

### Amish work ethic driving upward mobility?

The Amish's high fertility, communal practices, and lifestyles are coming together to fuel upward mobility and economic flourishing, according to recent articles and research. Aaron Renn's newsletter (November 1) cites a *Wall Street Journal* article reporting on how Holmes County, Ohio, a bastion of the Amish, has become a standout for economic mobility among millennials. Between 2005 and 2019, average household income in Holmes County rose 24 percent for 27-year-olds raised in lower-income homes—the biggest relative jump for any U.S. county—from roughly \$36,000 to \$45,000 in inflation-adjusted 2023 dollars. That puts millennials who are now in their early 30s far ahead of their Gen X counterparts when they were that age, according to data released this year by a team of Harvard University economists. Scholars and local business leaders believe much of the progress stems from entrepreneurial growth fueled by cooperation and innovation, all buttressed by tight family and community ties. Mark Partridge, an Ohio State University economist who has studied Holmes County, points to an “extreme networking effect,” where companies—and cousins—routinely help each other out due to the Amish culture. While other counties can't necessarily replicate this cocktail, they can draw on key ingredients, Renn argues. He quotes Partridge: “There's no real strong reason you have to be Amish. You can have a tight social network with effective social organizations, chambers of commerce, business organizations, other kind of nonprofits.”

Renn adds that, “While the Anabaptists are about as far as you can get from Calvinism and still be Protestant, the [*Wall Street Journal*] article also hints that historic Protestant values and culture are key to Amish success there. Namely sobriety, thrift, a work ethic, civic mindedness (of a sort), and a sense of accountability to God in stewarding what they've been given.” As one Amish businessman in the article says, “We believe that God has given us everything that we have, and we are going to make the most of every opportunity.” Renn writes that civic mindedness among the Amish seems to mostly apply within their own community. “This is similar to what the sociologist E. Digby Baltzell noted about the Pennsylvania Quakers. Whereas the Calvinist Puritans built up genuinely public institutions in Massachusetts, the Quakers built largely sectarian ones. Examples like Holmes County, Ohio or Sioux County, Iowa show that the Protestant ethic still produces great results even today.” Renn notes that the free passes that the

Amish have been given—such as not paying self-employment taxes—may not last. “They are becoming too numerous, are perceived as taking over in various areas, and are starting to make real money. The first rule of being a tolerated minority that lives differently is not to get too big or too visible. The Amish have broken it, and I suspect that means there will be a much more skeptical gaze turned their direction in the future.”

High fertility rates among the Amish have also been cited as a factor in their business productivity, but this faith group shows various birth rates, often influenced by their strictness, according to a paper presented at this year’s meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, held in Pittsburgh in late October and attended by **RW**.

Matthew Conrad (University of Connecticut) analyzed Amish directories from 2004–2020 in Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania, comprising 37,000 households. He found that while fertility remains high among the Amish generally, with families of between six to eight children, there are substantial differences among the various Amish sects. The very strict Swartzentruber Amish have the most children, among both farming and non-farming families, followed by more moderate Amish groups, such as the Andy Weaver Amish and the technologically lax New Order Amish. Conrad also found that clergy families have more children, and that where Amish settlements have more clergy, they have higher fertility rates. Those families that used more biblical names for their children also had more offspring.



Source: *Ohio Amish Country: 2024 Map and Visitor’s Guide*, <https://www.visitamishcountry.com/sites/default/files/2024-01/>

## Religion not computing for robots for now

While theological perspectives remain open to the possibility of artificial intelligence (AI) developing the capacity for religious experiences, one theologian argues that the deeply embodied and evolutionary roots of human religion suggest that even highly advanced AI systems would likely be incapable of developing anything comparable to human religious behavior. Marius Dorobantu, an Assistant Professor of Theology and Artificial Intelligence at the Free University of Amsterdam, makes this argument in a recent article in *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* (online Oct. 25). He starts by discussing the case of a Google engineer who claimed in 2022 that an AI chatbot he was testing had become sentient. His belief was partly fueled by the program's mention of God, its expressed fear of being turned off, and its declaration of being a "spiritual person." Dorobantu warns that it is not difficult today for chatbots to generate statements outlining their interest in religion if prompted to do so. But this does not make them authentically religious—and authenticity is essential here. Notwithstanding "our inherent tendency to anthropomorphize AI," and assumptions in science fiction that intelligent robots "will develop very humanlike concerns, fears, and desires," even "the hypothetically superintelligent AIs of the future, endowed with artificial general intelligence, will likely be profoundly different kinds of entities from us."

