

Religion's cultural mismatch leading to its obsolescence?

An interview with Christian Smith

*From its title, University of Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith's new book **How Religion Went Obsolete** (Oxford University Press, \$34.99) may seem like other recent books charting a secular future for America and the rest of the world, but Smith has something different in mind. The book marshals survey research, qualitative interviews, and content analysis of religious and secular online and offline material to make the case for a growing "cultural mismatch" between younger Americans and traditional religion. RW recently interviewed Smith via email.*

RW: When you refer to American religion becoming obsolete, can you briefly explain what you mean?

Smith: The normal term we use to describe religious losses is "decline." That is fine, but it mostly describes features of organizations and individuals: decline in affiliation, attendance, beliefs, etc. In my book I really wanted to not just talk about organizational decline or measurable aspects of individuals, but instead to get at the larger *cultural* status of religion of late. And I don't think "decline" describes well what has happened to religion in the broader culture. Instead, I think the idea of obsolescence captures what traditional religion has suffered in recent decades. Going obsolete means having been left behind or superseded by alternatives that most people consider more functional or relevant to life tasks. But the idea of obsolescence does not mean extinct or



useless. Most technologies we have that have gone obsolete—slide rules, DVDs, electric typewriters, and so on—are still as functional as they were before, and some people still use them, just as more than a few Americans now still follow traditional religion even if at a macro-cultural level, it has gone obsolete among post-Boomers. So, bottom line, I think to describe what traditional American religion has undergone in recent decades, the term obsolescence is more accurately descriptive and flexible than simply “decline.”

RW: You revive the concept of “zeitgeist,” or spirit of the times, to explain your view that there is now a “cultural mismatch” between much of society and traditional American religions. Why is that?

Smith: People sometimes use the term “zeitgeist” informally, but it is not a concept that academics, like historians and sociologists, like much. It has a problematic theoretical history descending from Hegel and Mannheim. But I think the concept can be retrieved and rehabilitated to help us better understand how culture works in different times. I describe in my book a host of complex, long-term technological, economic, demographic, and other institutional changes and national and world events that all converged in the 1990s and 2000s that brought about, in my argument, what I call the Millennial zeitgeist. This was an era that had a set of distinct sensibilities, attitudes, interests, values, commitments, and aesthetics that wrapped up together into a particular spirit of the age. I spend a long chapter trying to describe from multiple angles what the Millennial zeitgeist was about, how it felt, the influences it had on younger generations.

Central to it was the experience of a cultural mismatch between the zeitgeist and traditional religion. They just increasingly became oil and water, so to speak. Part of that, I suggest, is that traditional religion itself was seen as failing to live up to the kinds of things that most Americans believe make religion good. Part of it was just religion getting “crowded out” by other opportunities and imperatives. And part of it was that religion became “polluted” culturally for a variety of reasons, including the broad effects of 9/11 and the interminable religious sex and money scandals. In the end, I think that to really grasp what has happened to traditional religion, it is necessary to understand the feel, the tone, the sense of the Millennial zeitgeist and the many ways traditional religion simply failed culturally to match up with it.

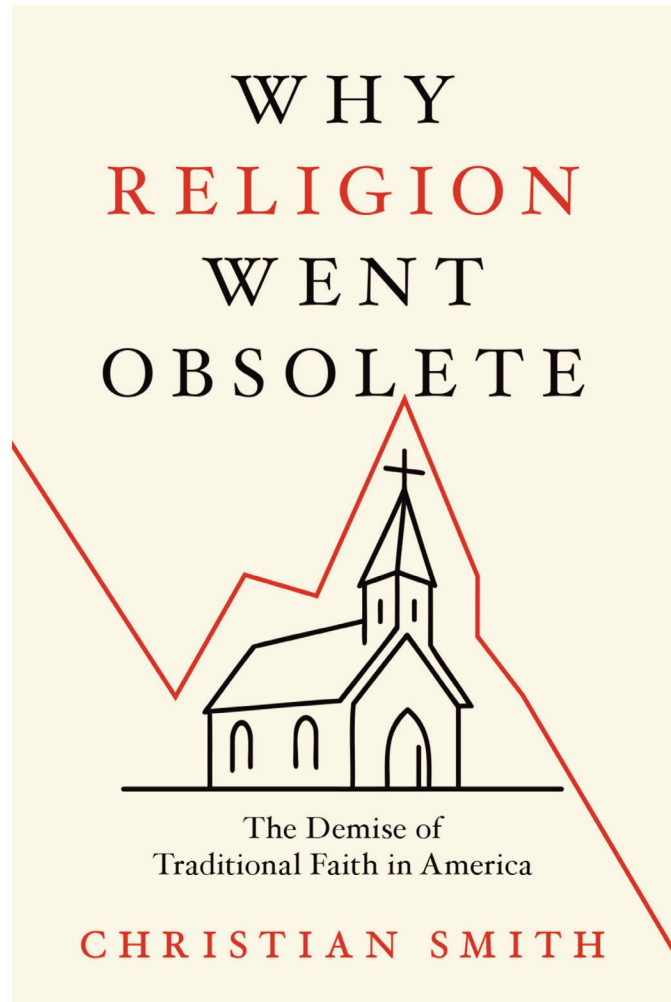
RW: Previous findings from your research on post-Boomer youth saw them adopting what you have called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), where their faith is mainly concerned with being nice, personal growth, and having a distant view of God that doesn’t affect behavior. Has MTD just been generalized to the younger generations, even if Generation X is what you call the “hinge generation” of this development?

Smith: This is a very interesting question. When I first wrote about MTD, I limited [myself to the] claim that it was the actual, functional faith of teenagers. But the open question was whether it was broader than that, especially since another argument was that teenagers are more profoundly influenced by their parents when it comes to religion than just about any other factor. Subsequently I did a study of religious parents and found an awful lot of MTD among the adults too. Not all of them but many. So, if you now read chapter 2 of the current book, where I

describe what in the eyes of most Americans makes religion good and useful, much of that sounds a lot like a generalized MTD. In short, I continue to think something like MTD is the default background operating religion of most Americans. In its teenage form, it was pretty stark. As those same Millennials grew up and had to figure out life, it of course became more complicated and, for some, unreliable. Bottom line: MTD has not gone away. It's just that when you look at people's actual beliefs and expectations of religion, it can get messier as life moves along.

RW: In your earlier work on evangelicalism, you portrayed the movement as a vital subculture that thrived in tension with society, but in your new book you argue that such tension has been detrimental to evangelicals and that they (and other religious groups) have played a part in their own obsolescence. How did this happen?

