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Platforming religion: an interview with Paul Seabright

Economic approaches to studying religious trends have been prominent for the past three decades, but Paul Seabright's recent book, The Divine Economy: How Religions Compete for Wealth, Power, and People *(Princeton University Press, $35), is unique for its comprehensive treatment of the religious past and present as well as its novel use of the concept of "platforms" in explaining the economy of religion. Seabright, who is professor at the Toulouse School of Economics in France, talked to* ***RW*** *about the book and his more recent work in an interview by email in early July.*

RW: In your book, you write about religion as being expressed and growing through the way they serve as platforms. Can you explain this concept?

Seabright: Platforms are organizations that facilitate relationships that could not form, or could not function as effectively, in the platform's absence. Some platforms are digital, like Facebook or Google, which connect different types of users (groups of friends, or firms and customers) more effectively than alternative mechanisms can do. But many platforms are not digital—traditional matchmakers and marketplaces, chambers of commerce, lobbying organizations, and of course religious communities, played a crucial role in building social ties in both traditional rural and modern urban settings.

RW: The secularization thesis has undergone something of a revival in recent years. But throughout your book you write that religious platforms have some advantages over secular ones. So would this challenge those forecasting a secular future?

Seabright: Definitely! The secularization hypothesis has tended to appeal to people who think the main characteristic of religious movements is their attachment to systems of beliefs that are in conflict with modern science. In fact, most religious platforms offer their members a set of services that are mostly about community and belonging and only very indirectly about beliefs. This makes them very adaptable. Religious movements are not passively retreating before the changing demands of modern life, but reinventing themselves to provide the benefits of community that their secular rivals often struggle to convey.

RW: Since religious affiliation and religious organizations are seeing decline in the U.S., does this suggest that religious platforms in America will be weaker than elsewhere?

Seabright: No. Religious affiliation is seeing a decline in the U.S. from an unusually high level of affiliation, which remains high by the standards of high-income countries. Also, the decline in religious affiliation is not accompanied by an equivalent decline in belief in God or in general spirituality. This suggests that many Americans are moving towards a more "mix-and-match" approach to spirituality. At the same time, others are heeding the call from megachurches, which are attracting a growing share of Americans. In short, the religious landscape is becoming more diversified—much like the rest of American society. In any modern society where people are free to choose their religious activity, we can expect that a significant minority will feel no need for the offerings of religious platforms. But many, perhaps most others, will continue to heed the call of religious platforms, in the U.S. no less than elsewhere.

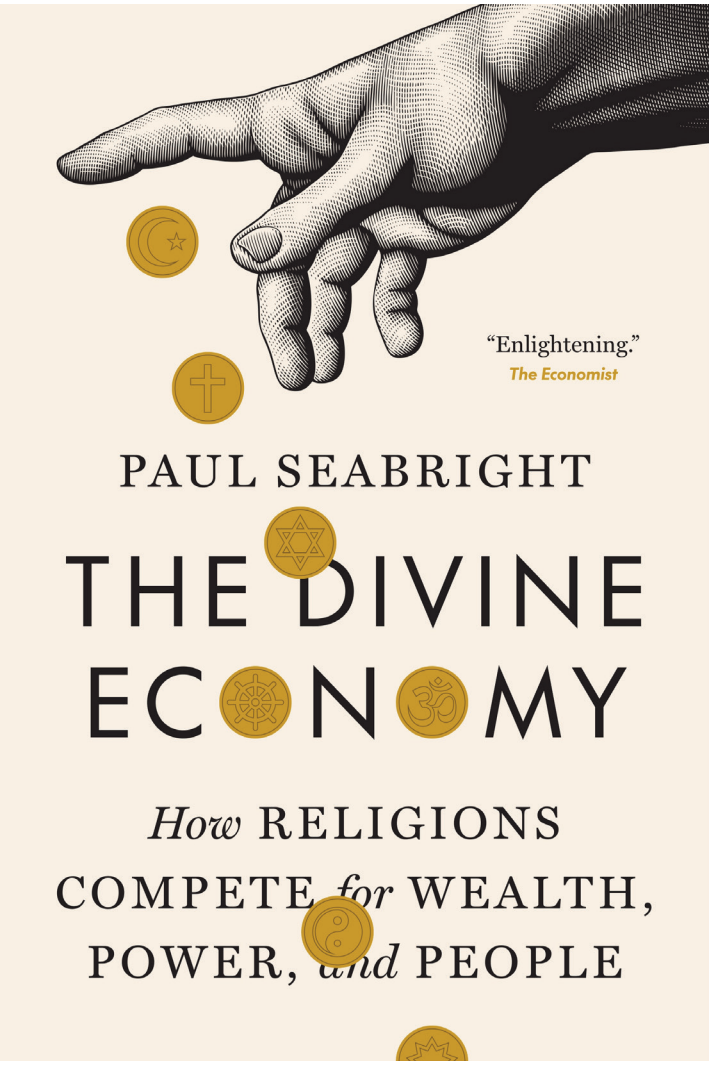
RW: The economic approach to religion has stressed how the demand for religion remains steady while changes on the supply side (such as because of state regulations) affect the fortunes of religious institutions. How does your religious platforms approach deal with supply and demand?