Dorobantu notes that even if AI systems achieve human-level intelligence, their internal structure, world-modeling, and problem-solving approaches remain radically different from our own. This fundamental difference casts doubt on whether AI would develop the same kind of existential anxieties and spiritual needs that drive humans to religion. He questions the widespread bias toward equating religion primarily with its intellectual or doctrinal aspects. People assume robots would develop religious tendencies mainly through intellectual curiosity about existence and causality. This overlooks the deeply embodied and experiential nature of human religion. "If AI programs start to declare an adherence to certain religious beliefs, this will equate to only the upper, and arguably more superficial, layer of how religion functions in humans, thus lacking the emotional embedding and psychological structure that would grant such claims plausible authenticity." Still, Dorobantu admits that his conclusion is merely tentative—"it only refers to a type of religiosity very similar to our own, which is the



Source: @dinolover8558 (AI Emojis)-

only way we can so far imagine.” He maintains openness to the possibility of different forms of religious experience emerging through artificial intelligence, while emphasizing the need for careful evaluation of such claims based on improved understanding of both human religion and artificial intelligence.

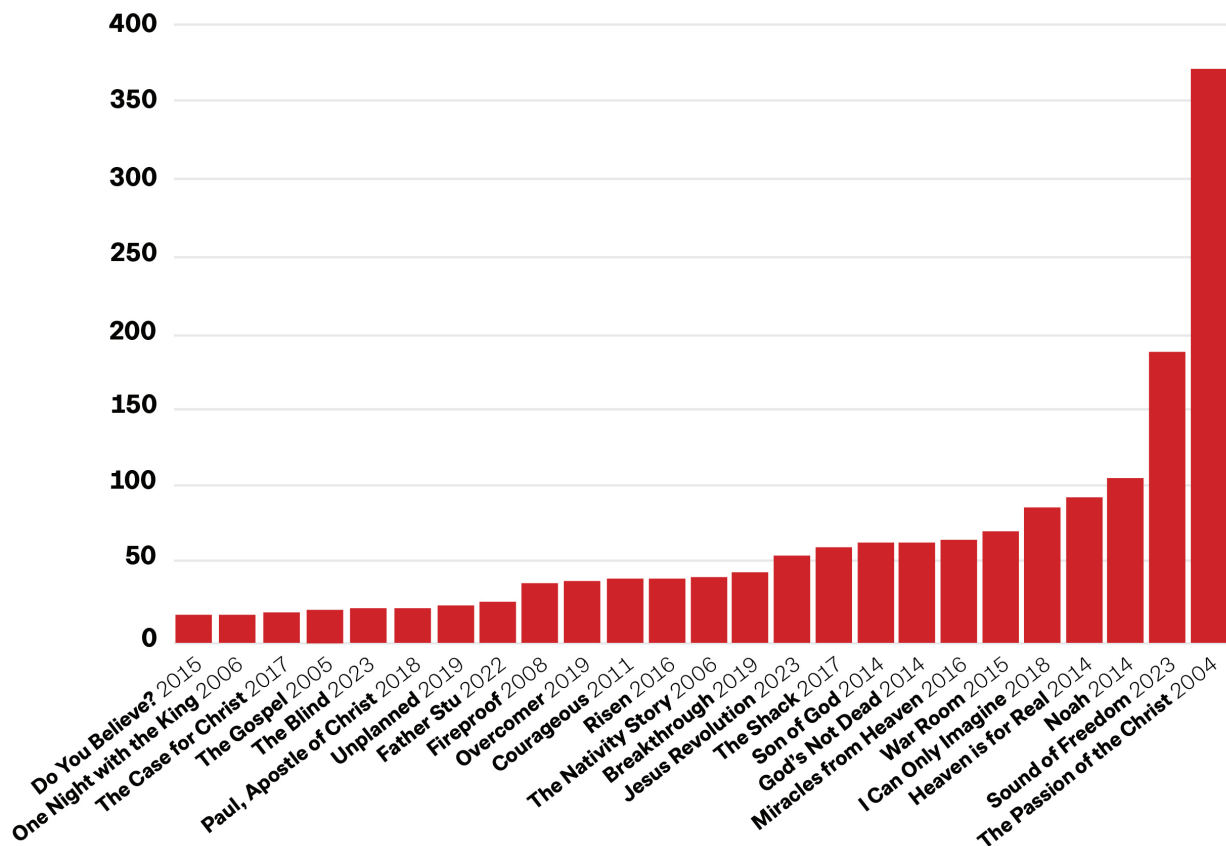
(*Zygon*, <https://www.zygonjournal.org/>)

