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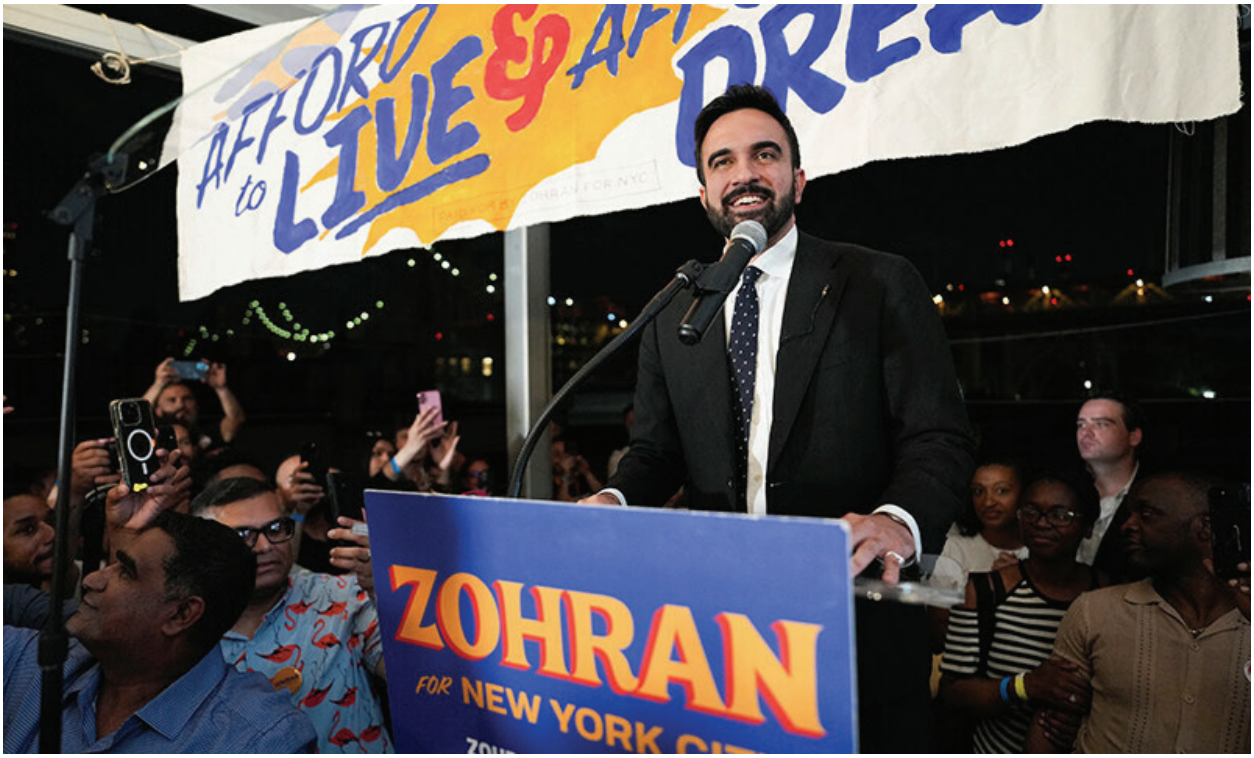
Cultural and secular Muslims seek tether to tradition

Just as there are secular and cultural Jews and, increasingly, people claiming to be "cultural Catholics," Muslims are likewise claiming that identity, according to scholars speaking at the mid-August conference of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Chicago, which **RW** attended. Survey research has found that almost a quarter of people from Muslim backgrounds disaffiliate religiously from their faith, following a pattern of religious disaffiliation in the general U.S. population. Based on focus group, interview, and survey research on those identifying as cultural or secular Muslims, Besheer Mohamed of the Pew Research Center found that they are not all atheists, with some maintaining ritual practices for cultural rather than religious purposes. Mohamed found that 17 percent of his sample were raised Muslim but no longer identified as such, while 76 percent of formerly religious Muslims still considered themselves Muslim. He found that 58 percent of his respondents identified with multiple religious traditions.

In another presentation, Mohamed, along with Eman Abdelhadi, Anna Fox, and Michael Guilmette, looked at how cultural and secular Muslims retain their Islamic ties and identity even as they drop or minimize the religious components of the faith. The researchers' study was based on 80 interviews with Muslims of varying levels of religious involvement, although the sample skewed toward a more liberal and less religious orientation, excluding converts and underrepresenting African-American Muslims. Half of the sample consisted of "secular and disembedded Muslims" who continued to identify as Muslims, either politically or culturally. For these Muslims, politics and culture constituted what the researchers called "identity tethers," serving to keep these people linked to Islam. Being politically Muslim allowed the respondents to maintain a positive sense of group identity in the face of the "political shocks" of a hostile society. Because such individuals, though secular, are still considered to be Muslim because of their ethnicity, particularly their Muslim names, they choose to proactively claim the Muslim identity rather than deny it.

Abdelhadi, Fox, Guilmette, and Mohamed found that even those respondents who had always been secular or were brought up in mixed religious families chose the Muslim identity as a way