Seabright: Supply is provided by platforms, as I've indicated—though platforms can be very varied, some small and local, others large and national or international. Demand is for a range of activities that give people a sense of meaning through involvement in community. That meaning may depend on specific beliefs, or more generally on moral teachings, or on spiritual narratives that help people to make sense of their place in the larger universe, and to reconcile themselves to the disappointment and suffering that is an unavoidable part of the human condition. One of the most important insights of many religious platforms is that the high demands made of their members are not a bug but a feature: their members value being asked to contribute to the community, even or especially when those contributions are large enough to hurt.

RW: You also tie the success of religious platforms to how their members and leaders relate to political authorities.

Seabright: Historically, many religious movements have obtained great privileges from the support and sponsorship of political leaders. But Adam Smith's profound insight in Book Five of The Wealth of Nations was that this political support was nearly always detrimental to the movements' ability and incentive to provide what their members wanted. Why should leaders

trouble themselves to listen to their members if they have guaranteed incomes from the state, not to mention the ability to stifle criticism through state-enforced religious censorship? Yet if they don't listen, their legitimacy will suffer.



RW: Given the current geopolitical situation with Iran, do you have any ideas on how the Islamic platform might change in Iran in its relation to political authority?

Seabright: The Iranian people have been turning away from the politico-religious leadership in Iran for several decades. Surveys indicate that Iranians still have fairly high levels of belief in God and in Islam, but their levels of mosque attendance are low—fewer than 40 percent attend a mosque even once a month. The regime has been using increasingly repressive tactics, as we saw in the response to the protests over veiling laws. But the decline in its legitimacy has seemed unstoppable—until the recent bombing actions of the Israeli and U.S. governments provided the regime with a cause to rally the population. Of course, many Iranians will not become supporters of their corrupt and repressive government just because of U.S. and Israeli attacks, but they may be inhibited from speaking out against the regime. The bombing will weaken the regime in some ways, but even if it were to fall the prospect that it would be succeeded by a more liberal and internationally open government has become more remote.

RW: You have been conducting new research on welfare and religion. How does that relate to the relation of politics and religious platforms?

Seabright: In work with my former PhD student Julia Hoefer, we've been trying to use comparative cross-country data to see whether political sponsorship of religious movements helps or hurts the movement's members. We find that it mostly hurts them, and makes them lose trust in the movement's leaders.

Vatican seeking new diplomatic role under Leo XIV

The Vatican under the early papacy of Leo XIV is being viewed as a negotiating site for international politics and peace talks, if not a partner in such negotiations, writes Massimo Faggioli in *Commonweal* magazine (June 24). Already, there was talk that the Holy See under Leo could serve as a "facilitator" or "observer" for ending the war in Ukraine, though Vladimir Putin ignored such an offer. In the past, the Vatican was fully involved as a negotiator in peacemaking efforts, such as during the Cuban Missile Crisis and in the run-up to the Helsinki Accords of 1975. But the bipolar nature of such Cold War-era initiatives has been replaced by a more complex multipolar world where the place of the Vatican is less clear-cut. Yet the Vatican still retains its world influence. An example is international leaders using the occasions of Pope Francis's funeral and Pope Leo XIV's inaugural Mass as opportunities to talk face-to-face. "The image of President Trump and President Zelensky meeting in St. Peter's Basilica before Francis's funeral was an almost iconic portrait of the power of the Vatican as a world stage—while suggesting the current impotence of secular diplomacy and international organizations," writes Faggioli. While the international community may accept the humanitarian or peacemaking efforts of Catholic organizations (such as the Community of Sant'Egidio), it "does not accept the Holy See per se as a real mediator between countries at war, and especially in cases of war with significant interecclesial (Ukraine and Russia) or interreligious narratives (Israel, Palestine, and Iran)."

