinska reports in the journal *Nations and Nationalism* (online in June). The Aramean movement in northern Israel, which is also active in other countries, seeks to recover an Aramaic language and heritage among Middle Eastern Christians, most notably through the Israeli



Group of Aramaic Christians with priest (source: Aviram Valdman / *The Tower* - <https://www.thetower.org/article/christians-in-the-holy-land-dont-call-us-arabs/>).



Christian Aramaic Association (ICAA). In 2014, Israel allowed several Maronite churches originating in Lebanon to identify as Aramean, allowing them to volunteer for conscription into the Israeli army. Aramaic Christians are following the model of the Druze, who were integrated as Israelis and effectively conscripted into the military. But so far, only a small number of Aramaic Christians have signed up for conscription. Leaders have also cited the cost and effort involved in claiming an Aramean identity as a factor discouraging Maronites from trying to do so. During the pandemic, Israeli authorities allowed these Christians to change their identity at no cost, but when it was learned that there might be 15,000 to 30,000 people eager to claim such a status, they reinstated the fee.

Officially, Maronite and other Orthodox leaders have not supported Christians' move to an Aramaic identity. But some clergy and lay leaders and the ICAA have taken up the Aramaic cause and dispute the accusation from other Arab Christians that they are participating in Israel's "divide and conquer" strategy in discarding their Arab identity. For example, the Aramaic leader Shadi Khalloul and his brother Amir said that such an identity change would increase security for their community and provide access to resources and political representation. Wozniak-Bobinska adds that "Aramean nationhood has sufficient historical legitimacy to attract a number of Israeli-born Christians who experience cognitive dissonance [in] officially belonging to the Palestinian nation. Besides, the Aramean revival is a broader, global phenomenon, and the ICAA has been recognized, supported and praised by the Aramean leadership in Europe." But Arameans, Maronites, and Christians in general constitute too small a group to gain much political relevance in Israel, where officials have treated the development with neglect and ambivalence. "Many Israeli officials perceive local Christians as part of the wider 'Arab problem,'" Wozniak-Bobinska writes, "with only a few politicians eager to include minorities in the boundaries of the dominant Jewish consensus, especially if these communities prove their 'more acceptable' non-Arab origin."

(*Nations and Nationalism*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14698129>)

## **Indian election results cast shadow on Hindu nationalist aspirations**

The 2024 election results in India have "dealt a significant blow to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), shattering its confidence in its ability to mobilise voters using its Hindutva ideology, which promotes Hindu nationalism and marginalizes religious minorities," reports *Newsreel Asia* (June 5). This was particularly reflected in the party's low election results in the BJP-dominated state of Uttar Pradesh, including Ayodhya, a city central to the party's Hindutva agenda. In the months before the election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the grand Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, a Hindu temple that is symbolic of the BJP's commitment to Hindutva. "The event was marked by a widespread display of saffron flags across the nation, an apparent portrayal of a significant victory of Hindus over the Muslim minority. The saffron flags became a common



Source: <https://www.hertie-school.org/en/news/detail/content/big-election-big-changes>.

sight on roads, in residential areas and on vehicles, but in hindsight, these flags did not represent the hearts of the majority of the people in those areas,” the newsletter reports.

The Samajwadi Party’s (SP) Awadhesh Prasad beat out the BJP’s Lallu Singh by a substantial margin. “This loss in a constituency synonymous with the Ram Mandir shows a shift in voter sentiment. The defeat suggests that the electorate, even in Ayodhya, is looking beyond religious symbolism and is possibly disenchanted with the BJP’s focus on Hindutva.” The newsletter concludes that in “2014, when the BJP was elected, people perhaps believed the party’s slogan, ‘Achhe din aane waale hain,’ or ‘Good days are coming,’ a sincere promise. A decade later, the BJP’s focus on grand religious gestures has clearly not translated into votes. It appears that local issues and governance have taken precedence for many voters, who may be demanding more than just ideological commitments.”