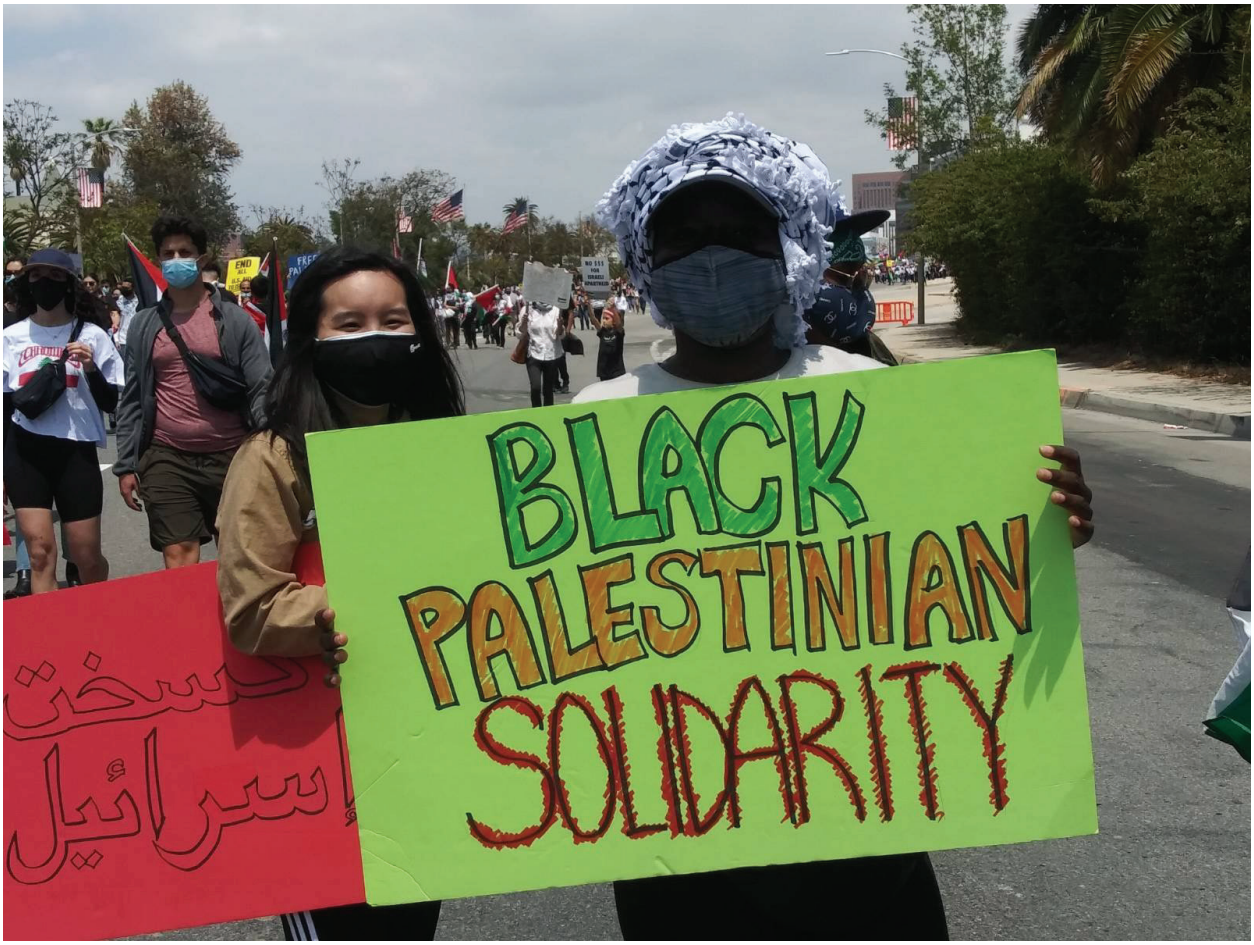


New York mayoral frontrunner Zoran Mamdani is said to share much with cultural Muslims.

to fight back at injustice (such as through Palestinian rights activism) and resist prejudice against Islam. Since most of the respondents were between the ages of 15 and 30 during 9/11, they believed that the greater surveillance and prejudice they experienced made their connections to Islam more political. In contrast, those identifying as cultural Muslims valued that identity for helping them to respond to fellow Muslims, especially family. These respondents experienced Islam as a set of cultural celebrations and shared traditions, especially during holidays or when traveling overseas to visit family members. In this case, "elements of religiosity—the restrictions around pork and alcohol—are divorced from religious meanings and passed on as ethnic particularity," according to the researchers. While they found, to their surprise, that these secular and cultural Muslims wanted to reproduce a Muslim identity in their children, their reluctance to pass on certain elements of Islam and their wariness about immersing themselves in Muslim communities may mean that these identity tethers are not enough to pass down the tradition.

Catholic and African American churches marked by caution and division on Israel, Palestine

Although mainline and evangelical churches and denominations have taken clear sides in the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, Catholics and the black church have either straddled the fence or experienced internal divisions about this contentious issue. In *Commonweal* magazine (July–August), Julie Schumacher Cohen writes that there has been a Catholic hesitancy in applying the



church's social teaching to Israel-Palestine. Aside from Vice President J.D. Vance weighing in on the war in Gaza, there have been few American Catholic public figures speaking on the issue. Cohen writes that those holding to and working on Catholic social teachings have avoided applying them to Israel-Palestine because of guilt over "historic Christian anti-Semitism and a fear of being associated with contemporary expressions of contempt for Jews." Recent anti-Semitic violence, such as the murder of two employees of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, has further kept Catholics from criticizing Israel, according to Cohen. While Catholic leaders, including Pope Leo, have issued statements calling for peace in the conflict, Cohen sees Catholics as still refraining from "joining the struggle for Palestinian freedom."

Meanwhile, black churches are experiencing competing claims over Israel and Palestine that mirror longstanding divisions among African American Christians, writes Roger Baumann in the *Christian Century* (June). Baumann, the author of the recent book *Black Visions of the Holy Land*, writes that evangelical Christian Zionism has found a growing following among black pastors, such as Mitchell Stevens of the Church of God in Christ. The appeal of Christian Zionism draws on evangelical teachings about Israel's place in biblical prophecy, as well as linkages between black churches and Jews during the civil rights movement. The African American-Jewish relationship has been expressed through popular tours of black clergy to Israel,