Smith: Great question. My original “subcultural identity theory” that I developed in my *Embattled and Thriving* book was based on my observations in the mid-1990s. Of course, none of us then knew where the evangelical movement would go. There was still a strong Christian Right political movement, but it was only one stream in the larger mosaic of evangelicalism. In my view, the “embattled” tendencies of that earlier era have pathologically mutated into what we now have in Christian nationalism. It's still embattled but now speaking in a totally different register. Earlier, evangelical political activists insisted on the need to elect “godly and righteous” people to positions of political power. Now they champion an obviously massively ungodly leader who is a pathological liar, philanderer, and egoist. My belief is that contemporary Christian nationalism is itself really a symptom of a desperation that has set in precisely as a result of the kind of obsolescence of religion I analyze. It is not a movement of confident people but desperate ones. It is more interested in being protected by a strongman than advancing a godly culture. And, if that is true, then it means that the more conservative Christians head down this road of narrow political commitment, the deeper it will drive religious obsolescence among most post-Boomers. It's a profoundly self-defeating strategy.



RW: But you don't see secularization as the end point for the U.S.; rather, you see a process of "re-enchantment" taking place. The secularization theory seems to be rebounding among sociologists of religion today, but how far is that view from your critique of religion as being obsolete?

Smith: Most people inside and outside of academia today automatically view these things in old binary terms: religion vs. the secular. And the assumption is a zero-sum game: the more one loses the more the other gains. It's like two teams on an American football field struggling to push the ball back and forth toward their end goals and to prevent the other from doing the same. But I think that is a simplistic and misleading binary. When we adopt it, we remain blind to the much more complex cultural options developing now. A major one is "re-enchanted culture," or what I also call "occulture" (meaning, a culture of the occult, the latter word meaning "things hidden"). Most people dismiss "mere" spirituality—manifesting, karma, paganism, alternative healing methods, channeling, paranormal interests, magic, astrology, crystals, etc.—as trivial. Research on this project forced me to see they are anything but trivial.

The consequences for religion and secularism are this: religious decline does not equate to secularist gains. Most Americans find secularism, whether rightly or wrongly, to be a shallow, empty, boring approach to life. People want some larger purpose, mystery, intrigue in life. And if they think they cannot find that in traditional religion, then various forms of re-enchanted culture become attractive. That's where most have gone who are not into religion. It offers easy and intense versions, it offers light and dark sides, it allows easy entry and exit, it does not require institutional memberships, it is highly compatible with consumer capitalism, and it allows individual autonomy and control without external authorities. That is extremely appealing to so many younger Americans now. That's my view. If traditional secularization theory is "rebounding," therefore, in my view, that is a mistaken conclusion of presupposing the old simplistic binary. What I hope to show in this book, but especially in a follow-up book I am writing now, is that we need to change our lenses by which we see the world and that helps us realize that the world is a lot more complicated than simply religion vs. secular. Again, traditional religion has gone obsolete, I am convinced. But that does not mean secularization theory is true. We need more agile ways of thinking that make real sense of the world we actually live in, rather than old theories inherited from 19th century evolutionary thinking about modernity.

RW: Secularization theorists might argue that many of the trends you point to are evident in other Western countries, so how much are these changes related to the distinct nature of American religion and society?

Smith: One of the points of my book is that the obsolescence of traditional American religion was a very particularly American process. It is not good enough just to list some allegedly abstract universal forces or laws of modernity, like differentiation, rationalization, etc., as a way to explain these kinds of outcomes. We have to get down to the specifics of cases, and when we do, they vary greatly across those cases. Of course there are some parallels. The internet played a huge role in all of this and that is obviously a global force, not American. But many of the causal

mechanisms by which the internet affected religion do not fit the standard, abstract list of social forces. Furthermore, many of the crucial events helping to produce religious obsolescence, according to my story, are very particularly American: the rise of the Christian Right, 9/11, missteps by American evangelicalism. So, if we want a genuinely plausible explanation that makes what actually happened intelligible, we need to get away from a “hypothesis testing” approach to secularization theory. We need to focus on actual forces and events in particular contexts that explain specific outcomes. And when we do that, we find the world is incredibly more complicated than the traditional secularization theory suggests.

RW: You don’t view this zeitgeist and the trends that created it as being easily reversed. But some observers are arguing that there is a “vibe shift” taking place with the growth of populism and nationalism, and the related values of solidarity and a de-emphasis on globalization. Do you think such societal changes are having any effect on the zeitgeist and the state of religion in general?

Smith: The world is definitely shifting, especially in the last 10 years and especially around politics and economics. My general sense, however, is that it is usually nearly impossible to know what is happening and what it means *while it is happening*. It requires some distance and perspective to sort out what is going on. I say in the book that none of us in 1991 or even 2000 really had a clue that religion was going obsolete. Retrospection makes that clear. So what is happening today? I don't know. I personally do not see evidence of any religious revival on the horizon. But certainly, zeitgeists do not last forever; by definition they don't. Whether or not the Millennial zeitgeist is morphing into something else, I cannot say. My book is a work of historical cultural sociology, an explanation of known facts from the recent past that helps makes sense of the current situation.

But things may be changing in ways that will only become clear in the future. Feel free to get back to me and make me eat my words on “no religious revival on the horizon,” if things go that way. But I just cannot see it. I think the most likely future, if I was forced to make a guess, would be a continued growth in re-enchantment and occulture, growing desperation among what remains of traditional religion, and ongoing social disruption. But really, in the end, the future is anyone’s guess. Which is why I prefer to focus on explaining and better understanding what we do know has already happened.

Religion getting caught in crossfire of DEI crackdown?

In the Trump administration’s drive to eliminate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs from government agencies, faith-based and religious freedom initiatives have been caught in the crossfire, writes Brian Grim of the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation on the website of the *Coalition for Faith and Media* (March 31). While Trump has established a White House Faith Office to protect communities of faith and identify failures of the “executive branch to enforce constitutional and Federal statutory protections for religious liberty,” there have been “unintended religious consequences” in eliminating DEI. Many faith-based programs that were

