

Sociologists and evangelicals take up the secular narrative

At this year's conference of the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR), which **RW** attended in Montreal in early August, it was obvious that there has been a shift of interest and emphasis toward secularism among scholars in the past few years. There were fewer sessions and papers on the growth of religious congregations and denominational changes compared to previous years. Viewing religion and theology as "independent variables" that shape society and individual values has taken a back seat to an "intersectional" approach (the theme of the conference in fact being "Religion and Intersectionality"), where race, gender, sexuality, and class are presented as key factors in shaping religious outcomes. There was continued and growing attention to the non-affiliated ("nones") and "non-religion" in sessions, with Grace Yukich, president of the ASR, suggesting in her outgoing lecture a name-change of the scholarly organization that might add "non-religion" or even substitute "the sacred" for "religion." As in previous years, papers on secularization trends and theories have returned with a vengeance, as sociologists try to account for the rising rate of religious non-affiliation throughout much of the West.

While there are disagreements as to whether classic secularization theories can explain the current religious decline, or even if the process itself might better be seen as "de-Christianization," there is a striking agreement among both academics and some Christian leaders that the ground has shifted on the future of religion. From the side of Christian leaders and commentators, there is Aaron Renn's recent popular book, *Life in the Negative World*, which argues that an anti-Christian culture has gained the upper hand in American society over the last decade. The way in which a certain secular narrative has been internalized by evangelical thinkers can be seen in a recent article appearing in Renn's Substack newsletter (August 22) by evangelical apologist and cultural analyst John Seel. Seel writes that "We are amid a 500-year historical geo-political inflection point...We are not talking here about the accumulation of incremental changes, but the wholesale changes of assumptions, global actors, and personal experiences..." He sees a shift from a Christian to a post-Christian world "that is functionally



Source: Andia/Universal Images Group via Getty Images (<https://theconversation.com/3-big-numbers-that-tell-the-story-of-secularization-in-america-199378>)

divorced from any reference to the sacred. We have shifted from societies based on fate and faith to one based on fiction. Moreover, the foundational basis of society, namely traditional marriage, has been rejected. The fruit of marriage, namely the procreation of children, has also been rejected.”

Among other civilizational shifts that Seel sees is a shift from Global West to Global East, with a “growing global awareness of the spiritual and political demise of the West...The church has tended to think in terms of North and South, with our missional focus increasingly being oriented to the global South, where Christianity remains vital. We must instead begin to think West and East...If you are thinking spiritual, you don't look first to the West but the East. The West is the spiritual problem not the spiritual solution. What was once only true of Muslim countries like Iran is now being joined with the Eastern communist axis of Russia and China.” Somewhat differently than secularization theorists, Seel also sees a shift in how “we are rejecting forms of Enlightenment rationalism in favor of a more enchanted form of spirituality. This is a big threat to the evangelical church as it is largely the stepchild of the Enlightenment...With the rejection of the Enlightenment rationalism with its association with secularism and disenchantment, has come the rebirth of a wide variety of older and new forms of enchantment, i.e., neo-paganism

and the occult.” The usual kind of evangelical apologists “have liked their religious antagonists to be tweed-wearing, pipe-smoking, atheist evolutionary biologist[s] in elite universities. We are far less comfortable with our religious antagonists being ex-evangelical, transgender Wiccan witches.” Seel concludes that the evangelical approach toward missions is going to have to change. “The historic priority of foreign missions may need to shift to home missions. The West represents the most strident global unreached people group.” He adds that the American evangelical church is ill prepared to adapt to these shifts. “The likelihood is that under sustained cultural pressure, it will resort to doubling-down on past approaches, wearing an anti-intellectual, anti-elitist, populist-fundamentalist resistance as a badge of honor.”

(*Aaron Renn's Newsletter*, https://www.aaronrenn.com/p/a-change-of-age?utm_campaign=email-half-post&r=5c98f&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)

New converts and new politics in American Catholicism

The entrance of JD Vance as the Republican vice-presidential contender reflects a new breed of Catholic convert that is reshaping Republican politics, Matthew Schmitz, a founder and editor of the online magazine Compact, writes in an opinion piece in the *New York Times* (August 14).