Faggioli writes that the papacy currently embodies a "cool-headed approach to religion and politics, in which men and women of good will and hope will prevail." Lately, however, "there is nostalgia—especially in right-wing U.S. Catholicism—for a pre–Vatican II political theology. Leo XIV will have to deal with new attempts to influence papal teaching about the role of the Church in international affairs—and in ways that differ significantly from the era of Catholic neoconservatives: Is a holy-war mindset overtaking the tradition of just-war teaching?" Faggioli adds that Leo sees a central role for Vatican diplomacy. In his June 10 speech to papal representatives, Leo said that "the diplomacy of the Holy See constitutes in its very personnel a model—certainly not perfect, but very significant—of the message it proposes, namely that of human fraternity and peace among peoples." While Francis relegated the Secretariat of State to the margins, Leo immediately restored it as the cornerstone, not only of diplomacy, but of the entire Apostolic See, designed in his time by Paul VI in his 1967 reform of the Roman Curia. "Francis's position on war and peace was actually somewhat radical, closer to pacifism than to the stance of his predecessors. It remains to be seen what Leo the Augustinian's posture will be." Faggioli notes that in a 2022 interview, "when he was bishop of Chiclayo in Peru, he articulated his view of the war in Ukraine as an act of 'imperialist invasion.' Since his papal election, a rebalancing of the Vatican's position toward the side of Ukraine has been apparent."

(*Commonweal*, https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/)

Anti-Semitism gaining entry to evangelicals through social media

Anti-Semitic sentiments are finding a place among American conservative Christians, often through far-right social media sites, such as the Manosphere, Red Pill, and 4chan, as well as Christian podcasts and websites, writes Will Spencer in his blog *Christ Over All* (June 2). Spencer focuses on Stone Choir, a weekly podcast hosted by Corey Mahler and Ryan Dumperth, both of whom were excommunicated from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod for their anti-Semitic views. The podcast regularly trades in racialist and anti-Semitic tropes. Spencer came under attack from Stone Choir and its supporters after he criticized its anti-Semitic content and apologized for appearing on the podcast without knowing its ideology. His apology post amassed 250,000 views, many of them hostile to such criticism. He writes that anti-Semitism and the popularity of Stone Choir and its neo-Nazi narrative have grown especially since the assassination attempt on Donald Trump in 2024. Influencers such as Candace Owens, Andrew Tate, and Nick Fuentes have hinted at these beliefs on X. "Worst of all, Reformed pastors have released videos talking about 'Talmudic Judaism,' 'heritage Americans,' and 'low-IQ minorities,' all of which are dog-whistles playing Stone Choir's Neo Nazi tune to young men who can hear it," Spencer writes.

In the *Free Press* (June 2), conservative Christian writer Rod Dreher sees a similar anti-Semitic influence in social media that are reaching Christians, especially young men. "When popular online figures offering crackpot takes like *Actually, Churchill was the real villain of World War II* find their way onto mainstream podcasts like Joe Rogan's and Tucker Carlson's, you know

something massive is happening," he writes. Dreher tells of a middle-aged professor at a Christian university in the South with a mostly conservative student body who has been "poleaxed by the number of normie white male Christians in his classes who are anti-Semites." "This was not part of the conservative evangelical world I grew up in," the professor said. "Support for Israel was a cultural marker for us. I'm not saying that you have to be on the side of this or that Israeli government policy, but good Lord, antisemitism?" Dreher writes that a "woke right" has emerged that is not often criticized or exposed by fellow conservatives. Even if the left-wing version of identity politics and "wokeness has lost some of its steam in the post-Biden era, the conditions that brought wokeness about still remain—and right-wing people (especially the young) are just as susceptible to the siren song of ideological certainty, and to the temptation of crushing all who stand in their way."

(*Christ Over All*, https://christoverall.com/article/longform/the-dangerous-secret-your-young-men-are-keeping-neo-nazi-thought-has-entered-the-church/)

Gen Z women finding contentment at convents?

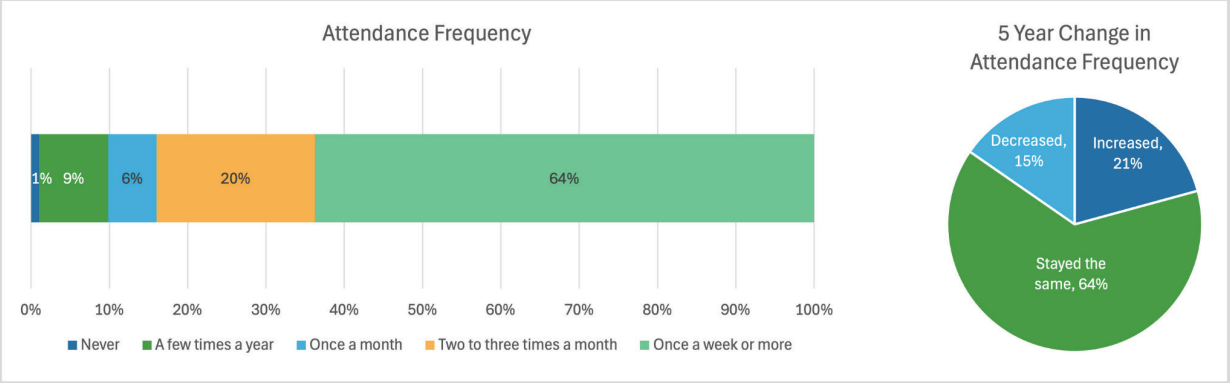
Instead of sharing beach houses, a growing number of Gen Z women are checking into Catholic convents and monasteries for their vacations, writes Ashley Fike in the magazine *Vice* (June 30). "In an unexpected pivot from rooftop parties and dating app exhaustion, young women are opting for peace and quiet. Literal quiet." Called the "vow of silence summer," people

