

## Catholic vote and public discourse endangered?

As with Americans in general, it may be too early to make forecasts about the shape of the Catholic vote in this very close presidential election, according to recent polls. Just as Catholic voting patterns are no longer as predictable as they once were, distinct public Catholic voices are no longer being heard above the din of social media memes and culture wars. Writing in *Religion Unplugged* (September 24), veteran religion journalist Richard Ostling notes that “How Catholic voters view the candidates and issues could nudge margins enough to swing the election, and so could many other factors in such a nail-biter. Though political coverage emphasizes evangelicals, shifts by the two different Catholic segments [Hispanics and whites] are usually much more important in general elections.” It is true that non-Hispanic white Catholics have gradually trended Republican after a long period of Democratic loyalty, while Hispanic Catholics remain “reliably Democratic and by larger margins ([although they] may be more in play this time).” But two notable new surveys of Catholics offer strange and contradictory clues. In an SSRS poll for Pew, Catholic respondents overall were evenly divided between Harris and Trump at 49 percent each. The white, non-Latino Catholics favored Trump at 61 percent, versus 38 percent for Harris. Hispanic Catholics favored Harris at 65 percent, versus 34 percent for Trump.

But a poll of U.S. Catholic voters by the conservative Catholic Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) and RealClear Opinion Research found Catholics favoring Harris at 50 percent over Trump at 43 percent. Trump led with non-Hispanic white Catholics by only 52 percent to 42 percent, while Harris led with Hispanic Catholics by 60 percent to 30 percent. “Most remarkable,” Ostling adds, “was EWTN’s report that female Catholics favored Harris by a commanding 56 percent to 37 percent for Trump. While Trump led among Catholic men, he only did so 49 percent to 43 percent for Harris.” This is in line with other polls showing historic gender gaps for this election. On such issues as abortion, Pew found 77 percent of atheists saying abortion is “very important” in voting decisions, while 44 percent of the traditionally pro-life Catholics (and white Protestants) said the same. “Curiously,” Ostling notes, “72 percent of white Catholics deemed immigration policy ‘very important,’ but only 57 percent of Hispanic Catholics did.” But because Catholics occupy significant percentages of the population in battleground states, their vote will remain important. “Of the 61,858,137 U.S. Catholics (children



Source: *The Central Minnesota Catholic*, <https://thecentralminnesotacatholic.org/a-catholics-guide-to-voting/>

included) in the recent U.S. Religion Census, 9.7 million live in the seven key battleground states everyone is talking about.”

Regardless of the Catholic vote, in an article for *Commonweal* magazine (September 24), Massimo Faggioli writes that the larger trend is the “paucity of public Catholic theological voices in the general political and societal discourse.” He sees this deficiency in the worldwide church as well as in American Catholicism. Last May, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, noted the absence of prophetic voices among religious leaders working to foster peace and reconciliation in the region. While Catholics may speak up, they do it in Catholic publications and outlets, not in mainstream media. Faggioli adds that a “national sign-on letter from U.S. Catholics on Israel-Palestine garnered thousands of signatures—bishops and clergy, women religious, laypeople, academics, and activists—but it did not register in the national debate on Israel and Gaza.” One issue crowding out other Catholic public voices is the undue attention to Pope Francis and his views on a wide range of issues outside of official Catholic teachings. “This has created a sort of journalistic ultramontanism, augmented by Francis’s direct and frequent interactions with the press, where the only voice that ends up mattering is his.” Faggioli refers to the in-flight press conference of September 13, when Francis addressed the upcoming presidential election, suggesting a moral equivalence between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris.

But he adds that “It’s undeniable that there’s a problem with the public voice of theologians. The job of theology professors is to produce and keep alive the critical conscience of a people—a vital component of the experience of faith, but also for people of other or of no faiths. Yet that effort is increasingly politicized and subject to propaganda, given the heightened stakes of two-party electoral politics (which increasingly also seems to infect the Church). And despite Pope Francis’s efforts and personal popularity, the social-justice component of Catholic theology is receiving far less visibility than it used to (and than it should), which influences the public perception of what Catholicism stands for today.” He also lays the problem at the door of the universities, as they have “ceded the role of thinkers and scholars—including theologians—to diversity officers, education experts, and branding wizards. In some ways, that has helped liberate theology from the close watch of Church authorities, but it also now makes it more subject to the pressures of donors, customers, and other stakeholders in the ‘marketplace.’” Faggioli adds that bishops “don’t write for the larger public as much as they used to, and when they do, their voices register only when they’re weighing in on culture-war issues. Lay Catholic leaders, meanwhile, are more and more often identified with a particular agenda or institution... The Catholic Church is not in a state of schism, but there is something like a schism in the social-media world of public Catholic figures.”