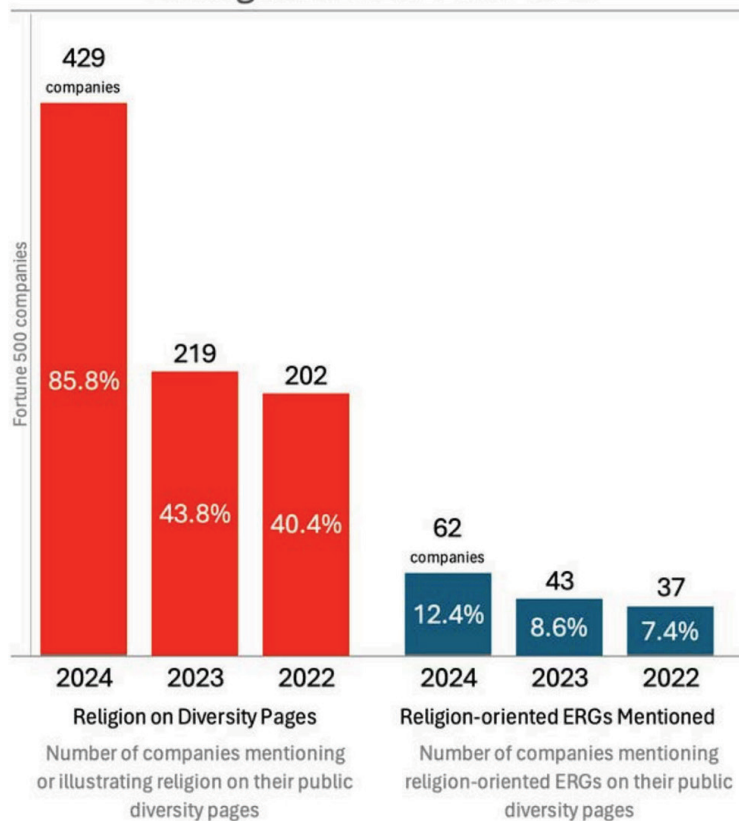
facilitated by DEI have been canceled, ranging from the U.S. Naval Academy Gospel Choir's Spring Break outreach trips to underserved communities to employee resource groups (ERGs) in government agencies like the U.S. Department of State. DEI made such programs possible. Grim notes that almost every federal agency has faith-based employee organizations. "Not only do these official faith organizations build religious freedom in Federal workplaces, they inform and impact religious freedom worldwide." For instance, through a program facilitated by the State Department's Christian group, Grace, Grim trained personnel at the U.S. embassy and all U.S. missions in the People's Republic of China on how to build religious freedom through faith-and-belief-friendly workplace policies and initiatives. Grim adds that Grace was not only a support for Christians at the State Department, but also helped form Jewish Americans in Diplomacy (JAD) and American Muslims and Friends At State (AMFAS).

Beyond the government, Fortune 500 companies are "taking note of the Administration's cancellation of DEI and the unintended outcome of canceling religion initiatives across the government. More than a few corporations are feeling pressure to throw the religious baby out with the DEI bathwater." This is taking place at a time when there are a record number of faith-based ERGs. Grim writes that the curtailment of faith-based initiatives is bad for business, since they give employees a sense of belonging and identity. Many American workers find that faith-based ERGs are the primary place where they find religious fellowship. A new national study of Jewish workers finds that for 24 percent, their company's ERG is their primary connection to Jewish life. Grim argues that "recognizing and accommodating religious needs—such as providing prayer rooms, dietary accommodations,

and flexible scheduling for religious observances—demonstrates that an employer values their workforce beyond just professional contributions." These initiatives help employers comply with legal protections surrounding religious expression and accommodation in the workplace. In the

Religion on Fortune 500 Diversity Pages

Change from 2022 to 2024



May 21, 2024, content analysis of Fortune 500 Diversity pages, first quarter 2024
2024 REDI Index & Monitor Report, Religious Freedom & Business Foundation

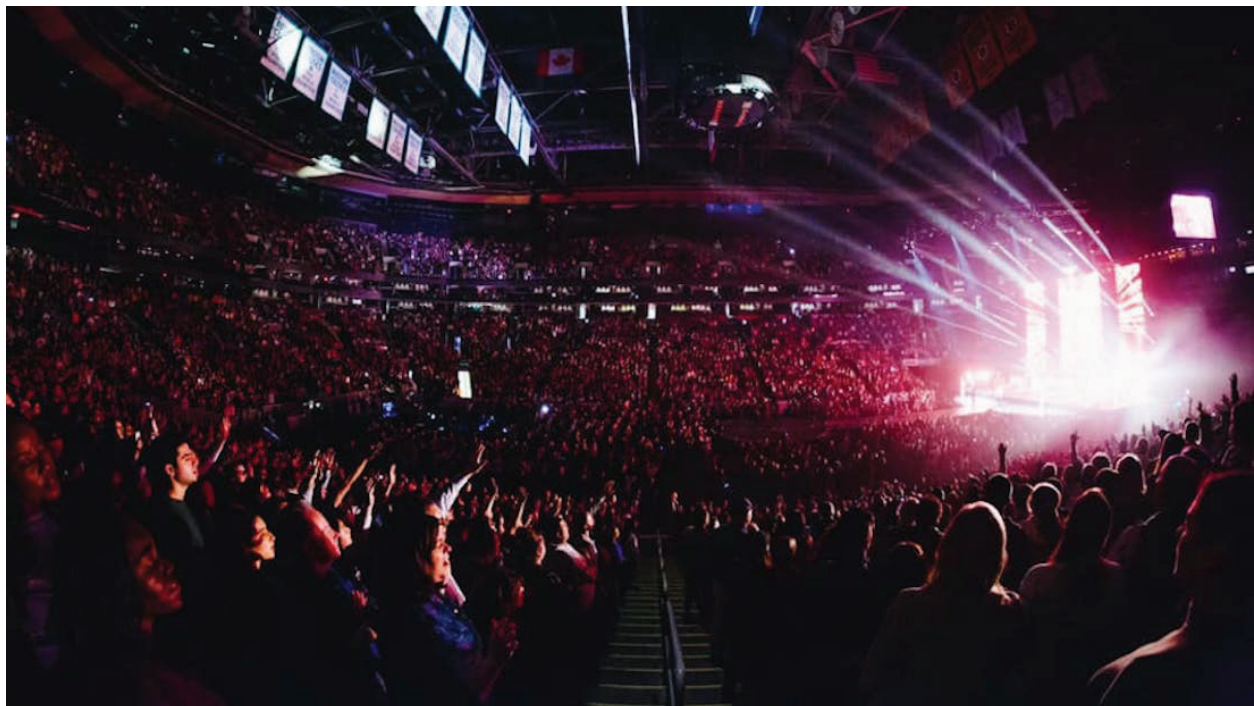
U.S., Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination based on religion and requires reasonable accommodations for employees' religious practices, "making faith-friendly policies both a moral and legal imperative," Grim writes.

(*Coalition for Faith and Media*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/coalitionforfaithandmedia/2025/03/losing-dei-may-cost-more-than-you-think-including-faith/>)

Hillsong's declining influence in church music

As its momentum has dissipated, Hillsong's place within the Contemporary Congregational Song (CCS) industry has been irrevocably altered, writes Daniel Thornton (Alphacrucis College, NSW, Australia) in the journal *Religions* (March 27). For decades, Hillsong was the dominant producer of the contemporary worship music used in churches worldwide. By 2017, it had managed to become a global movement with over 100,000 adherents across 15 countries, and its worship music was adopted far beyond its ranks. Hillsong songs were sung weekly by an estimated 50 million people in 60 languages. The songs featured strong metaphors and poetic imagery that resonated with believers at both theological and personal levels. All songs had simple, singable choruses with a limited vocal range and repetitive rhythms.