voluntarily give up speaking for days at a time, communicating only by writing or gestures while living alongside nuns. Fike adds that the demand is high. According to one TikToker, in a video viewed 700,000 times, "I booked a vow of silence at a Catholic monastery late last year, and the booking process is really straightforward—you just email the nuns…When I went to book again for this summer, they were fully booked for the next three months." Fike writes that monasteries and convents are now seeing waitlists as young women line up for "a kind of stillness that's hard to come by elsewhere. No phones buzzing, no endless notifications, and definitely no small talk. Instead, many are spending their days tending gardens, attending prayer services, and catching up with themselves."

She cites a recent survey finding that nearly 250,000 Americans experience burnout before they hit 30. "A vow of silence might seem extreme—but it's a clear counter-move to the overstimulation so many people are desperate to escape. The TikTok comment section has turned into a sort of confession booth for collective exhaustion." But others share how transformative the experience can be. Another TikToker writes, "I lived with nuns last summer…legit the best three months of my life…They are so cool and fun. I worked in their garden and lived in a cottage for free." While this trend might seem surprising, "it doesn't come from nowhere. Between the burnout, the dating fatigue, and the constant pressure to be *on*, Gen Z's new version of luxury looks more like spiritual retreat than poolside party." As one commenter noted, "I feel the nuns have been expecting us. They knew our last nerve would disappear at some point."

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **The latest findings from a survey on the congregational engagement of Christian church attenders in the aftermath of Covid suggest that most attenders have either remained consistently engaged or have increased their worship attendance.** The results of the 2024 Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) Attender Survey were based on responses from more than 24,000 churchgoers across the United States. Two-thirds were found to attend weekly, and over 80 percent reported stable or increased attendance compared to five years ago—especially among newer and younger participants. The survey, led by EPIC director Scott Thumma, found that online worship is still being widely offered, even if in-person services are preferred. What is called "dual format participation" is common among families and younger adults. Virtual attenders actively engage—but often multitask, which means singing and praying but also doing other things simultaneously. Still, the study found a high degree of satisfaction with virtual worship. At the same time, participation in congregational programs was found to be stable or growing. Most church attenders have maintained or increased their involvement in activities like religious education, fellowship, and service. Personal religious practices also have remained strong among attenders, with about 90 percent praying weekly, and two-thirds reading scripture regularly.



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

The study found that volunteering and financial giving have rebounded since the pandemic began—half of churchgoers volunteer monthly, and over one-third have increased their financial giving. The shift to electronic giving continues, with more than half of respondents using this method. The greater frequency of people attending multiple churches has likewise continued: 46 percent regularly attend or view other church services, and 7 percent identify as having more than one "home" church, even if such worshippers show lower commitment. As much as 38 percent of church attenders joined their current church after the pandemic began. These new members include switchers, returners, and first-time participants, "many of whom bring more energy and higher optimism about their church's future." The study concludes that the pandemic strengthened individual faith and deepened congregational trust for many people. Over half reported stronger faith and spirituality post-pandemic, and nearly half felt greater belonging, trust in leaders, and connection to their church.