### **DNA tests spark Jewish reconnections and conversions**

The popularity of at-home DNA tests has led to a surge in conversions to Judaism, reports Kaya Burgess in *The Times* of London (September 20). Dr. Jonathan Romain, a senior rabbi and



Source: Yerusha, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/uncovering-recovering-discovering-our-jewish-archival-robin-nobel/>

convenor of the UK Reform Beit Din (rabbinic court), reports that this phenomenon has become increasingly common in recent years. Individuals who discover Jewish ancestry through DNA testing, even consisting of as little as 5 to 10 percent of their genetic makeup, are now regularly reaching out to explore Judaism. Many of these individuals feel a sense of connection to their newly discovered heritage and wish to “restore that lost link.” Some claim that they had always felt Jewish without previously understanding why. Not everyone who discovers Jewish ancestry necessarily seeks full immersion in the faith. However, some individuals who were already searching for spiritual guidance or a sense of community find that this discovery provides a context for their existing interests or feelings of connection to Judaism.

Some people have been able to trace their Jewish ancestry back to 16th-century Spain and Portugal, where Jews were forced to convert to Catholicism or face expulsion during the Inquisition. In Reform Judaism, Jewish identity can be passed down through either parent, unlike Orthodox Judaism, which traditionally recognizes only maternal lineage. Rabbi Romain says that in cases where individuals can demonstrate Jewish ancestry, they are given a “return certificate,” acknowledging their return to Jewish roots rather than a completely new conversion. This trend is part of a broader phenomenon where people use genetic testing to explore their ancestral roots and potentially reconnect with lost cultural or religious traditions. It also highlights the complex interplay between genetics, identity, and religious affiliation in the modern world, where technological advancements can unexpectedly influence personal spiritual journeys.

### **Schisms finding their way to world Methodism?**

While schismatic separations from the United Methodist Church (UMC) have largely taken place within the U.S., the largest being the Global Methodist Church, the denomination is now facing the situation of its international partners threatening to leave, according to *Evangelical Focus* (September 9), a newsletter on European evangelicals. So far, the denomination has lost around a quarter of its churches (over 7,600), most of them dissenting from the UMC’s opening to LGBTQ+ issues [see June **RW**]. Jonatán Soriano writes that “many national Methodist churches have seen themselves forced to open a reflection process about their place in the denomination from now on.” Among the first national churches to leave the denomination in 2019 was the Methodist Church of Bulgaria (whose separation was finalized in 2022). A church official said of the last General Conference that voted on the LGBTQ+ issues: “When the majority vote can define the truth above the Scriptures, we are talking about a different kind of organization, not so much concerned about Scriptural holiness, but social justice and submission to the ideologies that rule in modern society.” But Soriano writes that it is the African churches that are the most closely poised to leave the denomination. In December 2023, 11 African Methodist bishops signed a declaration stating: “Notwithstanding the differences in our UMC regarding the issue of human sexuality especially with our stance of traditional and biblical view of marriage, we categorically state that we do not plan to leave The United Methodist Church and will continue to be shepherds of God’s flock in this worldwide denomination.”





Source: *United Methodist Insight*, <https://um-insight.net/perspectives/hands-off-the-united-methodist-church-in-africa/>

But even the stalwarts of African Methodism, such as John Wesley Yohanna of the United Methodist Church in Nigeria, whose moves are expected to influence the rest of the continent, have expressed more uncertainty since the actions of the General Conference. One decisive event that could change things was the arrest and deportation from Nigeria of Eben Nhiwatiwa, bishop of the United Methodist Church of Zimbabwe, who was accused of entering the country with invalid documentation, a “visit” rather than a “religious” visa. According to the authorities, Nhiwatiwa had traveled to Nigeria to destabilize the UMC of Nigeria’s electoral process, with the aim of maintaining control and promoting an alleged pro-marriage and pro-LGBTQ ordination faction. One official said the bishop was “arrested because he was found doing religious business with a visit visa. We arrested him following information that he was supervising the election of a new bishop.” Meanwhile, in Zimbabwe, the members of the UMC protested against the decisions taken in May after the conclusion of the Charlotte General Conference, stating, among other things, that “homosexuality is a threat to our culture.” In the same month, the Methodist Church of Côte d’Ivoire voted to break with the denomination and leave the UMC with its 1.2 million members.