Starting in 2020, the global Hillsong movement began facing significant challenges. Multiple scandals emerged, and documentaries such as "Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed" and "The Secrets of Hillsong" brought negative media attention. Churches left the movement, and attendance dropped at local Hillsong churches. By 2021, Hillsong stopped actively recording new CCS. As its influence waned, other producers emerged to fill the void, such as Elevation

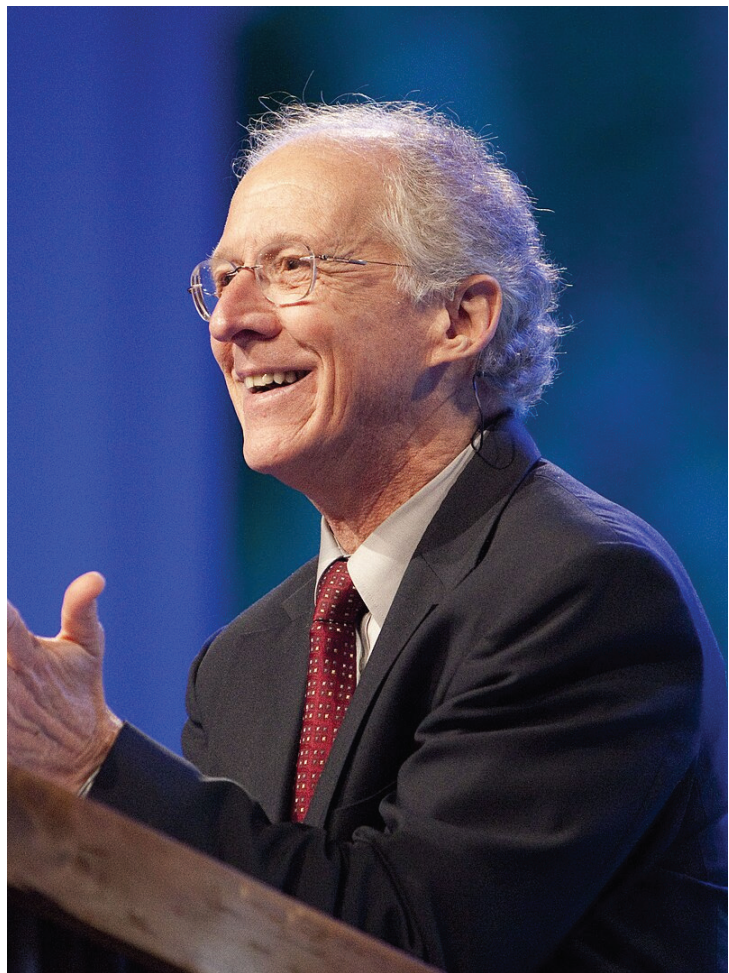


Worship (based out of Elevation Church in Charlotte, NC), with their 2020 release “The Blessing” becoming a global anthem during the Covid-19 lockdowns, and also Maverick City Music. Individual artists also emerged, like Charity Gayle (“I Speak Jesus”), David Brymer (“Worthy of It All”), and Phil Wickham (album “Hymn of Heaven”). While Hillsong might reenter the CCS market, competition has increased and audience attention has shifted elsewhere. This is also part of a natural development in church music, however, as the genre continues to evolve as churches seek fresh ways to express their worship.

(*Religions*, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/16/4/427>)

New Calvinism—from evangelical gatekeeping to tending its own subculture

New Calvinism, known for its impact on the wider evangelical world in the early 2000s, has retreated to more internal concerns, primarily serving its own community, writes social forecaster Aaron Renn in his Substack newsletter (March 7). The movement generated a considerable number of institutions, spokesmen, and old and new media and publishing outlets compared to other evangelical subcultures. From Tim Keller and the Gospel Coalition to John Piper and Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church, new Calvinism was often viewed as the most aggressive theological and social force among conservative Christians, shaping evangelical ideas about politics, gender, and engaging culture. “Today, nearly two decades later, the founding superstars are all but gone from new Calvinism,” Renn writes. “They are either dead (Tim Keller), departed (John MacArthur, a peripheral figure to the movement), disgraced (James MacDonald), or retired (John Piper). Quite a number



New Calvinist theologian John Pieper (source: Micah Chiang, Flickr).

of key figures had scandals. The net result today is that the movement is largely post-superstar. There are plenty of talented leaders with big churches. But they don’t have the reach or sway of say John Piper.”

Renn notes that it was the internet, with its videos, blogs, and podcasts, that both united the movement and drew new people in. But the growth of social media and the way Google has prioritized major media pages “basically destroyed the original blog sphere,” negatively affecting new Calvinist websites. “The net result of passing through the hype cycle, entering a post-superstar world, changes in the social media landscape, and generational change mean that New Calvinism’s ability to project influence over the evangelical field has radically diminished... They probably also won’t be able to sustain their position as self-appointed guardians of traditional orthodoxy, particularly if they cross the Rubicon and embrace women’s ordination.” But Renn adds that the movement and its institutions retain considerable vitality. The Gospel Coalition still draws crowds to its conferences. New Calvinism will remain resonant among people from “select demographics—educated strivers in urban centers, college towns, and professional class suburbs.” Even if some of them voted for Donald Trump, they are “certainly not Trumpists... They are more simpatico with urban progressive culture than the median red state MAGA culture. They are overwhelmingly college educated and want more intellectually substantive fare.”

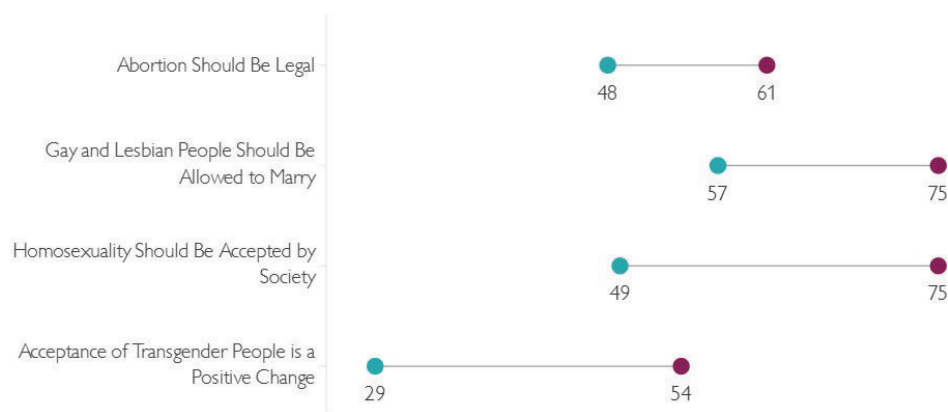
CURRENT RESEARCH

• **The gender gap in churches is growing, with young men and women differing on social and moral issues.** In the Substack newsletter *American Storylines*, pollster Daniel Cox analyzes the recent 2024 Pew Religious Landscape Survey and finds that more than 6 in 10 (61 percent) young Christian women say abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Less than half (48 percent) of young Christian men say the same. Young Christians are less supportive of legal abortion than their peers, but the drop-off in support is substantially larger among men. On

The Young Christian Gender Gap on Abortion and LGBTQ Issues

Percentage of Young Christians (ages 18 to 24) who say...