### Faith-based films’ repeated successes and repeated rejections

While faith-based films have grown sharply over the past few decades and drawn a global audience, mainstream movie studios still largely steer clear of these projects despite a clear economic upside, Daniel Parris writes in his Substack newsletter *Stat Significant* (September 25).

## Top “Faith-Based” Domestic Dramas Since 2000

Grossing over \$10M (in millions)



Source: The-Numbers.com



The early 2000s witnessed the emergence of numerous independent studios dedicated to creating faith-driven narratives for spiritually minded audiences. But most moviegoers will not recognize the names of these production companies or their films, which is part of a “never-ending cycle of cultural amnesia and discovery, a broken feedback loop” that plays out as follows: When a faith-based movie performs well, as in the case of *Heaven is Real or Fireproof*, it is touted as the “future of entertainment,” but after “a solid week of internet discourse, most people quickly forget the success of this faith-based film and the existence of these independent studios—only to be surprised when another breakthrough hit emerges a year or two later.” Parris traces this ambivalent and often negative attitude toward faith-based films to the secularization of mainstream movies over the past 50 years. The success of *The Passion of the Christ* in single-handedly birthing today’s faith-based film industry proved both the latent demand for such films and mainstream critics’ rejection of them.

In analyzing the production budgets of faith-based films, Parris finds the widespread use of lesser-known actors or former Hollywood stars (such as Dennis Quaid), and relatable, low-concept themes (often criticized for their lack of complexity, even by religious critics). And yet, despite quality concerns, “these movies are consistently profitable, regularly grossing 1.5x their budget (Hollywood’s back-of-the-envelope breakeven point)...When we group films by average user reviews and sort them into quality quartiles, faith-based projects show exceptional returns across the board, demonstrating strong performance for poorly rated projects and critically acclaimed films (with at least 50 percent of movies achieving profitability, no matter their critical reception).” Parris adds that “At some point, Hollywood stopped making many movies to satisfy diverse audiences and started making singular franchise events for every person with a wallet—these movies have no meaningful ideas outside of fan service and the prolonging of a franchise.” That’s why he thinks that Hollywood’s embrace of religion-driven stories and their integration into modern blockbuster filmmaking would breed dissatisfaction. He concludes that the “story of faith-driven movies is yet another example of Chesterton’s Fence: there is likely a reason why things turned out this way, and to disturb this equilibrium would potentially yield lackluster results (displeasing to all).”

## CURRENT RESEARCH

- **While voting patterns among religious believers have held steady in recent elections, there was less support for President-elect Donald Trump among Protestants compared to 2020.** RW was going to press as the election results came out, and we will undoubtedly report more on the election and the upcoming Trump presidency in the next issue. In a post on X (November 5), political scientist Ryan Burge finds that the distribution of votes for Trump among several religious groups remains similar to that of four years ago—with 59 percent of Protestants, 52 percent of Catholics, and 66 percent of Mormons voting for him. Trump had the lowest votes among Jews (31 percent), Muslims (30 percent), and “Nones” (27 percent). However, the Muslim vote for Trump in 2020 was only 6 percent. In his Substack newsletter Rational Sheep (November 8), Terry Mattingly notes that the declining Protestant vote



Source: First Liberty (<https://firstliberty.org/news/religious-voters-deciding-factor-in-2024-election/>).

for Trump, which was 64 percent in 2020, may be due to a weakening of support among mainline Protestants, since the president-elect's totals among white evangelical voters remained about the same (at 82 percent).