(*Evangelical Focus*, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/world/28115/the-united-methodist-church-widens-its-fragmentation>)

## Cautious acceptance with oversight marks new Vatican policy on Medjugorje, Marian apparitions

While allowing for “prudent adherence” to the messages, the Vatican has recently taken steps to tighten control over the alleged Marian apparitions in Medjugorje (Bosnia and Herzegovina), writes Mikael Corre in *La Croix International* (September 20). On September 19, the Holy See issued a decree that does not formally recognize the supernatural nature of the visions but permits devotion to these claims. The Medjugorje phenomenon began on June 24, 1981, when six children claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary. Three of them still report daily visits. Despite the lack of official recognition and dissension within the local church, the site has attracted worldwide devotion. This decision by the Vatican represents an attempt to find a middle ground in dealing with the Medjugorje phenomenon and with apparitions in general. The church’s approach reflects the delicate balance between recognizing genuine spiritual experiences and maintaining theological and ecclesiastical discipline. The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, led by Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez, announced that future messages from the presumed visionaries would need to be reviewed by a papal delegate, Bishop Aldo Cavalli, before publication. These messages will be accompanied by a note stating that the faithful are free to believe or not.

A document titled, “The Queen of Peace: Note About the Spiritual Experience Connected with Medjugorje,” has been published, acknowledging the positive spiritual experiences of millions of pilgrims (“abundant conversions,” increased sacramental practice, and numerous vocations associated with Medjugorje), while urging caution regarding certain aspects of the messages. The



Source: 206 Tours, <https://www.206tours.com/cms/tour1/>

note criticizes messages with apocalyptic tendencies, contradictions, or those linked to the interests of the visionaries. The Dicastery emphasizes that while they consider the essential experiences at Medjugorje to be “profoundly Catholic,” this doesn't imply a judgment on the moral lives of the visionaries or confirm the supernatural origin of the apparitions. Pope Francis approved pilgrimages to Medjugorje in May 2019, recognizing the positive spiritual fruits while maintaining caution about the alleged apparitions themselves. The recent Vatican document emphasizes that these positive experiences are primarily associated with pilgrimages to the site rather than encounters with the visionaries. The Vatican's actions align with new norms adopted in May 2024 for evaluating supernatural phenomena [see June **RW**]. Procedures based on specific criteria provide the basis for a decision on a scale of six possible conclusions. Except in those rare cases when the pope himself would solemnly recognize an event as supernatural, the Roman Catholic Church does not make a final conclusion. The highest positive level (the one granted to Medjugorje) on the scale of discernment of supernatural phenomena is a decree of “*nihil obstat*” (literally: “nothing stands in the way”), the lowest one, “*declaratio de non supernaturalitate*” (not supernatural). Recent decisions have been issued on several other, less widely known apparitions.

(Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith, “Note About the Spiritual Experience Connected with Medjugorje”: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_ddf\\_doc\\_20240919\\_nota-esperienza-medjugorje\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240919_nota-esperienza-medjugorje_en.html))

## CURRENT RESEARCH

- **While there is less opposition to the prospect of an atheist president, especially as the stigma of atheism has decreased in recent years, partisanship and religiosity may still keep voters from electing even patriotic candidates if they don't profess a faith, a new study finds.** In an article in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in September), political scientists David Campbell, Geoffrey Layman, and Wayne Marsh report drawing on four survey experiments from 2020 to 2023 to test whether America's growing secular currents have been changing the negative perception of voting for an atheist candidate. In these experiments, respondents first read news stories about a hypothetical candidate for political office who was an atheist and then were asked how likely they would be to vote for such a candidate. One news story also portrayed the candidate as patriotic and “truly American.” The researchers found that, depending on the news story respondents read, identifying as an atheist produced either “a null or slightly negative overall effect.” They also found that voters' reactions to atheist candidates did not vary with the office or position for which they were running.