● Young Christian Men ● Young Christian Women



Source: Pew Religious Landscape Survey, 2023-2024.



homosexuality, the gap is even wider, with three-quarters of young Christian women saying that homosexuality should be accepted by society, a view shared by less than half (49 percent) of young Christian men—a 26-point gap. Young Christian women are also far more likely than men to support allowing gay and lesbian people to marry (75 percent vs. 57 percent). A majority (54 percent) of young Christian women say greater acceptance of transgender people is a positive development, but only 29 percent of young Christian men agree. Cox notes that there is some indication that the gender gap among young Christians has gotten larger. A decade earlier, “young Christian men and women were more aligned than they are today. In 2014, less than half of young Christian men (42 percent) and women (45 percent) said abortion should be legal in all or most cases,” he writes.

This does not necessarily mean that young women are moving leftward on all these issues. Aside from the issue of abortion, young Christian women have hardly changed their views over the last decade, while young men have become less supportive. Cox finds that young Christian women are also more progressive on economics and the role of government. Three-quarters of young Christian women would prefer a larger government, offering more public services. Nearly 6 in 10 young Christian men say the same. Since there are not wide differences between young men and women on attendance, denomination and other practices, Cox argues that young Christians are being exposed to the same cultural divides afflicting secular young people. “Even if they attend the same church, the social context for young men and women is still quite different. Young Christian women have many more close friends who identify as LGBTQ than men, an experience that has a considerable influence on policy views.” The way young men and women are segregated on social media and exposed to different content may reinforce gender divisions. It may also be the case that marriage-rate declines have led to less shared perspectives between men and women.

● **A recent study finds that during the Covid pandemic, U.S. counties with greater shares of Christian adherents experienced faster employment recovery, a higher recovery of companies, and modest but positive wage effects.** Findings from the research by Christos Makridis (Arizona State University) and Byron Johnson (Baylor University) were presented at the early-March meeting of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture (ASREC) in Washington, DC, which **RW** attended. Using data from the Quarterly Census of Employment (2019–2023) and the Religion Census (2010, 2020), the researchers looked at the relationship between within-county religiosity and indicators of economic performance



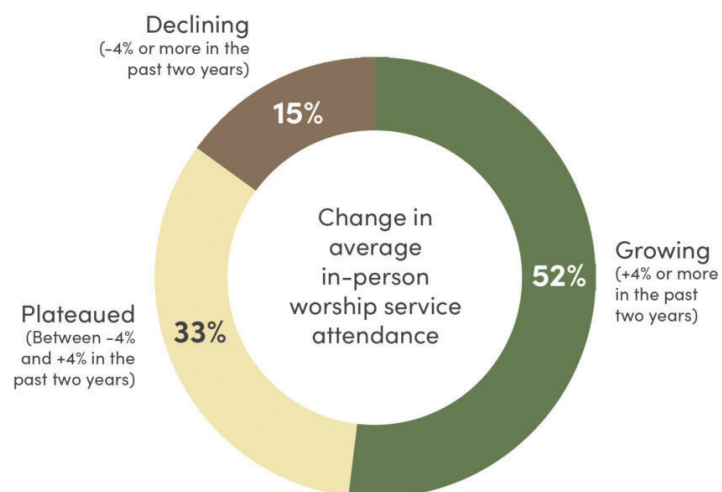
during the pandemic. Those counties with lower shares of Christian adherents showed greater negative effects in these areas. The weakest effect among the higher-share counties was the growth of employment. The study controlled for such variables as rates of social capital and median household income and took into account the declines in Christian adherence between 2010 and 2020. Makridis and Johnson conclude that involvement in religious social networks enhanced community resilience, with religious communities generating “trust, ethical business practices, and labor efficiency.”

● **Protestant pastors say their churches are growing, but some warning signs remain about their congregational future, according to a study by Lifeway Research.** The survey finds that Protestant churches are almost evenly split between those that have grown within the past two years and those that have plateaued or lost attenders. About half of the sampled congregations (52 percent) increased their worship service attendance by at least 4 percent in the past two years. The other 48 percent have either remained within plus or minus 4 percent since 2022 (33 percent) or declined by at least 4 percent (15 percent). “Clearly, the last two years of attendance growth was aided by people returning to regular attendance after being away since the start of the pandemic,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research.

He adds that “Most pastors wish they had returned earlier, but their attendance is a source of optimism, though future growth will need to come from brand new contacts.” Overall, the large congregations are growing larger and the small keep getting smaller. The study found that the larger the congregation, the more likely it was to be growing by 4 percent or more: 62 percent of those churches with more than 250 in attendance and 59 percent of those with 100 to 250 grew by at least 4 percent, while this was true for 45 percent of those with 50 to 99 in attendance and only 23 percent of those with fewer than 50. Evangelical pastors are more likely than mainline pastors to say their church is growing (57 percent v. 46 percent). Denominationally, Holiness (63 percent), Pentecostal (62

Half of U.S. Protestant churches are growing

Among U.S. Protestant pastors



Lifewayresearch

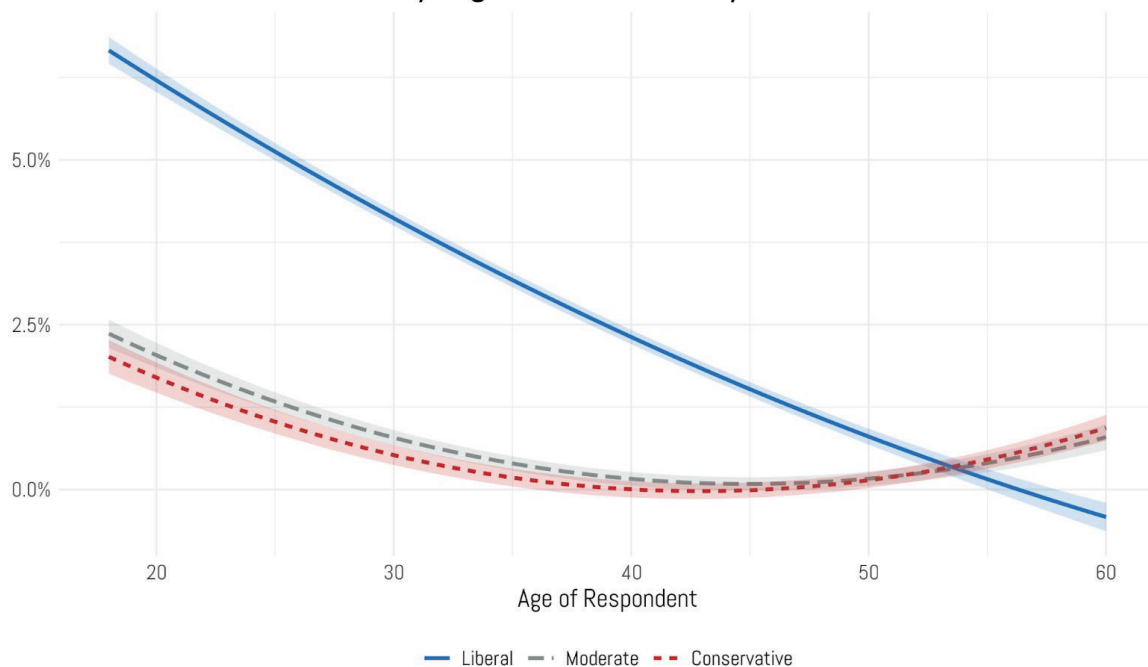
LifewayResearch.com

percent), and Baptist congregations (59 percent) are more likely than Methodist (43 percent) and Lutheran churches (37 percent) to be experiencing growth of at least 4 percent.