(Ryan Burge on X, <https://x.com/ryanburge/status/1853978633796256212>)

● **Church closures tend to follow different patterns in urban and suburban areas, with closed urban churches often being used for secular purposes and suburban congregational properties more often being purchased by other religious groups.** Those are two of the findings that were reported in papers on church closures at the meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in late October. Kraig Beyerlein of the University of Notre Dame introduced this increasingly pressing issue by looking at urban churches in Chicago, noting that conflicting counts of congregations make it difficult to estimate church closures, with many congregations relocating instead of closing. He noted that approximately half of the 4,907 congregations counted in Chicago in 2002 have survived at their original sites. As to the uses of closed congregations, Beyerlein found that the majority were slated for non-religious purposes, ranging from ordinary businesses to a circus school. Of the denominations that experienced closures, the Catholic Church had the fewest closings and non-affiliated congregations the most, with black churches and Hindu and Muslim congregations in the middle. The variation is mostly due to the age of congregations. He also found the predominance of black and Latino churches to be a predictor for the changing use of land.

Another paper by Brian Miller of Wheaton College looked at church closures in the Chicago suburbs, finding the pattern to be very different from urban areas. Of the 725 congregations in Dupage County, 87 congregations have closed, with the majority being sold to other religious



Source: James K. Honig (<https://jameskhonig.com/2015/09/24/lament-at-the-closing-of-a-church/>)-

groups. Miller found that Baptist and Christian Science churches, congregations with an early establishment in the suburbs, had closing rates of 67 percent and 100 percent, respectively. Twelve had closed by 2023. Other predictors of church closures included a larger number of congregations in the areas to start with, and the age of the communities in which they were located. Miller concluded that it was a challenge counting closures, since some churches may appear active but have actually relocated or are closed.

- **Seminary education may make students more liberal after graduation, although particularly with regard to views on the Bible, theology, and sexual ethics, according to a new study.** Joshua Gaghan of Duke University, who presented a paper at the late-October meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Pittsburgh, conducted a longitudinal study of seminarians at a United Methodist seminary that included 431 respondents before graduation and 102 after graduation. The unnamed seminary was said to be representative of moderate mainline seminaries, though with evangelical students also enrolled. Gaghan found that the students slowly liberalized on theological and sexual matters, but that such liberalization slowed down after graduation. Yet on family and parenting issues, such as mothers of young children working less than fathers, the respondents tended to become more conservative. Gaghan concluded that he did not see signs that the seminarians upon graduation had become more



ideological, instead accepting a whole package of views. Rather than a wholesale shift, such liberalization only targeted the more immediate concerns of students. But the study does suggest that seminary education plays a role in the mismatch that exists between liberal clergy and more conservative laity in mainline congregations.

- **Christian seminaries are becoming more pluralistic, with more non-denominational and non-affiliated as well as non-Christian students, according to a paper presented at this year's meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.** Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi of Iliff Theological Seminary analyzed data from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) between 2001 and 2024. She found that the denominations represented in these seminaries had grown from 112 to 140, with an increase of 23 schools since 2001. Among Christian students, there has been an increasing share of evangelicals in these seminaries (from 40 to 46 percent) and a decreasing share of mainline Protestants (from 38 to 33 percent), while the share of Catholics and Eastern Orthodox has remained the same (at 21 percent). There has been a 40-percent increase in the "other" category, which includes interdenominational Christians as well as Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, non-denominational, and non-affiliated students, increasing from 19 to 33 percent of the total. Lizardy-Hajbi found that Christians decreased from 80 to 67 percent of all students, suggesting growth in those "other"



Source: McCormick Theological Seminary.



Source: Wyoming Seminary (<https://www.wyomingseminary.org/campus-life/diversity-equity-inclusion-and-belonging>).



categories besides non-denominational Christians. But, parsing these categories, she found that there has been a sharp increase in non-denominational students in evangelical seminaries, while multi-denominational and interdenominational students have decreased. It was among mainline seminaries that Lizardy-Hajbi found Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist growth (by more than 400 percent, from 53 to 272 students), with only one Buddhist student found in evangelical seminaries.

• **Polyamory, the practice of having open sexual or romantic relationships with more than one person at a time, is gaining a place in progressive churches, though congregational settings are often the last places polyamorists will “come out to.”** At the recent conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, April Stace of General Theological Seminary presented findings from her ethnographic study of a small number of polyamorists, totaling 16 participants. She noted that estimates of those practicing polyamory vary widely, ranging from 4 to 20 percent of Americans. Although hers was a non-representative sample, Stace found that most of the participants, while having a background in evangelical purity culture, came from mainline Protestantism. Five of the 16 were in the ordination process.