(*To download this report, visit*: https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/research/national-survey-research/this-place-means-everything-to-me-key-findings-from-a-national-survey-of-church-attenders-in-post-pandemic-united-states/)

• **Beyond the personality and policy differences, the rift between Elon Musk and Donald Trump may also reflect a religiously influenced split over technology among the fans and followers of these two men, a recent survey suggests.** The feud between Trump and Musk has hinted that the prospects of a fusion between religious conservatives and populists and technological futurists [see **RW**, Vol. 40, No. 3] may be more fraught than expected, especially since Musk has proposed to start his own political party. The shaky alliance between the men may reflect the weaker reception of Musk's products, especially his electric car company Tesla, among Trump's core constituency, particularly evangelicals and Latter-day Saints. The American Communities Project (ACP) has analyzed 15 types of communities in the U.S., showing the geographic tribalism marking American society and suggesting the difficulties Musk will have in reaching out beyond his base, whether in business or politics. Aside from polling data from Gallup showing that the electric car consumer base is more Democrat than Republican (71 percent versus 31 percent), in its Substack newsletter, the ACP finds that of the roughly 275 Tesla dealerships, more than three-quarters (213) are based in what it designates as the Big Cities, Urban Suburbs, College Towns, and African American South, which are the only four community types that did not vote for Donald Trump in the 2024 election. The evangelical and LDS community types were among the least likely to have Tesla dealerships. While these disparities have much to do with the incomes of residents in these communities, it is also the case that business and consumption increasingly follow politics.

(*This study can be downloaded from:* https://www.americancommunities.org/as-politics-and-consumerism-clash-a-look-at-tesla-dealerships-across-communities/)

• **The recently-released Brazilian census finds a steady loss of Roman Catholics and a slowing yet still growing evangelical Protestant presence.** Writing in his blog *Byzantine Calvinist* (June 11), David Koyzis cites the census finding that while 30 years ago Catholics made up 82.9 percent of Brazil's population, they now account for just over half (56.7 percent).

Baptist congregation in Brazil.

The number of evangelicals has continued to grow, rising from 9 percent of the population to 26.9 percent over the past three decades. Although the growth rate of this group has slowed slightly—having risen by 6.5 percentage points between 2000 and 2010, and 5.3 since—the new data show that, for the first time, at least one in four Brazilians identifies as evangelical. As a proportion of each racial group, there are more black evangelicals than white ones—"a particularly relevant finding given that the majority of Brazil's population, 56 percent, is black." Koyzis adds that the *Guardian* newspaper article reporting on the census findings also notes that the growing evangelical political force in Brazil has led to an erosion of support for President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who will be standing for reelection next year. "Rationally, the government understands it needs to engage with evangelicals, but internally, many of Lula's party leaders still believe religion is a thing of the past and that the faithful are simply people who haven't had proper access to education," said anthropologist and historian Juliano Spyer, an author of books on the evangelical movement in Brazil.

(*Byzantine Calvinist*, https://byzantinecalvinist.blogspot.com/2025/06/evangelical-population-growth-in-brazil.html?m=1)

Muslim Brotherhood running a stealth strategy of Islamist politics and anti-Semitism in Europe?

A recent controversial report from the French Senate on the Muslim Brotherhood notes that the organization has built an extensive ideological infrastructure in France—"not through violence, but through schools, charities, mosques, and soft power." The report, based on intelligence files, field investigations, and dozens of interviews conducted by two civil servants, finds that the "Brotherhood's strategy is to install a form of ideological hegemony by infiltrating civil society under the guise of religious and educational activities." Writing in the *Free Press* (June 2), Simone Rodan-Benzaquen adds that the report is the most detailed government study to date of the Brotherhood's presence in Europe, combining months of fieldwork and analysis with input

from diplomats, intelligence officials, academics, and religious figures. The report's conclusions are clearly written within the framework of its "laïcité" policy, which seeks to restrict the public expression of religion. Rodan-Benzaquen maintains that the report uncovers a distinctive Brotherhood strategy: "The Brotherhood operates as a political project. Its goal is not sudden revolution, but gradual transformation. Its targets are hearts and minds. Its strength lies not in secrecy, but in strategic ambiguity. And it is not coming just for France. It is coming for all of the West." The report argues that the Brotherhood seeks to impose Islamic law through gradual, ideological means—primarily via schools, charities, and religious networks.

While it claims to reject violence, the Brotherhood has extremist offshoots such as Hamas, and its influence often blurs the line between nonviolence and radicalization. After being repressed in the Arab world, the Brotherhood has "methodically expanded its presence across the continent—embedding itself in local communities through a network of mosques, charities, educational institutions, and civic associations, all designed to promote its vision of political Islam under the cover of religious outreach." The Brotherhood's French network comprises 280 associations, including 139 officially affiliated mosques and 68 more mosques with some links to the group's ideology, making up 10 percent of the mosques opened since 2010. Every Friday, some 91,000 people attend worship in these spaces. The movement also controls or influences 21 private schools (three of them state-funded) and 815 Quranic schools. More controversially the report claims that anti-Semitism is a core ideological element of the Brotherhood, often laundered