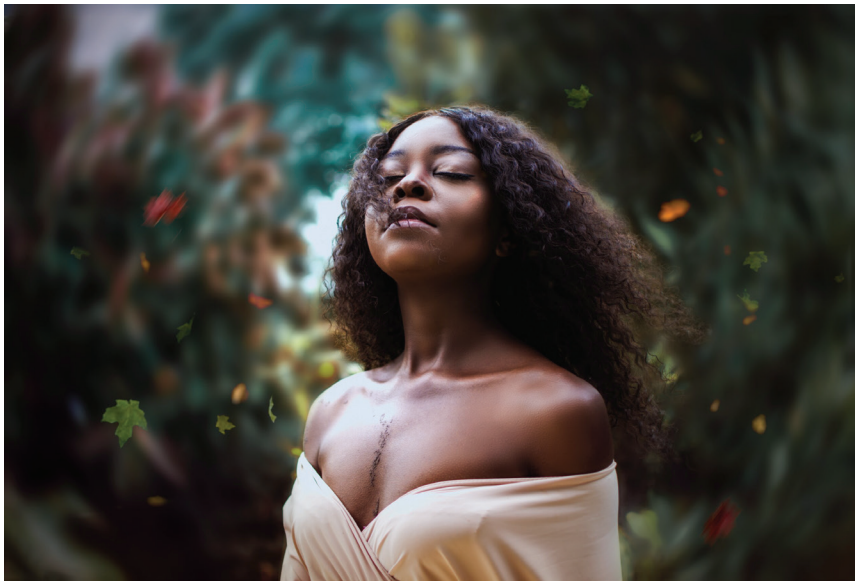
working on interfaith collaboration on charitable and philanthropic work, as well as more political efforts to lobby Congress and advance pro-Israel U.S. foreign policy.

At the same time, African American churches are being pulled in the direction of activism and the "prophetic tradition" of the black church and liberation theology that finds common cause with the Palestinian struggle, Baumann writes. This movement of black Christians finds its voice in such organizations as the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, which organizes events on Palestinian issues and training programs, and publishes related curricula for congregations. The emphasis of this camp is on seeing Jesus as a Palestinian Jew and on reading the Bible through the "eyes of the oppressed." More recently, a third, more moderate approach has emerged. Based around the evangelical Perfecting Church in New Jersey and its pastors Kevin and Angela Brown, this camp issued its statement shortly after the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel, calling for a ceasefire and a "just peace." The emphasis among these black Christians is more on reconciliation and peace-building than liberation and struggle.

(*Commonweal*, https://www.commonwealmagazine.org; *Christian Century*, https://www.christiancentury.org/)

Seeking divine feminine and traditional gender roles on TikTok

"Divine femininity" has become a popular phenomenon on social media, particularly TikTok, for its teaching that women need to harness a particular feminine energy to improve sex relations and everyday life, reports the magazine Teen Vogue (August 13). Sithara Ranasinghe writes that divine femininity is based on the idea that everyone holds two core energies which need to be balanced: feminine and masculine. Feminine energy is about "feeling," "receiving," and "flow," while masculine energy is "stable, productive, getting things done, chasing, going after your goals." On TikTok, "#divinefeminine" has amassed more than one million posts, many of which are tutorials on how women can use femininity to heal their inner child or attract a partner. Online, divine femininity borrows heavily from ancient spiritual traditions. One leading divine feminine influencer, Liz, offered advice on romance using these principles, but attracted controversy when she later split up with her boyfriend.