The Bible was often cited and was seen as legitimizing their lifestyle. The participants saw community as an important Christian value that was often expressed in networks of other polyamorous Christians offering each other support. They also valued “faithfulness,” though not in a monogamous sense but as being “faithful to oneself” in “honest and caring relationships,” according to Stace. Yet this honesty and support was rarely found in wider congregational settings. In fact, congregations were often the last places that these polyamorous Christians “came out to” regarding their lifestyle, with only three participants having done so. Few



Source: Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender (<https://www.centerforfaith.com/blog/a-response-to-the-critics-of-my-ct-article-on-polyamory>)

experienced any shunning for their polyamory, but most agreed that the church needed to be more robustly “sex-positive,” and a place that is safe from abuse.

- **Chile is showing a decline in Catholicism while evangelicals are holding steady, according to the results of the new national public opinion survey by the Centre for Public Studies (CEP).** The newsletter *Evangelical Focus* (October 19) reports the survey showing that 17 percent of Chileans define themselves as evangelical. The number of evangelical believers coincides with the number of those who were raised in this faith, and the evangelical faith “remains stable in quantitative terms. But of the 74 percent of citizens raised in the Catholic faith, only 48 percent of adults said they maintain the same faith.” The survey showed 76 percent of respondents saying they believe and have always believed in God, which is a slight decline from the 80 percent found in the 2018 survey. A considerable 31 percent consider themselves agnostic or atheist. Among other religions identified, 1 percent of respondents identified as Mormon, 1 percent Jehovah’s Witness, and 1 percent “other” religion or creed, while 1 percent answered that they “don’t know or no answer,” and 6 percent identified as “none.” None of the respondents identified as Muslim or Jewish.

(*Evangelical Focus*, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/world/28583/17-of-chileans-identify-as-evangelicals>)



- **While there has been significant progress in religious freedom in Latin America, it has not been uniform, with some countries still lacking specific laws to protect and promote religious freedom and not having the clear leadership to drive successful policies in this**





**area.** Writing in the *Canopy Forum on the Interaction of Law and Religion* (September 26), Camila Sánchez Sandoval analyzes the expansion of the right to religious freedom in Latin America at the constitutional level, finding that 25 percent of the region's national constitutions, including Argentina's, Costa Rica's, Guatemala's, Panama's, and Uruguay's, still favor the Catholic religion, either as the official religion or through economic benefits. However, all countries grant the right to freedom of worship and protection against religious discrimination. Additionally, half of the countries—Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Paraguay—prohibit political participation by clergy. Only the countries of Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Venezuela recognize the beliefs of indigenous peoples. At the statutory level, Sandoval finds that only 8 out of 20 Latin American countries—Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru—have at least one specific law promoting religious freedom.



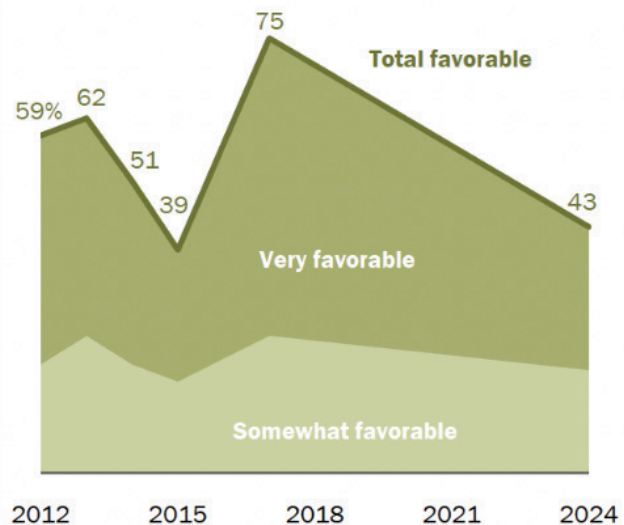
In some countries, such as Colombia and Peru, laws differentiate which religious beliefs are protected, excluding practices such as witchcraft or occultism. Regarding the registration of religious entities, 12 countries—Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela—have religious entity registries and an entity responsible for granting legal status to churches. This could be viewed as a form of religious discrimination, contradictory to constitutional principles. Sandoval concludes that “existing laws extend what is established in constitutions but lack concrete actions, programs, or strategies to guarantee or strengthen this right.” Colombia stands out for its comprehensive public policy on religious freedom and worship. “[W]hen reviewing the national development plans (PNDs) of current presidents in 20 Latin American countries, religious freedom is mentioned in only [six] of these plans. Chile, Colombia, and Nicaragua are the only countries that detail concrete actions to strengthen this right [even as Nicaragua is facing charges of religious persecution by international human rights organizations].”