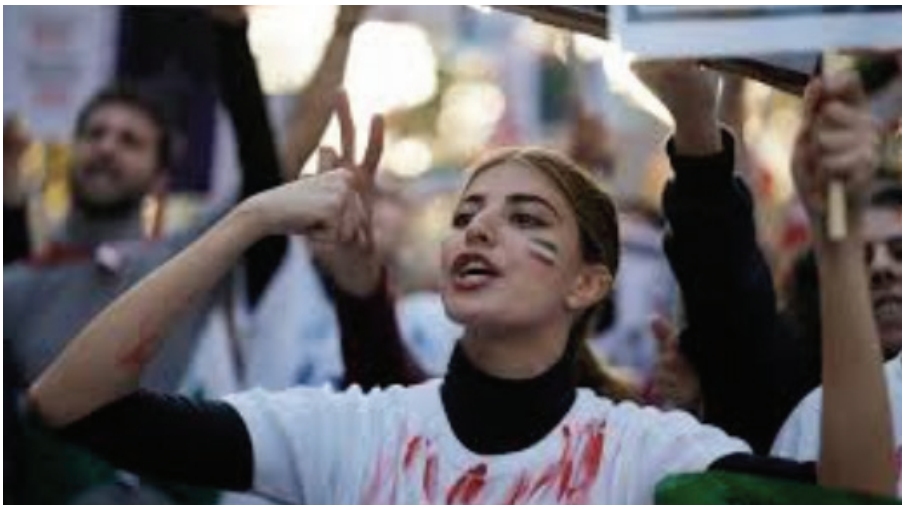
through anti-Zionist slogans. "In one mosque near Paris, a speaker recently declared 'Je suis Hamas' ("I am Hamas") to a cheering audience. In others, anti-Israel rhetoric bleeds seamlessly into classic antisemitic tropes." Rodan-Benzaquen adds that the report emphasizes the movement's use of "double discourse"—projecting moderation in public while promoting anti-Semitism, gender segregation, and ideological separatism in private.

The report adds that the Brotherhood's new frontier is digital, where a wave of online influencers trained in Brotherhood institutions appeal to younger audiences on issues such as Islamophobia and present Islamist ideology in therapeutic or entrepreneurial language. Critics of the report charge that it is short on actual documentation and long on suspicion and unsupported conclusions. Political scientist Olivier Roy writes in the French weekly *Nouvel Obs* (May 23) that the report employs "moral panic rhetoric" that reveals nothing new. He adds that it focuses on an ideological construct of the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat, rather than on concrete facts. Like others before it, it lacks any in-depth analysis of Islamist movements or the political strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood and relies on a "constructed perception of the enemy." Yet the report's presentation of the Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations as hate groups is leading to similar attempts at investigation elsewhere. Sweden is launching its own investigation, while Austria had previously produced assessments, although few have led to action. "Belgium has accommodated Brotherhood-linked networks under the banner of multiculturalism," Rodan-Benzaquen writes. "And the United States? Here, the conversation barely exists. While several American Muslim organizations have historical or ideological ties to the Brotherhood, public scrutiny is rare, and political discourse tends to avoid the subject entirely."

Secular aspirations continue to build in Iran

As a reaction against state-imposed religion, secular aspirations have been building up for decades in Iran, and the religious foundations of the current regime are being increasingly questioned, with protest movements in recent years emphasizing "Iran" instead of "Islam." Mahdi Rezaei-Tazik, a political scientist at the University of Bern, Switzerland, who focuses on criticism of religion in the Middle East, writes in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (June 27) on these developments, which have been cited several times in **RW** (March 2020, February 2023). In 2023, a senior cleric, Mohammad Abolghassem Doulabi, expressed concern about the weakening of religion in the country, with 50,000 of Iran's 75,000 mosques closed, an indication of declining attendance. Rezaei-Tazik stresses that this represents a process that has been unfolding for a long time already, with people rediscovering the works of 19th-century Iranian authors who had been critical of Islam. One can also notice a growing interest in the country's pre-Islamic past, with some people both in Iran and in the Iranian diaspora switching from Muslim to old Persian first names and the use of old Iranian rather than Islamic practices during weddings.

Iran had been on a state-enforced secular path until the 1979 Islamic Revolution completely reversed this trajectory, notes Ali Sarihan (St. Mary's College of Maryland) in an article on the ascendancy of secular trends in Iran (*Religions*, May 3). But globalization has "spurred the



growth of secularism throughout the nation." Sarihan identifies here four key factors driving secularization: cultural exchanges, with young Iranians gaining unprecedented access to global music, literature, films, and fashion that introduce secular ideas and lifestyles; information access, with the rise of the internet and social media; educational opportunities, since the number of Iranian students studying abroad has nearly doubled from 60,000 to 110,000 in just four years; and comparative awareness, allowing Iranians to observe the freedoms and prosperity in secular societies and leading many to question their own government's restrictions.