J. D. Vance (source: Gage Skidmore | Flickr, 2023).

Vance, who converted to Catholicism after attending Yale Law School, joins a wave of recent converts who are challenging Republican politics, often seeking to apply Catholic social teachings to society. They include the legal scholars Erika Bachiochi and Adrian Vermeule, the political scientist Darel Paul, New York Times columnist Ross Douthat, editor Sohrab Ahmari, and Schmitz himself. While they may disagree on some points (including support of Donald Trump or the merits of populism), these converts share a social conservatism and a willingness to criticize the “free-market orthodoxies of the pre-Trump Republican Party.” Catholic social teachings on the economy and on family and life issues, such as abortion, inform their views. For instance, Vance has said that his “views on public policy and what the optimal state should look like are pretty aligned with Catholic social teaching.”

Schmitz notes that the newer converts’ views clash with those of Catholic conservatives and neoconservatives of only a generation ago, such as William F. Buckley and Michael Novak, who stressed the virtues of the free market and the liberal political system, mostly as a response to Soviet Communism. Today, Catholicism is seen as providing resources for “pushing back against the excesses of cultural and economic liberalism,” Schmitz writes. The new interest in Catholic social thought on the right may lie behind conservatives’ tentative moves toward labor activism, with a Teamster representative being included among the speakers at July’s Republican convention. The infusion of Catholic influence, however, is also adding to tensions as Republicans, including Trump, are moving away from life issues, such as pro-life and anti-IVF activism and concerns. Schmitz adds that these converts’ introduction of Catholic social teaching may have limited influence because of the diminishing institutional weight of the Catholic Church, including its loss of membership, no longer having strong Catholic labor unions, youth groups, and voting blocs to support such a vision. While Catholic social teaching “may still inspire influential actors like Mr. Vance...they will be constrained by an unchurched public’s limited appetite for Catholic ideas.”

Spiritual directors taking the “none” factor into account in their ministries

More non-affiliated Americans have been seeking spiritual directors even as they lose faith in other aspects of institutional religion, reports Deirdre Pelphrey in *World Religion News* (August 12). Spiritual directors have seen increased interest in their ministries, especially from “younger people who no longer attend church but still want to nurture a sense of the spiritual in their lives.” While spiritual directors have often operated independently from congregations for decades, one director says that this field encompasses not just prayer life, but all of life. A decade ago, a typical question might have been how to pray better, she observed, but today one hears, “I’m having trouble finding a job.” Spiritual directors can now be found in a range of traditions—Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, and those of Indigenous religions—as they have adapted the practice to their own religions. The Rev. SeiFu Anil Singh-Molares, executive director of



Source: precious Blood Renewal Center (<https://www.pbrenewalcenter.org/blog/spiritual-direction-a-path-to-interior-freedom/>)

Spiritual Directors International and a Zen Buddhist priest, defines spiritual direction essentially as deep listening and respecting people's ability to guide and control their thoughts, behavior, and life. "We're not trying to convert anyone," he said. While one form of spiritual direction may be anchored to one faith tradition, others are more pluralistic. Some spiritual directors may operate independently from external certification, while others participate in certificate programs at institutions such as San Francisco Theological Seminary, Jewish Theological Seminary, Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology, and Columbia Theological Seminary.

In Canada and many European countries, spiritual directors are required to be certified, but in the U.S., there is no central board, no licensing authority, and no required written or oral examinations to pass. Spiritual Directors International seeks to codify and coordinate spiritual direction, seasoning it with guiding principles to make it just enough of a discipline without letting it become a stultified regimen. Spiritual Directors International now has over 6,800 members in 42 countries, of which 90 percent are based in North America. After Christians, the second largest group the organization caters to are "spiritual independents," which include most of the membership's nones. In 2016, this category was too small to consider a category, but it now makes up about 1,600 members. The non-affiliated can include several types, from people formerly following a religion to those who no longer do, to younger people who are opposed to

institutional religions for various reasons. Singh-Molares said that spiritual direction is still a well-kept secret, but he sees its recent growth as a sign that people are hungry for the practice. Defining spirituality and differentiating spiritual direction from therapy remain two issues surrounding the practice. One spiritual director helped her clients to see how riding a bicycle or listening to music can become spiritual rituals by helping them feel more connected to themselves. Rev. Katie Nakamura Rengers, an Episcopal priest, says that while a therapist helps you get “out of the cave,” a spiritual director helps you “explore the cave.”