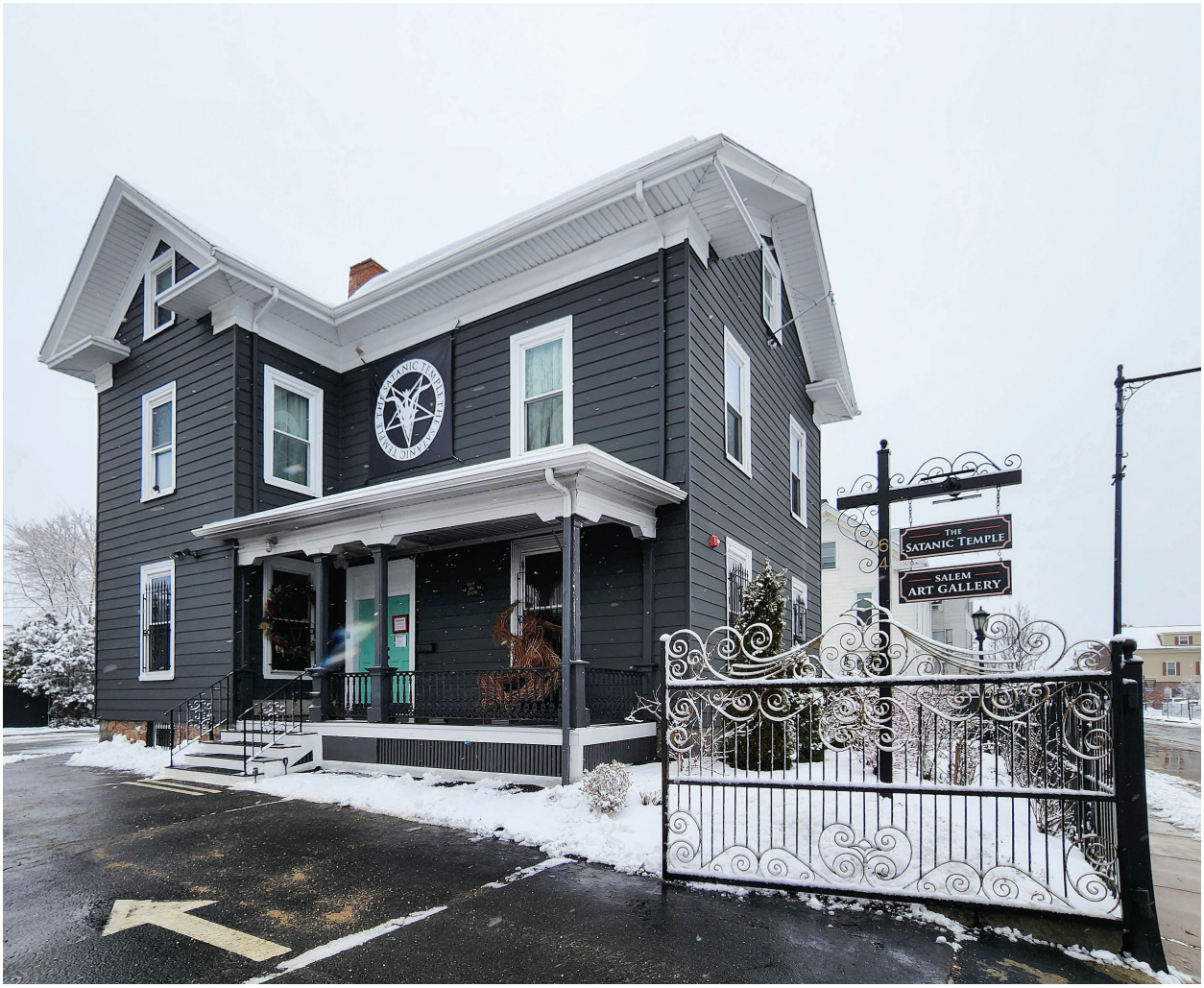


Neha Chandrachud, who writes on spirituality and religion, argues that "divine femininity" misrepresents

Eastern spiritual and philosophical principles about embodying the masculine and the feminine within, by removing these ideas from their original spiritual context and commodifying them for Westerners. Meanwhile, progressive critics charge that many of the posts are repackaging rigid gender roles as spiritual self-help, creating a slippery slope toward the alt-right and authoritarian ideologies like fascism and Christian nationalism. According to one observer, the movement "tells people you are either a man or a woman, and your role is fixed." Ranasinghe sees the trend as showing how young people are "losing interest in the life path set out by previous generations, feeling burnt out by the rise of hustle culture and disillusioned with the promises it makes."

Satanic Temple seeing major wave of defectors

The Satanic Temple (TST), a quasi-religious and activist group seeking to spread secularism and strict church-state separation, is experiencing a "mass exit," according to Diego Córdova and Ryan Cragun of the University of Tampa. In a paper presented at the August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Chicago, attended by RW, the researcher noted that the defrocking of a Temple of Satan minister in Canada in 2024 by the group's founder, Lucien



Greaves, set off a backlash from members, protesting that the action struck against TST's free-thought principles. There has also been rising concern that the leadership is overstepping its boundaries and taking an authoritarian approach. The group's "SatanCon" gathering was canceled in 2024 when the executive ministry leadership charged that the members were turning against them during the 2023 convention. The ex-members wanted the TST to focus more on social issues rather than legal ones. This major schism in the group has resulted in state chapters, such as ones in Colorado, Minnesota, and Florida, breaking away from the executive ministry.

Gülen movement shifts from charisma to bureaucratization

While Fethullah Gülen (1941–2024) was the undisputed leader of the Hizmet ("service") movement for over 50 years, his authority gradually became routinized into a bureaucratic structure of hierarchies, procedures, and offices, writes Ida Hartmann (University of Copenhagen) in an article in *Contemporary Islam* (online August 25) focusing on the aftermath of the dramatic 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. Hartmann challenges the portrayal of Hizmet as a purely charismatic religious movement centered around Gülen's personal authority. Over decades, the community developed complex bureaucratic structures that distributed authority beyond Gülen himself. This bureaucratization was shaped by the political contexts where Hizmet operated. Hizmet began in 1960s Turkey as a close-knit religious brotherhood organized around Gülen's charismatic teachings. The community expanded into a vast network of schools, media organizations, and businesses extending globally.

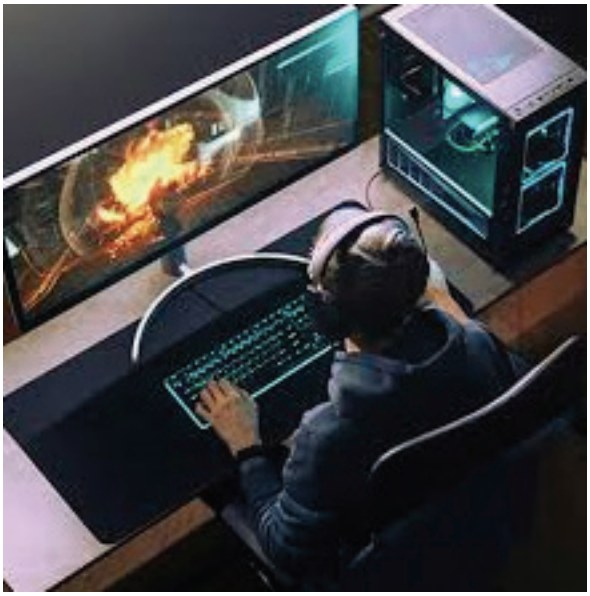
Fethullah Gülen, founder of Hizmet movement.

This growth required developing hierarchical organizational structures. Authority evolved from pure charisma to a "pyramidal structure." At the top were "senior brothers" (Gülen's disciples) based at his Pennsylvania retreat. Below, authority cascaded through international, national, regional, and local levels, with leaders selected for loyalty and proficiency. Those were "hidden hierarchies" with no explicit diagrams, decision procedures, or selection criteria. This opacity stemmed from Turkey's secularist state, which banned Sufi orders in 1925 and suppressed Islamic groups. It enabled "adaptational dexterity," shielding Hizmet from crackdowns while allowing it to infiltrate state institutions like the judiciary and police. Abroad, branches became more formalized, aligning with local transparency norms. For instance, in Western contexts, Hizmet adopted explicit governance in schools and NGOs.

After the failed coup and subsequent repression (involving mass arrests, asset seizures, and Hizmet's near-eradication in Turkey), many Hizmet members fled to Europe and North America, where they encountered demands for transparency and democratic governance that conflicted with the community's opaque Turkish-style organization. Diaspora followers, especially younger, Western-educated ones, pushed for transparency and accountability, leading to conflict between "old guard" senior brothers, tied to Gülen's charismatic authority and Turkish opacity, and reformers. The article examines key voices of reform, advocating various approaches. After Gülen died in 2024, the senior leadership announced that a committee would lead according to istişare (consultation) principles, with decisions subject to secretariat evaluation. This case study shows how religious movements navigate between maintaining traditional authority and adapting to modern institutional environments, with authority emerging from collective interpretive practices rather than individual charisma alone.