As might be expected, partisanship was found to be the main factor in voter reactions, with Republicans being more critical of atheist candidates and Democrats being consistently favorable to such politicians. Since Republicans are more religious than Democrats, that effect carried over to support for atheist candidates. The depiction of the patriotic and “truly American” candidate in





Source: *People's World*, <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/atheists-also-fight-for-religious-freedom/>

one of the news stories was not enough to narrow the gap between the voters, showing the continual importance of religiosity. Campbell, Layman, and Marsh conclude that atheists can count on support from Democrats (except for the small percentage of strongly religious ones). But in the future, the declining number of religious voters may propel atheist candidates to office, even if some degree of apprehension remains.

(*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14685906>)

• **A “U.S. leadership culture” remains influential in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) outside of America, a factor that may be keeping recent-convert retention rates at a low level.** In the independent Mormon journal *Dialogue* (57:2), anthropologist Henri Gooren writes that the LDS’s emphasis on maintaining a global and transcendent church free of national traditions and cultures has opened it to criticism that its U.S.-based leadership culture has been exported by default worldwide. In an effort to update a previous study of Latin American Mormons, Gooren conducted a survey of LDS leadership demographics in Chile and all the countries of Central America, based on data on the occupations of stake presidents and their counselors listed in the LDS’s Church News from 2000 to 2019. He also compared these findings to data from the same source on European church leaders. He found continuities in the distributions of the church leaders’ occupations in these countries: stake presidents and their counselors “are still overwhelmingly recruited from a background of (small) business owners, business administrators, business employees and professionals.” Gooren writes that this leadership culture based on American business models and norms conflicts with Latin American leadership models that uphold a more traditional style of leadership, known as “personalism,”





Source: Ask Gramps, <https://askgramps.org/how-should-mormon-missionaries-be-addressed-and-treated/>

based on bonds of friendship and the leader's ability to bestow favors on followers. This conflict may be related to recent low retention rates in Latin America (which are in the 15-to-25 percent range) and Europe. However, Gooren notes that the church has sought to address the problems of local leadership and the dominance of local culture

(*Dialogue*, <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/>)

● **A new study finds that tithing practices in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) do not appear to assist in alleviating localized poverty.** In the *Journal of Economics, Theology and Religion* (4:1), economist Dallin Overstreet describes how Mormon scriptures and leaders teach that tithing helps break the cycle of poverty. This claim was made explicit by LDS President Russell Nelson, who told members in Africa that “we preach tithing to the poor people of the world because the poor people of the world have had cycles of poverty, generation after generation. That same poverty continues from one generation to another, until people pay their tithing.” Overstreet used LDS temples as a proxy for tithing participation, testing whether counties with temples exhibited lower poverty rates than comparable counties without temples over the period from 2010 to 2018. His findings revealed no statistically significant impact of temple presence on poverty rates. He proposes that the gap between the promised prosperity benefits of tithing and these null results of temple presence is due to a fundamental flaw in the way the church allocates funds from tithing, with only a small

percentage returned to the temples and their charitable activities that could alleviate local poverty. Instead, institutional priorities and incentives are centered around global expansion, real estate, and public relations, recently revealed in the church's \$100 billion investment arm. Overstreet allows that it is possible that tithing confers financial benefits mostly to individuals or households rather than to entire communities, with temples boosting economic outcomes for members through expanded social networks and labor market referrals through congregational ties.



Source: *Mormon Olympians*, [https://mormonolympians.org/tithing\\_mormonism](https://mormonolympians.org/tithing_mormonism)

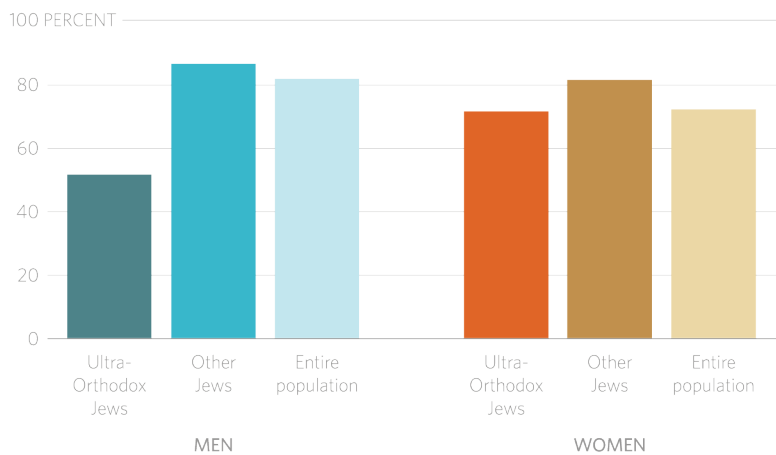
(*Journal of Economics, Theology, and Religion*, <https://j-etr.org/2024/04/03/the-elusive-economic-blessings-of-tithing-mormon-temples-and-county-poverty/>)