In addition, the Islamic Republic's shortcomings (poor economics, leadership crisis after Khomeini, internal dissent) have inadvertently fueled secular movements. Among younger people, a post-Islamist movement has emerged, with a new generation arguing that Islam was neither the solution to nor the cause of society's problems and advocating instead for secular governance. Moreover, the 3 million-strong Iranian diaspora has played a crucial role in promoting secular trends, and rapid urbanization in Iran has also had a significant impact. "Modern Iran is increasingly at odds with its traditional roots," Sarihan writes. According to him, "secularism serves as an umbrella that unites various opposition groups and reformists against the regime." But until now, the regime has been wary of making concessions that "could lead to further demands that would ultimately threaten its power."

(*Religions*, https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/16/5/592)

Rise and fall of alliance between Turkey's AKP and the Muslim Brotherhood

Historical trajectories, ideological differences, and shifting geopolitical realities shaped both the making and unmaking of the Islamist alliance between the current ruling party of Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and the (Arabic) Muslim Brotherhood (MB), writes historian Jan-Markus Vömel in a detailed report published by the Documentation Centre Political Islam in Vienna, Austria (April). Turkish Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood developed separately, with limited ideological transfer. Over time, however, both movements recognized each other as "sister organizations" representing local expressions of a global Islamic revival and converged at key moments, especially during the Arab Spring. Moreover, migration from Turkey and the Arab world to Europe created a unique space for Islamist networking, free from home-

country repression, leading the MB and Turkish Islamists to develop parallel but sometimes overlapping networks.

The Arab Spring (2010–11) marked the high point of cooperation. Turkey (under the AKP), Qatar, and MB-affiliated groups in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere formed a "revolutionary camp" seeking to reshape the Middle East along populist-Islamist lines. This alliance faced a counter-revolutionary bloc led by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and—later—post-coup Egypt, which viewed the MB as a threat and labeled it a terrorist organization. MB-inspired parties won elections in Egypt and some other Arab countries, but the 2013 Egyptian coup led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi resulted in a brutal crackdown on the MB. Thousands fled, with Turkey (especially Istanbul) becoming a key hub for exiled MB members and media. The MB lost ground across the region. Realizing that the MB was unlikely to regain power in the foreseeable future, Turkey began a pragmatic rapprochement with the other camp, reducing overt support for the MB while maintaining discreet ties. Turkey restrained the MB's media work on its territory, revoked the Turkish citizenship granted to some 50 Brotherhood functionaries, and even agreed to deportations of wanted members to Egypt.

Turkish Islamism and the MB retained distinct ideological traditions and strategic cultures. The alliance was always fragile, prone to unravel under pressure from external setbacks and internal disagreements. The AKP's initial appeal as a model for democratic Islamism faded as Turkey itself became more authoritarian and as the specificities of Arab political contexts proved resistant to Turkish-style transformation. The failure of the MB and its allies to consolidate power led to a regional realignment, with Turkey and Qatar recalibrating their foreign policies to accommodate the realities of a resurgent status-quo bloc. Turkish rapprochement with counter-revolutionary Middle Eastern regimes is expected to continue, though local crises may cause temporary shifts. On the other hand, following the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, Turkey

became a more open supporter of Hamas, which currently is "the foremost remaining Turkish alliance with a Muslim Brotherhood-heritage organization."

(*The full report in English can be downloaded from the website of the Documentation Centre Political Islam:* https://www.dokumentationsstelle.at/en/)

How far can the resurgence of Tengrism go in Kazakhstan?

The resurgence of Tengrism in Kazakhstan has been decried as an artificial and political project by a number of scholars, but researchers report in the *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* (Vol. 45, Issue 5) on recent evidence of a "growing interest in Tengrism…driven by spiritual exploration as well as the quest for identity amidst the forces of globalization." Tengrism used to be the dominant belief system among Turkic and Mongolian tribes, encompassing shamanism, ancestor veneration, and various rituals, with the worship of the sky-god Tengri alongside ancestral spirits. The authors of the article, Jolaman Bulan, Tussipkhan Imammadi, Aiymzhan Ryskiyeva (all three from Nur-Mubarak University), and Asset Kuranbek (Al-Farabi University), note that an interest in Tengrism emerged in Kazakhstan in the 1990s, after the end of the Soviet period. The initial phase came through scholarly works, which hardly circulated beyond academic circles, but there then came people eager to associate with Tengrism and to promote it through various channels. The authors see Tengrism as a response to the

Tengrist mural in Kazakhstan.

decline of traditional values due to globalization, reinforcing Kazakh cultural legacy and fostering a distinct identity separate from foreign influences.