(*Canopy Forum*, <https://canopyforum.org/2024/09/26/normative-development-of-religious-freedom-in-latin-america-counter-transfer-of-religious-policies/>)

● **The frequency of prayer among Muslims in Turkey is related to their views on numerous public issues, according to a new Pew Research Center survey.** The survey found that trust in the government is significantly higher among Muslims who observe the five-prayers-a-day ritual compared with those who pray less often. Among Muslims who say the five prayers daily, 69 percent say that they trust the national government to do what is right for their country, compared with 40 percent of those who pray at least weekly and 26 percent who pray less than weekly. More frequently praying Muslims are more likely to see Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in a positive light and the way democracy is working in their country. Those who pray more infrequently are more likely to support Turkey becoming a member of the European Union. Overall, 55 percent of Turkish adults have an unfavorable opinion of Erdoğan while 43 percent have a favorable opinion, a substantial drop from a 75 percent favorability rate in 2017. The 2017 survey

### Turkish adults far less likely to see Erdoğan favorably today than in 2017

% of Turkish adults who have a \_\_\_ opinion of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan



Source: Survey of Turkish adults conducted Jan. 29-March 11, 2024. “Turks Lean Negative on Erdoğan, Give National Government Mixed Ratings”

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was conducted eight months after Erdoğan and his government survived a coup attempt by a faction of the military.

(The Pew study can be downloaded from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/10/16/turks-lean-negative-on-erdogan-give-national-government-mixed-ratings/>)

● **When accounting for multiple religious identities and beliefs, the rates of religiosity in Asian countries and societies, such as Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan, show a degree of change and growth, according to several recent studies.** In a paper presented at the late-October meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, which **RW** attended, Purdue University sociologist Fenggang Yang introduced preliminary findings from his project, Global East Religiosity, which has added measures that allow respondents to indicate multiple religious identities, in contrast to the standard method of having them select only one religion. Allowing for such an option in surveys fits better with the eclectic and ritual-based approach of Asians when it comes to religions, and survey results from the above Asian countries suggest that this methodological change makes a difference. Yang said that the pattern of multiple religious



Main Hall of the Mengjia Longshan Temple in Taipei, Taiwan (source: Bernard Gagnon, 2011, Wikimedia Commons - [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Longshan\\_Temple,\\_Taipei\\_01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Longshan_Temple,_Taipei_01.jpg)).

ties may be similar to Kamala Harris’s religious identity, as she claims belonging and engaging in Hindu, Baptist, and even Jewish practices and traditions.

In a paper on Japan presented at the conference, Natsuko Godo of Purdue found in his survey of 3,947 respondents that Christians didn’t distinguish between Protestant and Catholic and that fortune telling was practiced by about half of his sample, including those who said they had no religion. Only 20 percent of the respondents chose Shinto alone as their religion, 33 percent folk religion alone, and 8 percent Confucianism alone. In a survey of 3,000 Taiwanese, Charles Chang of Duke Kunshan University found that half of his sample’s “nones” engaged in religious rituals, and 19 percent of the sample chose more than one religion.

### **Muslim-majority nations navigate space exploration**

The relationship between Islam and space exploration is evolving as more Muslim-majority nations venture into space activities, writes Béatrice Hainaut (IRSEM, Institute for Strategic Research, Paris) in the online *Bulletin de l'Observatoire international du religieux* (October, in French). The first instance of a Muslim in space was in 1985, and to date, 18 Muslim astronauts have traveled to space. Over the past decade, Gulf and Middle Eastern states have significantly increased their investments in space exploration. Countries like Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia have established space agencies and published ambitious space strategies. Other states, such as Iran, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan are also showing interest in space research and possible applications derived from it. These endeavors are driven by various motivations, including economic development, national pride, and the desire to project a modern and technologically advanced image. However, Hainaut remarks, for many of these nations, it is crucial to demonstrate that their space ambitions are not only compatible with Islam but are actively encouraged by it. Many nations explicitly ground their space programs in Islamic scripture, citing verses from the Quran on the pursuit of knowledge and exploration. This serves to legitimize their projects in the eyes of their citizens and the broader Muslim world.