(*Contemporary Islam*, https://link.springer.com/journal/11562)

CURRENT RESEARCH



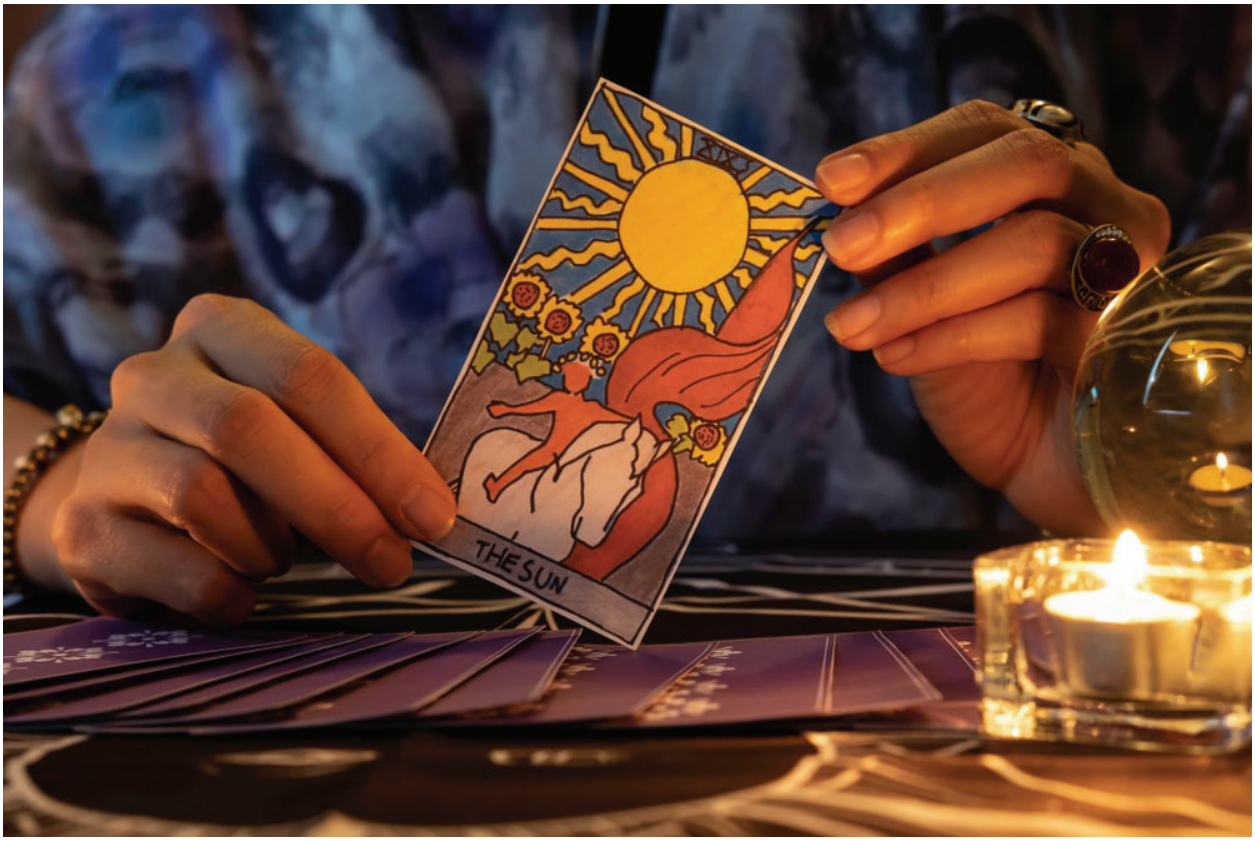
• **A new study finds a correlation between online gaming and atheist or agnostic beliefs, but also an association between social media engagement and religious practices like scripture reading and congregational attendance.** While there has been a growing body of research on the secularizing effect of the Internet, Baylor University sociologists Jennifer Laderi and Jeremy Uecker argue that specific kinds of online engagement have different impacts on religiosity. Reporting on their research in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in August), Laderi and Uecker used the 2021 wave of the Baylor Religion

Survey to analyze these different online activities and their affinities with religious and secular orientations. They did find a positive relationship between the time involved in online gaming and the likelihood of being an agnostic or an atheist.

Online gaming also was found to be negatively associated with religious and spiritual salience and with such practices as religious attendance, personal prayer, and reading sacred texts. Online gaming had the strongest effect on religious commitment. Laderi and Uecker speculate that the role-playing and interactive nature of online gaming, often involving different religious traditions and gods, may encourage the questioning of one's own religion, while its social aspect allows secular participants to connect with like-minded people. While video streaming was also linked to a lower rate of religious practice, the researchers found that posting original content on social media was positively associated with such observance. Religious practitioners, they write, "may interpret the digital spaces as extensions of their spiritual lives, using online platforms to access religious content, share faith-related reflections, and stay connected to religious communities. In doing so, they may recreate or adapt elements of offline religious practice for online engagement."