(*World Religion News*, <https://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/here-come-the-spiritual-directors-the-facilitators-for-the-religiously-unaffiliated>)

Vacation Bible schools innovate in the face of decline

Vacation Bible schools, which function as day camps that churches provide for members and the community, are adapting to changing dynamics of family life and religious participation, particularly a decline in volunteering for vacation Bible school ministries, according to a report from *National Public Radio* (August 4). Jason DeRose reports that rather than recruiting volunteers from the congregation to run vacation Bible school, some congregations are hiring



Source: <https://www.gofishresources.com/2023/03/31/2023-4-5-six-ways-to-make-vacation-bible-school-more-fun-for-everyone/>

outside organizations and ministries to run their vacation Bible school (VBS) programs. One pastor says the advantage of such outside sourcing is the service it provides for parents who can't easily take a week off from work to volunteer. "They would say, 'I'm looking for something to do this week for my kids, and this is an inexpensive way to care for my kids during the week.'"

But even with such changes, VBS is far from flourishing. Fewer congregations are offering VBS programs. Before 2020, a little more than one-third of congregations offered vacation Bible school, while now it's less than a third. Scott Thumma of the Hartford Institute for Religious Research says there is a similar decline in Sunday schools, with 88 percent of congregations offering it before Covid and 81 percent doing so today. The reasons cited for the drop in VBS include a lack of interest in religion among younger people, "compounded by competition from flashier camps. Think surfing or coding." But there are growing innovations in VBS. One United Methodist church in California offers hands-on science and religion lessons that it calls "Messy Camp." Children create their own projects, such as making a volcano, to learn about God's creation of the world and humanity.

(*National Public Radio*, <https://www.npr.org/2024/08/01/nx-s1-5044707/vacation-bible-schools>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **A study of campus ministries in the U.S. finds that today's college students are less likely to be seeking spiritual experiences and teachings in joining these ministries than looking for "a home away from home" that provides a source of social support.** The five-year study, directed by John Schmalzbauer at the University of Missouri, who presented its results at the August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Montreal, which **RW** attended, was based on 250 interviews in 20 campus ministries of different faiths around the country. Schmalzbauer said that students are joining these campus ministries more for a sense of belonging, what he calls "dwelling," rather than "seeking," which was more characteristic of previous generations. This trend is tied in with the reports of growing loneliness on campuses.

He found that, according to chaplains, the desire for a "safe space" is often referenced by students, by which they mean as much a space where they can ask questions about their faith as one



Source: <https://www.resonateglobalmission.org/campus-ministry>

where they can find refuge from “micro-aggressions” they may experience. Schmalzbauer adds that this can be seen particularly among Jewish students in the face of protests and tensions on campuses since October 7. But students from minority groups and religions may not feel the same degree of support, given their sparser number of campus ministries. While the Assemblies of God have 1,631 campus ministries, the African American Church of God in Christ has just 12. Muslim, Sikh and other campus ministries often cannot afford staff. Schmalzbauer adds that, all too often, religious groups on campus are “siloeed and...often segregated” from each other.

- **While urbanism and youth are seen as key features in religious non-affiliation in Canada, today the major cities in Quebec are showing fewer “nones,” even among young adults, while smaller cities are showing more, according to a study by Jacob Legault-Leclair (University of Waterloo).** The study, presented at the August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, analyzed the Census (2001–2021) and the National Household Survey, finding that nones represent about 29 percent of the populations of Montreal, Quebec City, and Gatineau, which have all attracted many immigrants. In these cities 60 percent of the populations are “other religions,” with fewer immigrant residents being non-affiliated (25 percent in Montreal). Any increase of nones in a city such as Montreal tends to be at the expense of Catholics. Legault-Leclair states that the “historical trend of cities being at the forefront of