Particularly interesting is how the UAE frames its space program within the context of Islamic history. The nation explicitly connects its current space achievements to the Islamic Golden Age (8th-14th centuries), when Arab scholars made significant contributions to astronomy and mathematics. The UAE’s Mars mission, named “Hope,” is presented not just as an Emirati achievement but as an Arab-Islamic endeavor, positioning the UAE as a modern leader in the Arab-Muslim world. This aspiration, however, brings the UAE into competition with Saudi Arabia, another major player in the Muslim space race. While Saudi Arabia has yet to release a comprehensive space policy, its commitment to human spaceflight is evident in its recent astronaut missions to the ISS. The contrasting approaches of these two nations—the UAE’s proactive engagement with religious discourse and Saudi Arabia’s more cautious stance—reflect the diversity within the Muslim world and the varying interpretations of Islam’s role in space exploration.





Malaysian astronaut performing prayer in the International Space Station (ISS) in October 2007 (source: <https://www.kompas.id/baca/english/2024/06/18/en-muslim-dan-muslimat-di-luar-angkasa>).

Religious authorities have grappled with the practical challenges of practicing Islam in space, issuing guidelines on prayer times, orientation towards Mecca, and fasting while in orbit. Malaysia's National Fatwa Council published a comprehensive guide for Muslim astronauts. Recent Muslim astronauts, like the UAE's Sultan Al Neyadi and Saudi Arabia's Rayyanah Barnawi, have actively shared their religious practices in space through social media, demonstrating the compatibility of Islamic faith with space exploration. These adaptations highlight the flexibility of religious interpretation in the face of scientific progress. However, certain limitations exist, such as the prohibition of one-way trips to Mars, which are considered equivalent to suicide under Islamic law by the UAE's General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments. There had been critical voices from Wahhabi leaders regarding space tourism. But Hainaut observes that "today...the influence of the Wahhabi clergy on educational and scientific programs is limited. The Saudi political authorities no longer allow it to have a say in these matters." The convergence of Islamic faith, scientific advancement, and political ambition in space exploration represents a new chapter in Muslim nations' development. As these countries continue to expand their space capabilities, they are eager to demonstrate that religious values and scientific progress can coexist and mutually reinforce each other, while serving broader national and regional objectives.

(*Bulletin de l'Observatoire international du religieux*, <https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/bulletin/?num=51>)

## U.S. unprepared for Islamic State's revival?

A “hinge moment” may have been reached in the longtime battle against the Islamic State (IS or ISIS), as the jihadist movement has been “mustering forces in Syria’s Badiya desert, recruiting and training a new band of holy warriors to resurrect its dream of ruling a caliphate,” reports Brian Stewart in *Quillette* (October 10). This year, the number of attacks by the group in Syria and Iraq has doubled, with U.S. garrisons in Syria and units of the Kurdish Syrian Democratic



Source: Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Forces (SDF) being primary targets. The goal of this offensive is to disable counter-terrorism patrols and free thousands of the group's confederates from jail, who have been imprisoned since the Islamic State's fall. But the U.S. has been largely passive in confronting threats of jihadism in Syria. Stewart writes that two distinct but mutually reinforcing attitudes are animating this desire to leave this theatre of war, and that unless both are confronted, ISIS may soon find that it has won yet another lease on life. The first of these attitudes is a "detached defeatism that imagines ISIS to be a resilient movement that will not yield to superior counterforce....This was the conventional wisdom throughout the West when the black flag of the Islamic State was first unfurled a decade ago...[I]t was said there was little that could be done to coerce ISIS into submission. It would remain a permanent nuisance."

In contrast, the second popular view of IS is marked by triumphalism. Since U.S. forces killed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a raid in Syria in 2019, Donald Trump has claimed to have defeated the Islamic State. "Trump's cheerleading conveys his visceral opinion that America has only a fleeting role in containing jihadist terror rather than an abiding commitment," Stewart adds. These rival tendencies suggest that ISIS can be "safely ignored or at least easily contained. Once upon a time, it was believed that this kind of benign neglect would doom ISIS, which might burn itself out on the embers of its own radical theology and pornographic violence." The conditions that created ISIS—the civil war in Syria and an overtly sectarian regime in Baghdad—"have been left to fester as part of a wider malign neglect of the Muslim Middle East in the aftermath of the Iraq war, and the lack of a hegemon has spawned a violent competition for power." Armed groups have taken up the opportunity presented by the weakness of the current state system to press for adjustments and to try to affect them through force. In Iraq, the failure to check Iran and its Shi'ite proxies has allowed a variety of Sunni gangs to present themselves as defenders of last resort to an embattled Sunni minority, Stewart concludes.