- **While the Israeli government has set the goal of integrating more ultra-Orthodox Jews into the labor market, a new study finds that “pull” factors are keeping members of this religious community from joining the labor force.** In the journal *Rationality and Society* (36:3), Yossi Perelman and Chen Goldberg write that, although the ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, have a higher natural growth rate than the general Israeli population, their employment rate, especially among men, is significantly lower. The researchers analyzed individual-level data collected from 256 ultra-Orthodox men and found a positive association between wage expectations and likelihood of entering the labor market, “implying a potential tradeoff between earning potential and the extent of social fines”

#### Employment Levels in Israel

Ultra-Orthodox men have resisted joining the ranks of the workforce while Ultra-Orthodox women take low-wage and low-skilled jobs.

Among ages 25-64, using 2016 data



Sources: Haredi Institute for Public Affairs; Central Bureau of Statistics; Reuters

Copyright Stratfor 2018

keeping members devoted to the religious community. The researchers found that the ultra-Orthodox community is also accepting of members who engage in Yeshiva studies but may not follow accepted norms, because they want to encourage potential future religious commitment. Although these laxer members may be amenable to entering the labor market, the community has increasingly been offering incentives (such as subsidies for Yeshiva studies) to retain members. Perelman and Goldberg conclude that Israeli economists and policymakers, in their attempts to assimilate ultra-Orthodox men into the labor market, may overlook how this community doesn't have the control over its members that is often assumed, even as the Haredi also offer incentives to keep members within a demanding religious community.

(*Rationality and Society*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/rss>)

### The rise of new left-wing Christians in France

In recent years, a new generation of young left-wing Christians has emerged in France, challenging the notion that Christian leftists were disappearing in the face of right-wing Catholics, writes Pascale Tournier in the Catholic weekly *La Vie* (September 26). This group, primarily consisting of individuals aged 25–40, is beginning to organize and assert itself in the public sphere, combining its faith with progressive political views. These new left-wing Christians are characterized by their open embrace of their faith while engaging in social and political activism. “Few are heirs of the left-wing Christians of the 1960s–1970s,” notes Yann Raison du Cleuziou, a political science professor at the University of Bordeaux. “Some of them



Source: Gzero, <https://www.gzeromedia.com/news/watching/french-left-wing-coalition-tops-election-results>



even come from very ‘classic’ right-wing Catholic backgrounds. In some cases, their left-leaning orientation results less from an attraction to left-wing parties than from a rejection of their Catholic environment turning to the right.” But they are not willing to leave the monopoly of Catholic identity to right-wing Catholics. The encyclical *Laudato Si’* by Pope Francis has been a significant catalyst for many in this movement, pushing them towards left-wing politics through the lens of ecological concerns. This has led them to a reconsideration of various social and political issues, often putting them at odds with their families of origin.

Beside environmental activism, key aspects of the movement include support for social justice, feminism and LGBTQ+ rights (including feminist theology and LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church), decolonial thinking, and intersectionality (connecting various liberation struggles with the “revolutionary power of the Gospel”). While they are gaining traction, their radical approach can sometimes alienate more moderate Christians. There is also a debate about how to engage with traditional political parties and institutions. These young Christians are not primarily focused on reforming the church from within and do not feel attracted to party politics. Instead, they aim to bring a Christian perspective to secular society and social movements. Many are pursuing theological studies to strengthen their discourse. The article concludes by noting that while these individuals are left-wing Christians, they consider themselves Christians first and foremost. This movement represents a significant shift in the landscape of French Christianity, challenging both traditional right-wing Catholicism and secular left-wing politics.