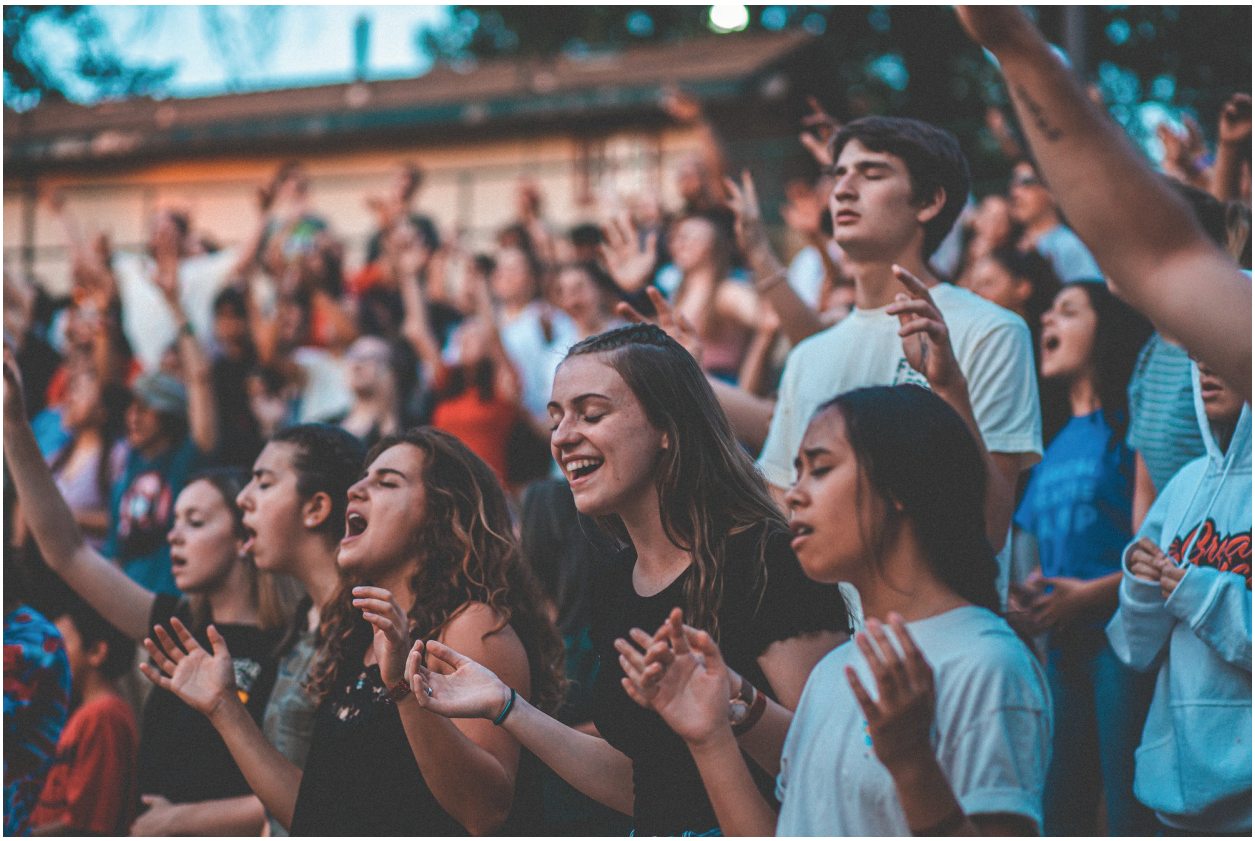
(*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14685906)

• **According to new research, audiences who watch tarot reading videos have been engaging in this occult practice more for spiritual power than because of concerns about relationships and personal growth.** Last spring, the Pew Research Center found that as much



as 30 percent of Americans practice some form of the occult, such as astrology, reading tarot cards, or engaging in other occult practices, although many view such practices as a form of amusement and entertainment more than spirituality. Evan Stewart and Cam Marsinelli of the University of Massachusetts Boston, who presented a paper on their research at the August meeting of the American Sociological Association in Chicago, which **RW** attended, studied popularity trends in a sample of YouTube videos of tarot readings. The sample consisted of 500 videos randomly selected from a total of 467,078 shown on 142 channels of YouTube between 2015 and 2025. While the most frequent topics of tarot readings were relationships, transformation, emotional concerns, abundance, spiritual power, and wellness, over time the audience favored the tarot readings on spiritual power and wellness over the other topics. Stewart and Marsinelli conclude that their results suggest "a spiritual turn in how the audiences awarded videos that stress immanence and mind-body spiritual thinking."

• **A recent international survey of young adults in eight countries finds that their interest in religion and Catholicism is increasing across cultures.** The survey, led by the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (Rome) and conducted by the Spanish polling company GAD3, found an increase of interest in spirituality among young people in all but one of the surveyed countries, with a net increase of 35 percent overall. Italy was the exception, while this growth of interest was observed in Spain, the UK, Argentina, Mexico, the Philippines, Brazil, and Kenya. As reported by the Catholic news service *The Pillar* (July 28), the growth was most evident in Brazil, Kenya, and the Philippines. The survey, which is part of a multi-year research study,