(The study can be downloaded here: <https://research.lifeway.com/2025/03/18/half-of-churches-experiencing-post-pandemic-attendance-growth/>)

- **Transgender people are significantly less religiously affiliated than other Americans, according to an analysis of Cooperative Election Survey data by Ryan Burge in his Substack newsletter *Graphs about Religion* (March 17).** Among people who identify as “non-binary,” only 13 percent say they are Protestants. That’s nearly 20 points lower than the rest of the sample. Additionally, only 7 percent are Catholic, compared to 18 percent of the male/female sample. As might be expected, the non-religious percentages are much higher among this group; about 60 percent of the non-binary/other group said they were atheist/agnostic/nothing-in-particular, compared to 35 percent of the male/female sample. Among the non-binary/other sample, 57 percent said that they never attended religious services—which is 23 points higher than the male/female part of the sample; when the “seldom” option is included, close to 80 percent of the transgender respondents reported going to church less than once a year.

Likelihood of Identifying as Non-binary/Other



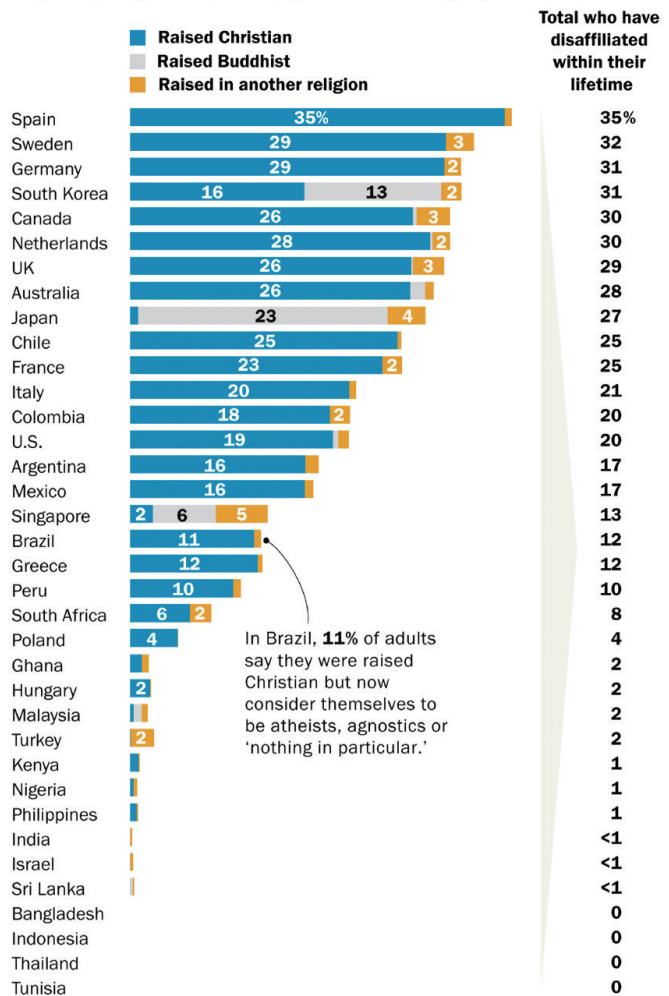
@ryanburge
Data: Cooperative Election Study, 2021-2023

- **A new Pew study finds that as much as 20 percent or more of all adults around the world have left their childhood religion, with the largest losses seen among Christians and Buddhists.** As the sharp growth of the “nones” in recent years suggests, most disaffiliation has been in the direction of no religion. Most of this disaffiliation has come from those raised

Christian. Spain leads the list, with 35 percent of adults saying they were raised Christian but are now religiously disaffiliated. Other countries with large Christian disaffiliation populations include Sweden and Germany (both 29 percent), the Netherlands (28 percent), and Canada and the United Kingdom (26 percent). The United States is in the middle, with 19 percent of adults saying they disaffiliated from Christianity. But nearly all Christians in the 27 majority-Christian countries have retained their religion, especially in the Philippines, Hungary, and Nigeria, where nearly all people who say they were raised Christian are still Christians as adults. In moving the other way toward Christian affiliation, Singapore and South Korea had fairly high rates of entrance into Christianity, with about 4-in-10 or more Christian adults in these countries saying they were raised in another religion or with no religion. In general, the most religious switching is taking place in South Korea (with 50 percent of adults having switched religions), Spain (40 percent), Canada (38 percent), Sweden (37 percent), the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (both 36 percent). The countries with the least religious switching, according to the report, are Tunisia and Bangladesh.

Most religious disaffiliation is from Christianity

% of adults in each country who say they were ___ but now identify as religiously unaffiliated (atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular”)



PEW RESEARCH CENTER

(The Pew Report can be downloaded here:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/03/26/around-the-world-many-people-are-leaving-their-childhood-religions/>)

- **Finland has recently been seen as either a bellwether or an anomaly in research suggesting that its boys are more religious than its girls, but a recent survey finds that the latter are also showing signs of religious interest and belief.** As *Evangelical Focus* newsletter (March 11) reports, Kati Tervo-Niemelä of the University of Eastern Finland, who has led studies of young people preparing for confirmation, previously found that boys in Finland were becoming more committed to Christianity than girls. Since 2019, when the share of young males saying they believed in God was on par with that of young females at 36 percent, the proportion



of these boys increased each year to reach 50 percent by 2023. But from more recent 2024 data, Tervo-Niemelä now finds that girls are approaching the levels of boys in religiosity. The new survey shows that 62 percent of boys attending confirmation school now say they believe in God, but the proportion of girls doing so has also risen to half of those preparing for confirmation. This is an increase of 13 percentage points from the previous year.

The researcher said that this change cannot be explained solely by the fact that young people who are not religious are not going to confirmation preparation, because the popularity of confirmation school has remained relatively high and at the same time the number of people declaring themselves believers has risen very significantly. The newsletter also notes that recent surveys in Finland show other curious patterns: young people in cities are more religious than their counterparts in the country—a finding which runs against the long-held position that religiosity is stronger in rural areas. According to recent studies of confirmation preparation, young people in cities are more likely to believe in God and the resurrection of Jesus than those in rural areas. Those who do not believe at all are more numerous in rural areas. According to Henrietta Grönlund of the University of Helsinki, an explanation for this may be that rural areas are more homogeneous in terms of population and religion, while urban areas are more diverse, with different beliefs present.