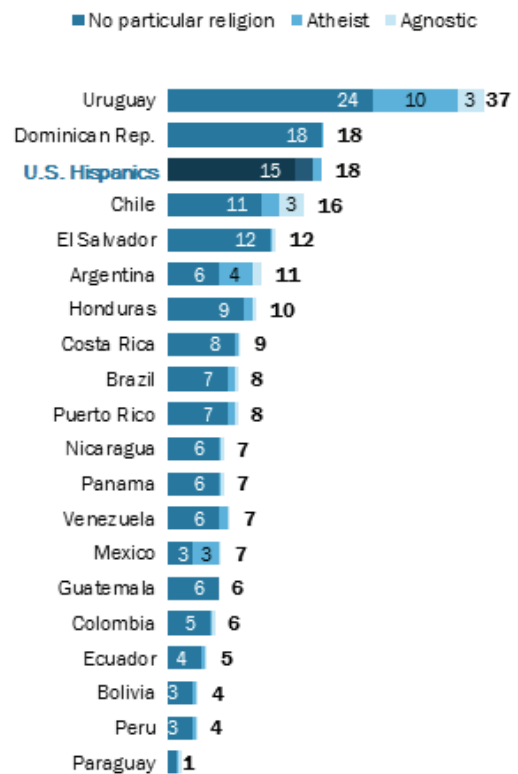
A woman attending a rally against Quebec’s Bill 21 on April 7, 2019, holds up a sign stating that people should not lose their employment for wearing a religious symbol (The Canadian Press / Graham Hughes - <https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/french-canada/challenging-secularism>).

secularization is gradually changing. The idea of the ‘secular city’ driven by immigration may have been the case in earlier years among older cohorts, but it changed with younger cohorts.” “However,” he adds, “it will take a few more years for the proportions of nones in Quebec’s regions to catch up with that of the cities.” But he speculates that Montreal, Quebec City, and Gatineau may come to resemble London and Sydney in being more religious than their respective countries.

- **While religious non-affiliation is growing in Latin America, the “nones” in this region are less secular than their counterparts in the U.S. and Europe, according to Matthew Blanton of the University of Texas.** Blanton, who presented a paper at the early August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Montreal, found that, overall, Latin Americans show a persistent religiosity and belief in God, even if there is a weakening of religious institutions. Using the Americas Barometer surveys with data from Pew and the Cooperative Elections Study, the researcher compared patterns of belief and practice among nones in Latin America and those in the U.S. and Europe. He found that 13 percent of the nones in Latin America still attended church, compared to 7 percent in the U.S. and 0 percent in Europe. Twenty percent of the Latin American nones rated religion as important, compared to 9 percent in the U.S. and 2 percent in Europe. While there is a “weakening of the institutions...belief in the supernatural persists in Latin America.” As in other countries, Blanton observed a trend of slackening religious affiliation and church attendance among the younger generations.

Unaffiliated Identity

% who describe their religion as ...

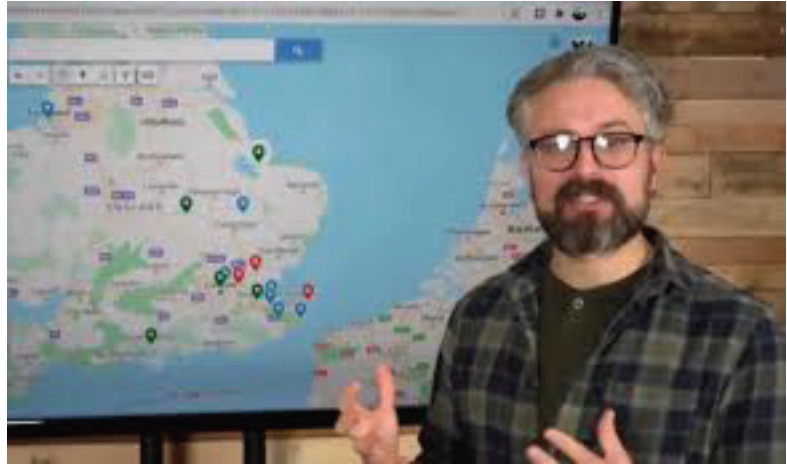


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PEW RESEARCH CENTER

- **A study of church planting in the UK finds that new church plants, attempting to appeal to their secular neighbors, rarely use the term “church.”** The study, conducted by the Centre for Church Planting Theology in Durham, found that although more than 900 new churches were established by 11 dioceses in the past 10 years, none of them used the word “church plant” or “church.” The study’s report, cited by Fox News (August 16), concluded that “Not one diocese used the term ‘church’ in their main descriptor. ‘Church plant’ is not used by any of the 11 dioceses. Only one diocese used ‘fresh expressions’ of ‘pioneering’ in its

descriptor.” The study itself refers to these not-quite-church-plants as “new things,” as there was no specificity offered as to what these “things” are. Six of the 11 dioceses used the language of “worship” as their main descriptor for new church projects. Seven used “community,” and only two used “congregation.”