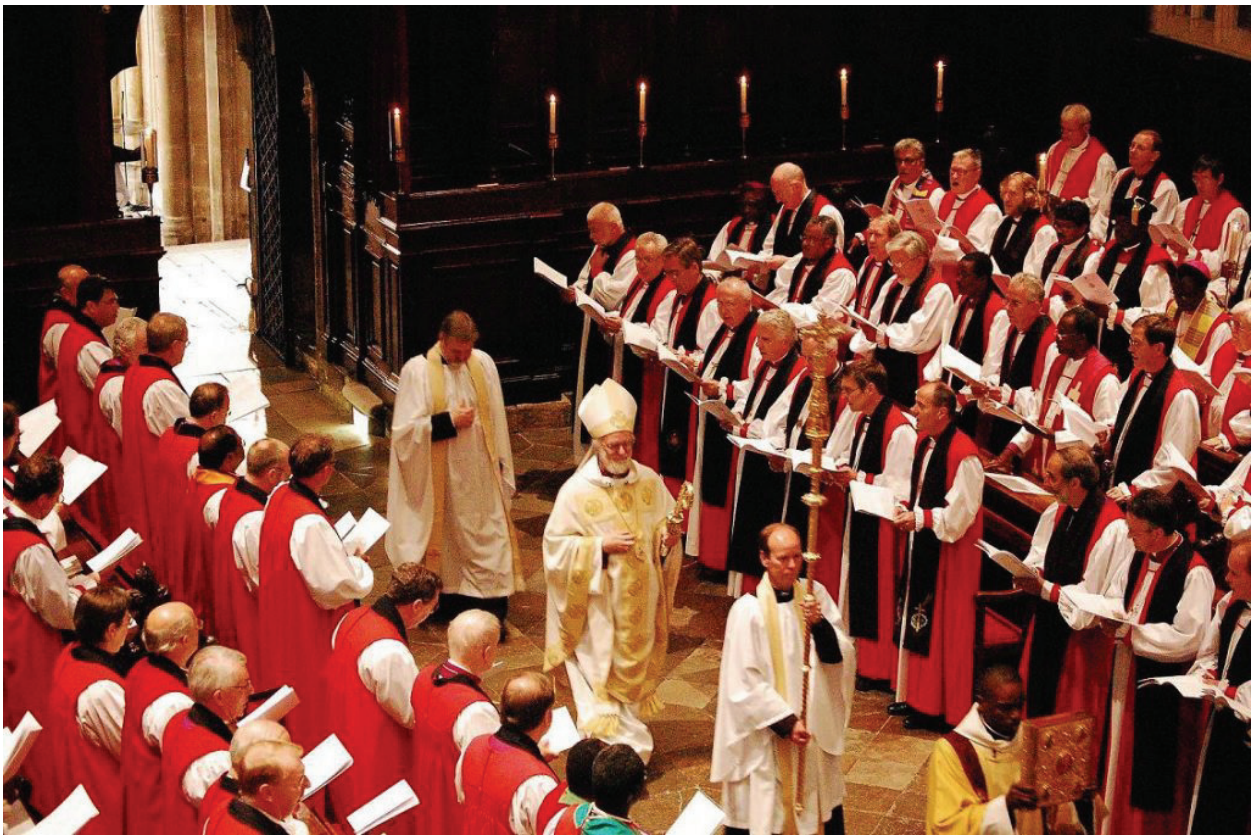


expanded its categories of nonbelievers, who represented 34 percent of the respondents, to include seekers (nonbelievers seeking to believe in God), those who have left religion and belief, and the indifferent. Within the nonbeliever camp, 15 percent identified as atheists and 27 percent as agnostics, while the rest identified with the survey's more nuanced categories: 16 percent identified as indifferent, 14.1 percent as "leavers," and 28 percent as seekers.

The survey found that 48 percent of the nonbelieving respondents prayed, at least occasionally, while 42 percent said they believed in an afterlife. Catholics showed a fairly high rate of dissent from church positions, although there was a high correlation between the degree of their religious practice and their agreement with the church's doctrinal and moral teachings. Nevertheless, among many of the respondents there was often some contradiction between the general positions they espoused and their attitudes towards their practical implications. For instance, while 73 percent of the Catholic respondents agreed that "there is no right or wrong way to experience sexuality," 73.5 percent also said that using pornography could be harmful, while 45 percent said this about contraception.

Public trust, church identity in crisis mode in Anglicanism in the UK?

Anglicanism in the UK is facing a "severe crisis," demonstrated by the unprecedented resignations, or calls for the resignations, of all four church leaders in England, Scotland, and Wales, writes Martyn Percy in the *Journal of Anglican Studies* (online in August). The cases of



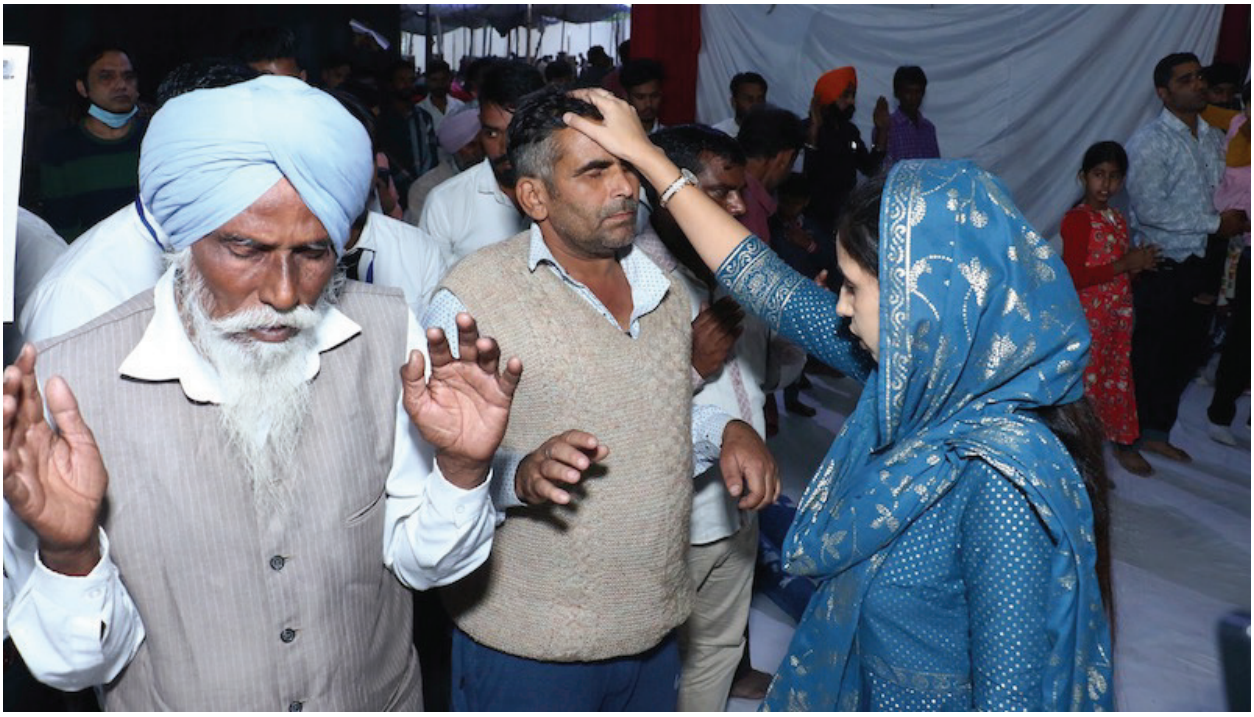
Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of Wales, Andy John, and Primus of Scotland, Mark Strange (and the Primate of the Church of Ireland has also recently faced calls for his resignation), all involve serious breaches of trust, often related to their handling of abuse cases and financial misdeeds, creating the appearance of hypocrisy, cover-ups, and the failure to protect church members. But there are other developments threatening the unity and future of these churches aside from the conduct of church leaders and the positions they take on controversial issues like those related to gender and sexuality. For starters, there are the declining rates of churchgoing, aging congregations, and soaring costs of church upkeep, with little hope of relief on the horizon. Instances of stability and even growth are more common among Pentecostal and Catholic churches. It is estimated that 16,000 Anglican churches have closed in the last decade alone, with rural parishes feeling the brunt of this decline.