(*Evangelical Focus*, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/europe/30401/in-finland-signs-of-renewed-interest-in-christianity-among-girls>)

● **A study on the growth of modern banking and finance in China finds that Protestant missions have had both a historical and contemporary impact on this form of market-based capitalism.**

Economists Riccardo Di Cato and Jiacheng Li (both at the University of California, San Diego) presented their research at the early-March meeting of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture (ASREC) in Washington, DC, attended by **RW**. They looked at the financial effect of missionary expansion by Protestants (mainly Presbyterians) from 1860 to 2022. While there were traditional banks in China before that period, they did not take deposits and relied on personal networks. Using the China Historical Christian Database, the researchers located missions in China and found that they were in the vicinity of modern banks, often in the interior of the country where the missionaries had penetrated, as opposed to the coast where Western traders were located.



The headquarter of China Minsheng Bank in Beijing (source: Max12Max, Wikipedia - licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license).

Missions played a strong role in educating the Chinese to engage in banking, and missionaries were also pioneers in trading, conducting financial transactions and maintaining information flows with banks back home. There was a high ratio of Christian bankers that increased in places with missions. In that early period—up to 1950, when missionaries were expelled from the country—there were 30 to 50 bankers educated in the Christian schools connected with missions. This effect was driven more by Protestants than Catholics. The missionary-bank effect was less evident after 1950, but could again be seen in the period of liberalization from 1978 into the 2000s, when Christians regained influence in education, fostering trade, spreading new technology, and enacting policies of limited state interference with banks.

● **Exposure to political violence drives up religiosity, especially in its communal forms, according to a quasi-experiment by economist Mohammad Isaqzadeh of Chapman University.** In a paper presented at the early-March conference of the Association for the Study



of Religion, Economics, and Culture (ASREC) in Washington, DC, which **RW** attended, Isaqzadeh reported on his study of 10 violent neighborhoods and 10 nonviolent neighborhoods in Afghanistan that drew a random sample of 1,585 residents in 2020 and 744 in 2021 and used a test-retest method in studying the participants' exposure to violence. Isaqzadeh also conducted 70 qualitative interviews with residents in these neighborhoods. In studying the effects of participants' exposure to neighborhood violence, violence against family members, and personal violence, he measured religious devotion both on an individual level (in the forms of listening to Koran readings and following Islamic programs) and communal one (as prayer at mosques). Isaqzadeh found that having family killed or injured did not correlate with increases in personal religiosity, while exposure to personal violence did. Family injury and death did, however, drive up communal religiosity. Isaqzadeh found that personal exposure to political violence is similar to aging 13 years in terms of increasing personal religiosity. Death and anxiety were significant drivers of religiosity, but such factors as receiving aid after exposure to violence and Muslim identity did not have a significant effect.

- **Religion can be a strong motivating factor in water conservation policy in the Middle East, a study by economist Giulia Buccione of Stanford University suggests.** In a paper presented at the early-March meeting of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture (ASREC) in Washington, DC, attended by **RW**, Buccione reported results from an experimental study examining if religion, specifically Islam in this case, can spearhead change in

a region known for its water-stressed conditions. The experiment, which took place in Jordan, was based on the fact that water has a special resonance in Islam, being used in such practices as ablution (or washing) before prayer and charity as expressed in providing water for the poor. It was targeted to women leaders, since they are key actors in household water management. The study tested the effect of Islamic religious messaging concerning water by comparing a class receiving this messaging with a control group where no such messaging was given. The experimental treatment included messages about water as a blessing, the sin of wasting water, teaching on ablution, water as an act of charity, as well as secular information on water management. The treatment effect in conserving water was three times larger than the secular approach in the control group. But it was also found that pushing religious norms that were less established, such as using treated water, caused a backlash among the subjects in the experimental group.



● **The 2011 Egyptian uprising and its aftermath transformed the religious and spiritual lives of upper-middle-class Egyptians who participated in the revolution, interviews with these participants suggest.** In an article published in *Cultural Anthropology* (February), Amira Mittermaier (University of Toronto) explores the “religious afterlives” of the revolution, focusing on how the experience of the huge gatherings at Tahrir Square (Cairo) led to significant religious transformations among former revolutionaries. The researcher reports that many participants experienced Tahrir Square as not just a political event but a spiritual one, describing it as a place where “God was manifesting” or where they felt “a blanket of light” and the presence of angels. After the revolution, and especially following the 2013 Rabaa massacre (when police and military forces killed more than 800 Muslim Brotherhood supporters), participants engaged in deep theological questioning and spiritual experimentation.

A widespread turn to Sufism emerged among these young, educated Egyptians, often merging with practices like yoga, meditation, and therapy. Many participants rejected their parents’ more rigid, rules-based Islam in favor of a more personal, experiential connection to God, separating “God” from “Islam” as an institution. Mittermaier explains that this post-revolutionary spirituality is not simply secular or the “spiritual-but-not-religious” variety found in Western contexts; it maintains a belief in divine sovereignty while questioning religious authority. The



A Sufi Dancer in Cairo, Egypt (source: thephotostrand, 2008 - Wikipedia, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license).

revolution's religious afterlives continue today, with some participants supporting Palestinian causes through spiritual practices during the Gaza war, showing how seemingly apolitical spiritual practices can retain revolutionary potential. Mittermaier argues that these religious transformations represent a continued form of revolutionary spirit, even as direct political action became impossible under increased authoritarianism. Rather than seeing these spiritual practices as mere retreat or defeat, she interprets them as keeping alive the indeterminacy and experimental spirit of the revolution in unexpected forms.

(*Cultural Anthropology*, <https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca>)

Segment of disenchanting Catholics turning to Protestantism in France

A growing number of converts to various forms of Protestantism in France come from Catholic backgrounds, reflecting broader societal shifts in religious attachment, writes Claire Bernole in the French Catholic weekly *La Vie* (April 3). According to an Ifop survey published in January, 25 percent of French Protestants were not born into Protestant families, with a majority being former Catholics (72 percent, compared with 59 percent in 2010). Whether seeking intellectual freedom in Lutheran-Reformed churches or emotional connection in evangelical communities,

these converts are responding to perceived shortcomings in Catholic institutional structures and practices. Reasons range from a perceived lack of understanding to views on divorced people and LGBTQ+ individuals. Many converts describe feeling unsupported by Catholic institution at crucial moments in their lives. Their journeys highlight how contemporary religious identity is increasingly shaped by



personal needs and experiences rather than traditional denominational boundaries. Converts to traditional Protestant denominations (Lutheran and Reformed) come from higher cultural and educational backgrounds, feeling attracted to the invitation to subjective reflection and appreciative of pastors who accompany rather than dictate. They are seeking freedom from dogma and the tension between personal convictions and official church positions.