## **Australia’s human rights regime struggling with religious autonomy and accommodation**

Australia’s legalization of same-sex marriage in 2017 has opened the door to a series of federal, state, and territory-level religious discrimination bills (or proposed bills) that focus on anti-discrimination rather than protection of the autonomy of religious institutions, curtailing the capacity of such organizations to govern their affairs, writes Ian Tregenza in the *Journal of Church and State* (66). The religious freedom legislation that has been widely enacted in Australia since 2017 tends to focus on individual freedoms in the framework of human rights, where institutions are criticized for curtailing individualism and personal choice (such as whom to marry). Tregenza writes that legislation like the Victorian government’s Equal Opportunity Amendment Bill of 2021 limits the freedom of organizations to “recruit staff on the grounds of conformity to the religious beliefs of the organization [to cases where] such conformity is deemed an essential feature of the role in question.” In other words, freedom in recruitment is only allowed in the case of chaplains and religious instruction teachers but not in the case of mathematics or English teachers. A very similar approach has been proposed for such legislation at the federal level, he adds. Tregenza notes that there are no comparable laws that “prevent, say, an environmental organization or political party from selecting office holders or members committed to their aims or worldview or expelling them from the organization should they act in ways deemed detrimental to the cause.”



Source: FSP, <https://socialism.com/fs-article/australia-far-right-christians-claim-god-given-right-to-discriminate/>

This “pragmatic pluralist” position is supported by a secular worldview that largely equates “religion with a set of abstract beliefs or doctrines which can be demarcated or allocated to specialized roles,” he adds. Such a position runs against the historic practice of religions where beliefs, practices, and rituals create distinct communities with thick ties of belonging. In fact, contemporary religion scholarship has found how the modern state is built on the construction of religion as a private affair, enabling the control of churches by the state. Tregenza sees this scenario playing out as religious freedom is relegated to the lowest level in the hierarchy of rights, where “religious schools, charities and hospitals are still allowed to exist but they increasingly come to resemble their secular counterparts.” He concludes that the degree of autonomy a religious organization should exercise and what forms of discrimination could be considered legitimate will remain contested questions in an increasingly secular country. But Tregenza calls for a “procedural rather than a programmatic kind of secularism,” where more attention is paid to the kind of context in which each religious group operates, rather than enforcing a “blanket universalism of the human rights framework.”

(*Journal of Church and State*, <https://academic.oup.com/jcs>)

## Somalia as the new hot spot for jihadism?

Al-Shabaab, an affiliate of al-Qaeda based in Somalia, is finding new support among the young as well as forming new alliances, such as with the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, reports Tam Hussein in the online magazine *UnHerd* (September 16). The ineffectiveness of the Somali



Source: The Jamestown Foundation, <https://jamestown.org/program/perspectives-on-the-future-of-the-somali-jihad/members-of-hizb-al-islam-patrol-southern-mogadishu/>

government in defeating the terrorist group was on display in July 2024, when a fireball ripped through a cafe full of football fans in Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab later claimed responsibility for the blast and the five lives it took. The attack posed a particular threat because the 22,000 African Union troops that have been stationed in Somalia since 2007 to support Mogadishu's fragile government are scheduled to leave at the end of the year. "And there's every reason to believe that al-Shabaab could take over and destabilise neighbouring nations with a large Somali diaspora...It could also spark more serious threats closer to home. After all, in the aftermath of 9/11, it was in Somalia—not Iraq or Afghanistan—that a new generation of Western jihadists were spawned," Hussein writes. The revival and spread of al-Shabaab is linked to the same dissident fervor that led young Muslims in Islamic societies and their diasporas to fight in Chechnya or join organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir that called for a return of the caliphate in Syria.

During that time, "policymakers appeared to be more preoccupied with threats emerging from Afghanistan and Iraq or dealing with the aftermath of major terror attacks such as the one that took place in London on 7/7, to appreciate the [influence] al-Shabaab had on a small but significant number of young Muslims in the West. Somalia appeared distant and war-torn." But today, Hussein writes, "we find ourselves in a similar situation, with a turbo-charged jihadi discourse heightened by the horrific situation in Palestine. Young, disaffected Muslims watch as the media appears outraged by Russian targeting of hospitals in Ukraine but relatively indifferent when the IDF targets hospitals in Gaza. They see themselves as othered, devalued and forgotten. Spurred on by social media and Telegram groups, they see the likes of the Taliban defeating the Americans or the Houthis doing something for Gaza while the rest of the Muslim world appears



impotent. For them, al-Shabaab offers an animating force. If its flags rise in Mogadishu, a new generation of Western jihadists could return to the Horn of Africa.”