The interest in Tengrism is not limited to Kazakhstan. References to Tengri are found in various places across Eurasia. In 2022, in Turkey, a lawyer won a lawsuit to have his religion changed from Islam to Tengrism in official records. There are Tengrist groups in various countries, with one that seems to be well-organized in Kyrgyzstan. In August 2024, a press conference given by the Tengrist association, Tengri El, in the largest city of Kazakhstan, Almaty, focused on formal recognition of Tengrism and the need for Tengrist places of worship, called *Tengrilig*. There are none in Kazkahstan at this point. The authors acknowledge that Tengrism currently lacks nearly everything usually associated with a religion. While they are optimistic about the potential for Tengrism in Kazakhstan, it remains to be seen whether it could develop beyond a reverence and interest in the history and legacy of the country into a significant organized religious body. Still, the authors conclude that "the contemporary resurgence of Tengrism has emerged as a significant element in the quest for national identity in Kazakhstan" and is "crafting a distinct cultural identity."

(*Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/)

Findings & Footnotes

■ A secularization theorist himself, Detlef Pollack (University of Münster, Germany) still claims to be surprised to see a dramatic decline of religion in many regions of the world, as he releases the third, revised edition of his book (in German), *Religion in der Moderne: Ein internationaler Vergleich* (€ 49), co-authored with his colleague, Gergely Rosta. "Whereas in the first two editions we cautiously sought evidence for secularization theory," they write, "this now constitutes the very foundation of our argument." The book holds that the plausibility of religion is being put into question by a growing number of people, although Pollack and Rosta recognize that "when religious identities are linked to political, economic, or national interests, this often helps strengthen religion and the church," giving the example of Russia. But they add that "religious ties often weaken again once the political, economic, or national goals pursued through religious means have been achieved."

Detlef Pollack, Gergely Rosta

The book argues that the decline of belief in a

personal God is a sign that secularization is progressing, and "the surveys in the study show that a diversity of spiritual options does not help strengthen faith." Except for a minority, most people won't continue to be religious after turning away from church institutions and communities. The wide range of non-religious activities available leads to "a gradual process whereby people re-prioritize their values" for the benefit of secular practices. Regarding the recourse to religion as an identity resource in the face of foreign cultures, the authors argue that this does not automatically lead to stronger religious commitments: "the perceived threat posed by competing belief systems seems to have a reinforcing effect on religiosity only if it is already deeply rooted in the population." Pollack and Rosta observe a recent "reignition of the debate on secularization theory," and their new volume will obviously contribute to it. Additional details about the 656-page-long third edition can be found here: https://www.campus.de/buecher-campus-verlag/wissenschaft/soziologie/religion_in_der_moderne-17852.html

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

The **4 a.m. Club**, the brainchild of self-proclaimed psychic **Gia Prism**, may be the closest thing to QAnon among progressive and left-leaning people. The club is a confederation of spiritually inclined women who all claim to have woken up suddenly around 4 a.m. on November 6 with a sinking feeling that Donald Trump had won the election. But even after their intuitions were confirmed, they did not really believe that he won. The 4 a.m. Clubbers believe that Trump is president in an alternate reality. Although the "timelines split" at 4 a.m. on November 6, 2024, they hold that it is only a matter of time before everyone realizes this and gets back on the "correct" timeline, where Trump failed and Harris took her rightful place as POTUS. There are hundreds of videos with millions of views on TikTok, with additional chatter on left-wing Reddit, and their popularity has only grown since Trump's inauguration. Many of these videos are made by self-proclaimed witches, mystics, mediums, clairvoyants, intuitives, and the like. Many members, it seems, are nurses with autoimmune disorders.

4 a.m. psychic Gia Prism.

Just as QAnon believed that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump, the 4 a.m. Club believes it was stolen from Harris in 2024, and both movements see it as their job to alert the rest of the country to

what's happening right under their noses. When the timelines are corrected and Harris is president, the "Divine feminine" wins. "It's more than just waking up that morning," said one 4 a.m Clubber. "It's actually about a Great Awakening." The psychic Gia "downloads" her spiritual messages to followers, and some devotees refer to multiple "spirit guides," which show them visions of Harris's victory or tell them which members of Trump's administration will eventually be prosecuted (such as Pam Bondi, Marco Rubio, and Kristi Noem). Whether the 4 a.m. Clubbers channel their spiritual beliefs into political action, as some QAnon followers did, may be doubtful, since they believe they can bring down the federal government from their lanais. In one video, Gia insists: "We're toppling a regime via spiritual awakening." (**Source**: *The Free Press*, June 21)