Source: <https://www.relationalmission.org/news/2021/1/20/plantuk-review>

● **New research finds that Buddhists in Italy tend to see themselves less as converts to the religion and more as mixing and matching Buddhist practices and beliefs with others, even with Catholicism.** In a paper presented at the early August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Montreal, Giuseppe Giordan of the University of Padua estimated that there are 350,000 Buddhists in Italy, mostly represented



Participants of a Kalachakra teaching at the Istituto Samantabhadra (source: <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/buddhism-in-italy-an-overview/>).

by the Union of Buddhists of Italy (except Soka Gakkai). Among those Italian Buddhists he interviewed and observed, Giordan found they tended to be upper class, highly educated, and leftist in politics. He found that 1 in 10 were Catholics, while 52 percent claimed no religion. Sixty-seven percent said they did not convert to Buddhism, with many taking a mix-and-match approach, while others said that Buddhism was more of a philosophy than a religion. Eighty-seven percent said that many religions have a claim to the truth. There was also a perception among the respondents that the state treats Buddhism as equal to Catholicism. Giordan concludes that for Italian Buddhists, who combine “multiple belonging, multiple practice, and Mass on Sunday, there is no cognitive dissonance.”

Securitization marks Central and Eastern European church-state landscape

Ukraine’s new law prohibiting the Russian Orthodox Church’s (ROC) activity in the country, as well as that of other religious organizations linked with Russia, is a sign of the increasing securitization of relations between state and religion in Ukraine since Russia’s invasion, writes Dmytro Vovk (Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Ukraine) in the *Nachrichtendienst Östliche Kirchen* (August 28). Along with inter-Orthodox competition, the war has led to state intervention into religious affairs, and the new law can be seen as accelerating that trend. While



The head of the UOC, Metropolitans Onufriy (source: https://en.lb.ua/news/2022/05/27/15550_ukrainian_orthodox_church_moscow.html).

the ROC as such does not operate in the country, the law also targets the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) under Metropolitan Onufriy, which, although it declared its independence from Moscow after the Russian invasion, has not claimed the canonical status of autocephaly at this point. Its bishops continue to be considered by the Moscow Patriarchate as members of an associated autonomous church and are accordingly listed in its ecclesiastical yearbook, as Reinhard Flogaus (Humboldt University, Berlin) notes (*Nachrichtendienst Östliche Kirchen*, August 28).

In Ukraine itself there has been little support for the UOC from other religious organizations, while a number of religious figures abroad have expressed concerns about a violation of religious freedom, from the pope to the World Council of Churches, as well as various Orthodox churches. Warnings that the Ukrainian state might be on a “slippery slope” had already been made on previous occasions (see **RW**, March 2023). From the perspective of religious freedom and international human rights, Vovk lists a number of problematic points about the law, since it does not require proof that targeted organizations have been involved in illegal activities to be banned, and the ability of the Ukrainian authorities to handle those issues impartially is questionable. However, at the core, “the decisive question in this conflict is whether the UOC is prepared to completely disassociate itself from the Moscow Patriarchate,” Flogaus comments.

More widely, as a result of the war in Ukraine, several states in Central and Eastern Europe want to make sure that the ROC—closely associated with Russia—does not use local Orthodox churches as agents of influence. This is not only the case in Baltic countries (see **RW**, July 2023). In the Czech Republic, the Senate Security Committee has called for an investigation into the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia (*Nachrichtendienst Östliche Kirchen*, August 29). As an autocephalous church, it is not dependent on the ROC, but the committee fears that since 2014 it has increasingly come under the influence of people with links to Russian power structures. Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský said he would not consider the ROC a “legitimate church” and its representatives “real clergy,” but rather part of Russian influence operations.