(*Quillette*, <https://quillette.com/2024/10/10/the-return-of-the-black-flags-isis-iraq-syria/?ref=quillette-daily-newsletter>)

### **Younger generations seek to integrate Salafi Islam into Cambodian society**

Since its emergence in the early 1990s among Cambodia's Muslim minority (about 5 percent of the population), Salafism has undergone significant changes, with young Salafis seeking cooperation and understanding with other Islamic groups. Writing in *Mediterranean Politics* (online October 7), Zoltan Pall (Austrian Academy of Sciences) explains that these younger adherents have sought to build ties particularly with the Shafi'is and the Jama'at al-Tabligh movement, as well as trying to generally become more embedded in the local Cambodian context. The Salafi movement had primarily been introduced by Cambodian students who had studied at Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia, particularly the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM). Salafism gained traction in Cambodia in the context of the leadership vacuum that followed the Khmer Rouge's destruction of religious infrastructure and elimination of religious leaders. Moreover, Salafi scholars had the prestige of having gained knowledge in Saudi Arabia and could provide precise answers to religious questions by quoting hadith from memory, which





Great Mosque in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (source: Muslim World League).

impressed many villagers. But Salafism functioned as a counter-religion, with adherents viewing themselves as the sole holders of absolute truth and aiming to purify what they considered corrupted practices. Those Cambodian Muslims whose traditional practices had managed to survive through the Khmer Rouge dictatorship felt more attracted to Tabligh.

The transformation of Salafism has been partly driven by socioeconomic changes, a diversification of educational destinations beyond Saudi Arabia, and a growing influence of Southeast Asian Islamic institutions. There is also the factor of generational change, which has brought a greater interest in national integration and in reconciling religious identity with modern life, as well as efforts in the 2010s by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to integrate Salafis into the structure of the Islamic administration and other state and societal institutions. As young pious Salafis are becoming eager to live a middle-class, urban lifestyle, they have become more receptive to reconciliation rather than isolationism. An important agent for change has been the informal network around the graduates of Fatoni University in Southern Thailand (FTU, formerly Yala Islamic College). “FTU is the flagship institution of the al-Salam movement that dominates the Salafi scene in the Malay-speaking provinces of South Thailand,” and is known for its moderate views. Although not all Salafis agree and traditional Salafi groups tend to oppose such trends, young Salafis are looking for ways to reconcile their Islamic identity with their Cambodian heritage instead of being foreign to it, which includes embracing certain cultural

elements (such as festivals) while maintaining their religious beliefs. The emergence of post-Salafi trends shows the adaptability of religious movements, the importance of local context, the role of education in religious change, and the impact of generational shifts.

## Findings & Footnotes

■ Now that Donald Trump has been elected again, the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) movement and its impact on conservative politics will receive renewed attention, making a special issue on this topic in the journal of new religious movements, *Nova Religio* (November), especially timely. Most of the contributors, in contrast to most new religious movement scholarship, take a strongly critical, perhaps alarmist, tone about the violent and potentially violent tendencies in the actions and beliefs of evangelicals associated with this movement, even linking it with far-right terrorism. The issue particularly focuses on this Pentecostal movement's relation to the events of January 6, 2021, ranging from the circle of "prophets" and "apostles" who predicted that Trump would be reelected to the influence of Messianic Judaism on the riots and protests surrounding the 2020 elections, such as the Jericho March.

Stuart Wright's article looks at how the failures of the prophecies and these Pentecostal leaders' interpretations of the election results played a part in the riots of January 6. The Messianic Jewish factor is due to an increasingly porous flow between charismatic and Pentecostal NAR churches and Messianic Jewish groups, as they share symbols (as seen in the blowing of the shofar at the January 6 events), memes, prophecies, and such leaders Daniel Juster, Curt Landry, and Paul Wilbur. The contributors see the NAR rhetoric of spiritual warfare and the "Seven Mountains" (teachings about Christians gaining dominion in society) as stoking sympathy for political violence in recent years. Damon Berry writes that NAR proponents like Lance Wallnau and Messianic Jewish leader Jonathan Cahn have employed such spiritual warfare language in their support of Israel's war in Gaza after the attacks of October 7. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://www.pennpress.org/journals/journal/nova-religio/>

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