## Deprogramming against minority faiths being taken up by patriotic Buddhists?

While the practice of deprogramming or “faith breaking,” where members of minority religions are confined and submitted to heavy psychological indoctrination and various forms of violence, has been reported to be a common practice in China, these techniques are now being conducted in cooperation with an official religious group, Dong Deming reports in the newsletter *Bitter Winter* (September 2). Deprogramming is illegal in most democratic countries, but it is routinely practiced in China and has taken place in different facilities controlled by the state. But Deming reports on how pro-government Buddhist clergy are now becoming involved, describing a recent video showing a Falun Gong practitioner from Chengde, a prefecture-level city in Hebei province, detained by the police. The officers arrange for his deprogramming with a Buddhist abbot who is a leader of the China Buddhist Association, the body established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to control Buddhists in the country. The video even has a few scenes showing the deprogramming, before the former Falun Gong practitioner is presented as having become best friends with the police officers who arrested him, and who are now helping him set up a small business and arrange care for his old parents. “The process shows the strict cooperation and complicity between China Buddhist Association personnel and the police. It seems that deprogramming is ‘sub-contracted’ to the government-controlled Buddhist agency,



Source: International Campaign for Tibet, <https://savetibet.org/buddhist-association-of-china-takes-a-leading-role-in-chinas-attempts-to-control-and-forcibly-reshape-tibetan-buddhism/>

while remaining under the control of public security,” Deming writes. He concludes that it is yet another way in which the China Buddhist Association supports the CCP and participates in its human rights violations.

(*Bitter Winter*, <https://bitterwinter.org/china-buddhist-association-works-with-police-to-deprogram-falun-gong-practitioners/>)

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

Albania is planning to create the world’s smallest, Vatican-style sovereign state within its capital city, Tirana. This proposed 27-acre enclave, about the size of five New York City blocks, would be called the **Sovereign State of the Bektashi Order** and would serve as a symbol of religious tolerance and moderate Islam. The initiative is being spearheaded by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, who chose to reveal this plan at the UN General Assembly, catching many off guard with his unconventional proposal. Rama sees the project as a way to showcase Albania’s tradition of religious tolerance and to counter negative stereotypes about Islam, sending the message: “Do not let the stigma of Muslims define who Muslims are.” The Bektashi order, founded in the 13th century in Turkey, is known for its relaxed interpretation of Islamic law and its mystical practices, with strong Alevi influences. Alcohol consumption is allowed and women are not required to veil themselves. The Bektashi order has a long history in Albania. By the end of the 19th century, up to 15 percent of the Albanian population belonged to the order. When Atatürk banned Sufi orders in Turkey, the Bektashi moved their spiritual center to Tirana. However, during Albania’s communist era, all religious activities were banned, and many places of worship were destroyed. The order’s center in Tirana only reopened in 1990. Today, Bektashi make up only around



Source: *Deutsche Welle*

3 percent of Albanian population, which raises some questions about the viability of such a project based on that specific group.

In Albania, Rama's announcement has been met with skepticism, mockery, and even outrage. The country's Sunni Muslim community, the largest religious group, has condemned the plan, arguing that it would be detrimental to religious tolerance rather than beneficial. Critics also take issue with how Rama introduced the project. According to Afrim Krasniqi from the IPS think tank in Tirana, "Rama presented the idea on the international stage without any prior debate in the country," giving the impression that he can do whatever he wants with the state. Political scientist Ilir Kalemaj of the University of Tirana describes Rama's approach as "international policy marketing," suggesting that the move is designed to bring Albania into the international spotlight. The plan for this new state is still in its early stages. A team of legal experts is drafting legislation to define its sovereign status, which will need to be approved by the Albanian parliament. Observers point out that there are significant hurdles to realizing this project. Albania's current constitution does not allow for initiatives that affect the country's territorial integrity. While Rama's Socialist Party could potentially amend the constitution if they win a two-thirds majority in next year's elections, international recognition of the new state would still be required. Despite these challenges, Kalemaj suggests that Rama has invested too much in this announcement for it to simply fade away without concrete consequences. (Source: *New York Times*, September 21; *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, September 28)