(*Nachrichtendienst Östliche Kirchen*, <https://noek.info/>)

Zoroastrianism transforming in urban Iran

The Neo-Zoroastrian religiosity of converts has often been described as different from traditional Zoroastrian practices, but changes are also being observed among those who are Zoroastrian by birth. In a new issue of *Entangled Religions* (August) on “Religious Conversion in a Religiously Plural World,” Benedikt Römer (Bundeswehr University, Munich) reports that aspects of coalescence can be observed “between the religious practice and self-image of Neo-Zoroastrians and reform-minded, urban Iranian Zoroastrians.” A traditionally endogamous religion of about 130,000 members, Zoroastrianism counts 23,000 followers in Iran, the majority of whom now



Source: <http://kouroshziabari.com/2020/10/zoroastrians-irans-forgotten-minority/>

live in Tehran, while the largest number of Zoroastrians are Indian Parsis, and a significant number form a diaspora around the world. But while Zoroastrianism does not accept converts, there are also people without Zoroastrian roots who are attracted to the religion. In the Middle East such people are found especially among Kurds and Iranians, with Zoroastrianism exalted as the original Iranian culture and Kurdish Neo-Zoroastrians claiming that it was the original Kurdish religion. This allows such converts to claim that they are not so much converting as reverting to their ancient heritage, which also goes along with dissociation from Islam due to negative experiences with it and with Islamism. Today, some Zoroastrians are open to conversions, while others (especially in India) are not.

Reform-minded urban Zoroastrians in Iran want to adapt their religion to a modern environment, continuing a trend of religious adaptation that began in earlier decades of the 20th century. Rituals have been shortened, with emphasis placed instead on “belief in moral principles as the core of religiosity,” and “earlier religious conventions are gradually loosening up as a consequence of large-scale migration to the urban centre of Tehran.” In Iran, there is little and cautious contact between ethnic Zoroastrian and Neo-Zoroastrian communities, and the latter can only express their religious views openly outside the country. But both reform-minded Zoroastrians and Neo-Zoroastrians are “moving towards an ideal of religion that is normatively shaped by a liberal Protestant template.” Römer concludes that if encounters between both groups become more frequent and strict endogamy is given up, the interest in Zoroastrianism “has the potential of becoming an opportunity for actual revival.”

(For the full issue of *Entangled Religions*: <https://er.ceres.rub.de/index.php/ER/issue/view/358>)

Japanese media drives anti-cult sentiment

Controversy and hostility toward new religious movements (NRMs), particularly the Unification Church, are being fanned by the media in Japan, which has focused attention on second-generation members who have left and protested against these groups, according to Adam Lyons of the University of Montreal. In a paper presented at the early-August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Montreal, attended by **RW**, Lyons compared the current developments in Japan, which started after the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022, to the 1980s and 1990s in the U.S., when many second-generation members spoke out against the NRMs in which they were raised. In the current case, the controversy is largely media generated, but it is also shaped by a younger generation that had been raised in popular new religions during the 1990s (as opposed to the 1970s in the U.S.) and is now turning against religion in general. Abe's assassin, a disgruntled former member of the Unification Church, has become the poster child for a group of second-generation members known as *nisei*, or victims, who feel alienated both from their parents' religious group and from society in general.

Lyons adds that while the media has become fixated on the *nisei*, they represent a minority of NRM second-generation children, most of whom, whether or not they have grievances against



Former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated by a 41-year-old with grievances over his mother's religious donations to the Unification Church.

the groups in which they were raised, have moved on with their lives. He points out that the media attention and sympathy is selective; some second-generation members of unpopular groups, such as Aum Shinrikyo, continue to be stigmatized and ignored. While domestic NRMs in Japan are facing new discrimination and disapproval, transnational NRMs are better able to defend and sustain themselves. Lyons adds that this is happening during a time when many NRMs in Japan are seeing “membership rates in freefall as the older generations pass away and their children and grandchildren opt not to continue to participate in their parent’s organized religions.” He concludes that the “proliferation of *nisei* grievance narratives should be seen as exceptional (representing only a small minority of the second generation) and also as representative (because the turn away from active participation in religion is a leading tendency among the younger generations in Japan).”

Findings & Footnotes

■ It has been over 50 years since the controversial Homogenous Unit Principle (HUP) was propagated through Donald McGavran’s book *Understanding Church Growth*. The HUP held that evangelism and church growth are most effective among groups of people with similar characteristics, people being more likely to become Christian if they do not have to cross cultural, linguistic, or ethnic barriers. While some church planters, evangelists, and missionaries used the HUP in their work, like Rick Warren and his megachurch Saddleback, for others it became a long-lasting bone of contention, challenging church ministries to diverse populations, such as in cities. The current double-issue of the *International Journal for Frontier Missiology* (Vol. 40: 1-2) reviews the effects and current developments in mission and church growth ministries stemming from the HUP.