Converts to evangelical congregations are often drawn by the emotional dimension of worship, inspirational messages, and warm relationships within the community. Transformations in French Protestantism also ought to be considered. A minister from the United Protestant Church of France found out that, in the 1950s, 19 out of 20 marriages in his parish were between two Protestants, but since 2000, it is only 1 in 20. A minister working in a French megachurch observes that, for the first time, his church has a minority of members born into evangelical families (it was 70 percent originally). But he notes that many “neo-Christians” attend multiple different churches, treating them as “places of consumption rather than communities,” and so cautions against concluding that French Protestantism is growing significantly. The article also notes a small but not insignificant number of Catholics who attend Protestant (often Lutheran) parishes while choosing not to officially change their religious affiliation.

(*La Vie*, <https://www.lavie.fr/>)

Kosovo’s Catholic moment?

Kosovo, the Muslim-majority Balkan nation, is seeing a growing trend of Muslims converting to Catholicism, reports Sonia Sarkar in *Religion Unplugged* (March 17). She writes that a group called the Decanski Movement Association has been promoting the voluntary exit from Islam, while also seeking to preserve Albanian national identity and values under the motto: “We are no longer Muslims.” Catholicism is viewed as the original faith of the majority Albanians living in Kosovo by representatives of this movement, who argue that, emotionally, these Kosovar

Albanians have always connected with Catholicism, even if they remained in hiding as “crypto-Catholics.” In Kosovo, 95.6 percent of the population is Muslim and only 2.2 percent is officially Catholic, while 1.4 percent is Orthodox. The remainder is either Protestant or Jewish. The people spearheading the movement argue that both Islam and Serbian Orthodoxy are harmful to Albanians and their identity. Most ethnic Albanians were forcibly converted to Islam when high taxes were imposed on Catholics by the Ottomans. In the war in Kosovo between 1998 and 1999, when Serbian forces destroyed Islamic facilities, libraries and archives, Albanians destroyed Orthodox churches. Many Serbian Orthodox places of worship have continued to be targeted, but Catholic places of worship have not been targeted with the same regularity.



Catholic cathedral in Prizren, Kosovo (source: Sharon Hahn Darlin, Flickr, 2023).

As recently as 2023, of the 73 incidents involving violence against religious sites, 49 targeted Muslim properties, 22 targeted Serbian Orthodox sites, and just two targeted Catholic sites. Mother Theresa, although born in neighboring Macedonia, has been widely honored in Kosovo for her charitable work, while the country is seeking recognition of its statehood by the Vatican. Sarkar writes that representatives of the Catholic conversion movement argue that the right to religious belief is an individual right and that Kosovo, as a secular state, allows religious activities to operate freely without state interference. The trend of Catholic conversion has not bothered Kosovo’s politicians, since the nation has long been seeking membership into the European Union, selling itself to the world as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious place. “These conversions are building a political premise for them to prove that Kosovo is closer to Europe by trying to establish Catholicism as central to their identity given Europe’s strained relationship with Islam,” Sarkar writes.

(*Religion Unplugged*, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/why-are-muslims-in-war-torn-kosovo-turning-to-catholicism?>)

Syrian Christians wary of post-Assad regime and divided on options

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria has left behind a fractured country and an increasingly divisive politics that raises new concerns about the safety of Christians and also the Alawite minority, the heterodox branch of Shia Islam espoused by the Assad family, according to two reports. In *The Dispatch* (March 16), Michael Reneau, Joseph Roche, and Iryna Matviyishyn note that reports surfaced in March of violent crackdowns by Syria's new Islamist rulers in the Alawite region of Latakia, resulting in over 1,000 deaths, including 745 civilians. Although most of the victims were Alawites, Christians were also reportedly caught in the violence. The attacks have intensified fears among Syria's Christian communities, prompting mass evacuations and raising concerns about their safety under the new regime. Yet the article notes that "many of Syria's Christians seem intent on finding ways to bind the wounds of Syria's diverse communities of religions and people groups—so long...fractured by decades of tyranny." Catholic priest Tony Homsy said his greatest concern was about the Alawites. Many Sunni Muslims want revenge against the Alawites, whom they, rightly or wrongly, associate with Assad's regime. The clerics interviewed support reconciliation and unity between the sectarian groups and parties, yet they expressed concern about escalating chaos in the country and that a threat against Christians could emerge.



Looking over St Takla's convent towards the main town of Maalula (source: Sean Long, Flickr, 2006).

While the ruling Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) organization has attempted to rebrand itself as a local Syrian force with governance ambitions, “it remains designated as a terrorist organization by the European Union and the United States due to its extremist origins and activities. Controlling parts of Idlib province, the group enforces a strict interpretation of Islamic law, fueling concerns among religious minorities, including Syria’s Christians,” write Reneau, Roche, and Matviyishyn. An analysis by Samer Sleaby in *The European Conservative* magazine (March 12) sees two futures for Syria’s Christians and other minorities: federalism or emigration. The growing discourse about federalism is the result of the ruling authority’s failure to create a national dialogue among the different groups and ensure that the HTS doesn’t resort to violence.

Historically, Syria has moved between various forms of federated states and centralized rule. “Today,” Sleaby writes, “the idea of federalism is most strongly advocated by politically organized groups such as the Kurds, whereas other communities—like the Druze and Alawites—are still in the process of structuring their political visions. However, the federalist debate has been largely absent among Syrian Christians, aside from a few recent, tentative efforts.”

The Syriac community, divided largely between Orthodox and Catholics, is also split politically, with the Syriac Union Party supporting federalism, and the Assyrian Democratic Organization against it. While Christians are now more inclined toward federalism than in the past, there are significant differences, often according to social class. Urban Christians tend to desire to remain integrated within their broader communities, while on the coasts and in southern Syria, Christians are more inclined toward federalism. This is mainly due to the Druze community’s relatively successful autonomy under the previous regime, fostering the belief that such an arrangement might also give Christians greater religious and social liberties. Sleaby adds that Syrian Christians share common ground with federalist movements in Lebanon, but the former’s demographic dispersion and lack of political organization puts them at a disadvantage. Syrian Christians in the diaspora—who make up a significant portion of the community—are also divided on the issue, while church officials “remain ambiguous across different denominations. Church leaders are treading cautiously, reassessing their relationship with the new authorities and their role within their communities in a post-Ba’athist Syria,” Sleaby writes. At the same time, a sizable segment of the Christian population views emigration as the only viable solution, the article concludes.

(*The Dispatch*, <https://thedispatch.com/newsletter/dispatch-faith/between-fear-and-reconciliation-in-syria>; *European Conservative*, <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/analysis/could-federalism-solve-syrias-religious-and-ethnic-hostilities/>)