### **Evangelicalism meets quest for Berber identity in Kabylia**

Conversion from Islam to Protestantism in Kabylia (an area of northern Algeria) fits with the region’s cultural and political claims for autonomy, writes Hamida Azouani-Rekkas (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris) in *Multitudes* (No. 95, Summer). The Kabyle people



Source: Center for Middle Eastern Studies (<https://www.orsam.org.tr/en/algerian-berber-separatist-movement-threat-to-national-unity-and-territory-integrity/>).

are one of the Berber (Amazigh) groups of North Africa. Starting from cultural and linguistic claims (Arabic being considered the national and official language) in the 1980s, some Kabyle people have gone further with aspirations for autonomy and even independence. Conversions to evangelicalism occur across Algeria, which has an estimated 30,000 to 100,000 converts. In a country where the preamble of the constitution states that Islam is the cement of national identity, converting to Christianity has political implications. In the case of Kabylia, it gets associated with identity issues. Kabyle Christians started creating associations of their own and producing printed and audiovisual material in their language, thus participating in the promotion of a Kabyle culture. Some Kabyle evangelicals started to promote a Christian Berber identity. “They propose Amazigh Christianity as an alternative to Arab Islam.” Thus, for the converts, structuring a Christian identity and an Amazigh identity go along with each other.

Following popular protests in 2019 and 2020 across Algeria, the country’s military leaders have attempted to maintain control in Kabylia in the background, with accusations of separatism and interference from foreign powers. Although evangelicals had been little involved in the protests, they offered a prime target for repressive measures, even more so since their legal status is fragile due to hurdles in getting permissions for opening Christian places of worship. Irritated by evangelical missionary activities, “since the early 2000s, state representatives have been tirelessly trying to make Catholicism the only legitimate branch of Christianity,” since the Roman Catholic Church does not actively evangelize Muslims in Algeria (proselytism toward



Muslims is illegal in the country). Algerian evangelicals have reacted by emphasizing demands for pluralism, something to which progressives in the country should seem to be sympathetic. However, a hindrance to such sympathy lies in the fact that some of the Berber evangelical faithful not only support the independence movement but are influenced by Christian Zionist ideas and support recognizing the State of Israel. Kabyle's supporters of independence have indeed turned to Israel in search of support, emphasizing similarities between the fate of the Jewish people and their own. However, evangelical converts' religious understanding of current political developments has increased suspicions that they are tools of foreign powers, especially the U.S.

(*Multitudes*, <https://www.multitudes.net/category/l-edition-papier-en-ligne/95-multitudes-95-ete-2024/>)

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

Launched in 2019 by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC), the “**Christians Against Christian Nationalism**” campaign has been a relative success in making room for an evangelical voice



Source: *Religion Dispatches* (<https://religiondispatches.org/new-report-on-white-christian-nationalism-and-the-j6-insurrection-shows-just-how-dire-the-threat-is/>).

critical of Christian nationalism in the U.S., although its influence on broader white evangelical sympathy for the movement has been limited. Christians Against Christian Nationalism is the brainchild of Amanda Tyler, who took the helm of the BJC in January 2017. The BJC was originally formed in 1936 under the auspices of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) to defend “Baptist principles whenever and wherever they are threatened by government action,” and it was soon supported by other Baptist groups as well. In the early 1990s it lost the SBC’s support because it came to be seen as too liberal in an increasingly conservative milieu. Describing itself today as “the only national faith-based group solely focused on protecting religious freedom for all,” it still receives donations from a few hundred Baptist churches.

When the Christians Against Christian Nationalism campaign kicked off in July 2019, it described the attempt to merge Christian and American identities as a distortion of both. Thirty prominent American Christian figures from various denominations endorsed its call to oppose “a threat to our faith and our nation.” A series of 10 podcasts, entitled “The Dangers of Christian Nationalism,” was also released, and in February 2022, the BJC published a 60-page report on the Capitol riots. There are several reasons why the BJC has succeeded to some extent where earlier attempts to alert public opinion to the theocratic tendencies of the Christian Right have failed. Criticism voiced by a Baptist agency cannot be seen as an attack against all forms of religion in the public arena. As an NGO that has been in existence for many decades, the BJC also has credibility and can find support. Moreover, the radicalization of Christian nationalists may worry many people. But the success of the campaign should be put into perspective. The BJC’s influence remains limited, with the campaign against Christian nationalism collecting just over 35,000 signatures since it was launched. In 2022, a Pew report stated that 45 percent of Americans—and 81 percent of white evangelicals—believed that the United States should be a “Christian nation,” apparently paying little attention to the BJC’s warnings.

(Source: analysis by Philippe Gonzalez (University of Lausanne, Switzerland), *Multitudes*, No. 95, Summer)