While the issue carries informative accounts of the conferences and debates surrounding the HUP, often revolving around Fuller Seminary, what is most noteworthy is how the debate is circling back to American churches after a decades-long emphasis on attracting diverse followings. In one article, Greg Parsons writes that recent research on multi-ethnic congregations has shown that they often attract those who are already Christians and that there is still discrimination in such



settings. Another article finds that the emphasis that McGavran and others placed on reaching out to those of similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds has widened to include such demographic characteristics as region of birth, age, education levels, and even hobbies and musical and artistic preferences. In other words, McGavran recognized the important role of social networks that are now commonly advocated by church planters. Still, the debate continues; in studies of world missions, highly diverse congregations are found to be better at drawing in marginalized people. Alan McMahan concludes that the combination of homogenous and heterogenous models is being used in large churches and urban contexts. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://www.ijfm.org/index.htm>

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

1) Rather than leaving organized religion, some evangelicals who no longer feel comfortable in a conservative subculture are finding new spiritual homes in more progressive evangelical churches, such as **Churchome**, a non-denominational megachurch in Seattle. Members of the church speak about their uneasiness with mainstream American evangelicalism and how Churchome is doing it differently. Churchome focuses on believers disappointed with evangelicalism—with its sermons being full of references that can only be understood by those familiar with evangelical subculture. However, in order not to be associated with the Christian right, Churchome avoids using the label “evangelical.” A recent study by Ariane Kovac finds that



Source: <https://churchome.org/about>

“at Churchome, distancing oneself from other forms of evangelicalism seems to be far more important than distancing oneself from the secular world.”

Although it is not a term used by members, Kovac writes of intra-evangelical “deconversion” to refer to a process where evangelicals are seeking change in identity at a time of evangelical politicization and polarization. She notes that this is more than standard church switching, because it involves transformations in people’s relationship with God and identity as Christians. Members speak about their religious experience in therapeutic terms and their narratives can be seen as “an example of the interconnectedness of psychotherapy, self-help, and evangelicalism in the U.S.” The church that became Churchome was founded in 1992 by the father of its current head pastor, Judah Smith. It was renamed Churchome in 2017 to emphasize that believers did not necessarily need to leave their home for worshipping, and the church developed a range of digital services before the Covid-19 pandemic. There are international Churchome groups and members who have never attended in-person services. In its self-presentation, Churchome “is not only a church for the deconverted but also a deconverted church,” with its identity depending “on a continuously reinvoked departure from conservative evangelicalism,” while avoiding doctrinal conflict and remaining a relatively conventional megachurch in comparison with more radical progressive groups.

(Source: Ariane Kovac in *Entangled Religions*, August)

2) **Tim Busch**, a prominent businessman and founder of the Napa Institute, a conservative Catholic organization, has taken on the role of peacemaker in an increasingly divided church. Most bridge-building efforts in the Catholic and other churches have been initiated by moderates and even liberals, so Busch’s new role is unique. His strategy is a simple one: he convenes gatherings at his New York apartment of prominent Catholics who are at odds with each other on issues across the theological and ideological spectrum. The dinners, which have so far convened 40 prominent Catholics, start with a Mass and rosary prayer and then lead to group discussions where participants share their personal stories about how they came to faith as well as their favorite Bible verses. While the guests and Busch broach sensitive topics in the church, the emphasis is on the “relationships among those present.” After the meal,



participants take a group photo and exchange contact information, with everyone encouraged to stay in touch. Most attendees are said to have continued the conversations started at the gatherings. The events have drawn the strongly conservative writer Sohrab Ahmari and the liberal Jesuit priest James Martin, who has become a leading advocate of ministry to the LGBTQ

community. Martin has suggested importing Busch's dinner model to parishes nationwide. Busch is also partnering with a Paulist Father's program seeking to reduce polarization in the church. He believes that such conversations may prevent actual schism in the church and encourage collaboration and cooperation without compromising church teachings.

(Source: *America magazine*, September)