Percy adds that the UK's Anglican polity has deteriorated in the 21st century in ways similar to the breakdown of the country's political party system. Just as the once-broad coalitions under the Labor and Conservative parties are now seeing fragmentation, the older movements of evangelicals, Anglo-Catholics, and members of the broad (liberal) church in Anglicanism are "divided on gender, sexuality, spirituality and the merits (or otherwise) of separatism." Likewise, the voting system, whether ecclesiastical or secular, is experiencing polarization and populist discontent. Percy writes that elections to Synod and the selection of bishops are determined by "minority party interests in a system that would be more suited to proportional representation…" The Church of England, at least, also increasingly "resorted to using the UK's muddled laws on free speech to try and silence malcontents." Percy charges that "the ambiguity of UK laws on free speech is being exploited by the hierarchy of the Church of England, who are seeking to use the police to coerce victims of abuse and injustice into silence, in order to prevent dissent, debate and complaint about their manifestly inadequate safeguarding processes." All of these issues are adding up to a profound identity crisis in Anglicanism, as reflected in how the churches of Wales, England, and Scotland no longer enjoy liturgical coherence or theological unity. Percy concludes that reforming the Anglican polity will require finding some means of securing processes of binding arbitration that would commit the parties to conflict resolution.

(*Journal of Anglican Studies*, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-anglican-studies)

Charismatic Christianity making inroads in Sikh Punjab

Charismatic Christianity is having a little-known but significant growth in the Punjab region of India, the cradle and stronghold of Sikhism, according to Miroslav Atanasov of the University of Colorado. Although hard numbers are difficult to come by, the recent growth is significant enough to have concerned Sikh leaders about its effect on the stability of Sikhism. In a paper presented at the mid-August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Chicago, which **RW** attended, Atanasov said that from 2011 to 2025 there has been an estimated

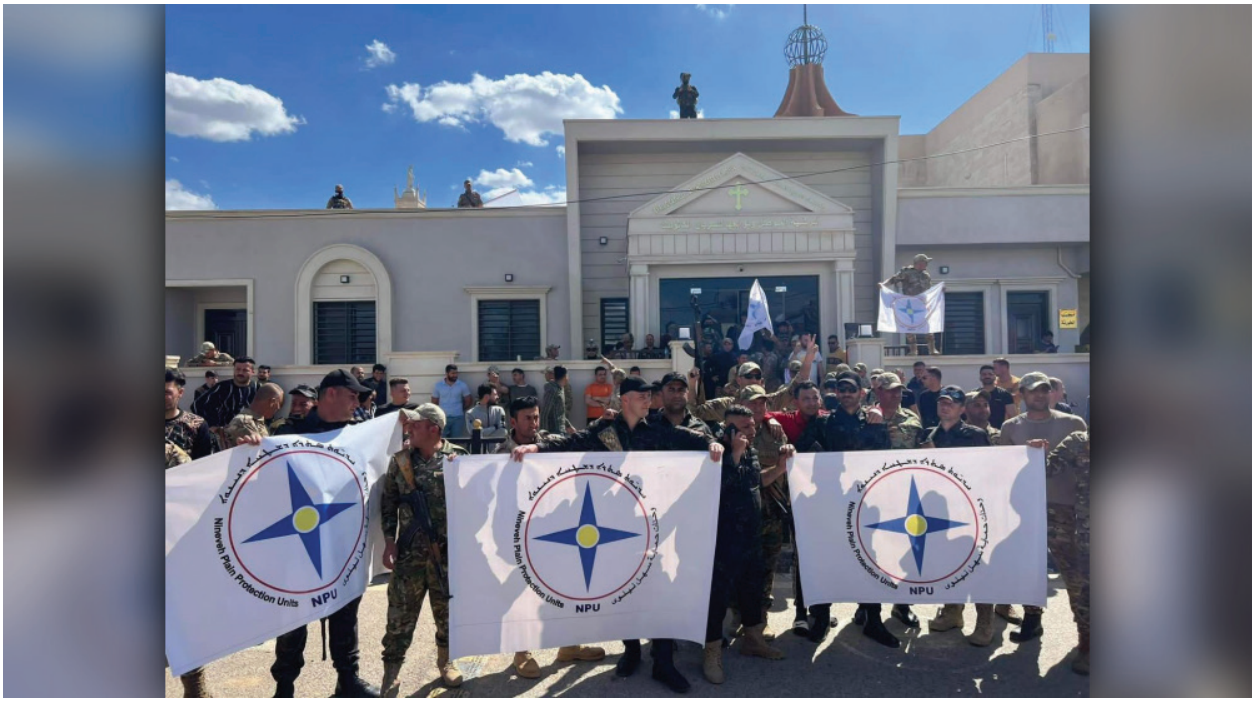


13 percent growth in Christianity in the Punjab region. Conversion to Christianity has become more widespread with the growth of inequality in the caste system, disappointment among Dalits, the agrarian crisis, and drug addiction in the north Punjab region. But Atanasov adds that even opponents of the Christian presence acknowledge the rapid growth of Christianity in the region. Much of the impetus for the Christian growth came from a Tamil evangelist visiting the region, as well as the influence of televangelists, such as Benny Hinn, and claims of miracles and healings.

Atanasov notes that this evangelical revival has worked within a Sikh context, with converts keeping their Sikh names and paraphernalia, such as the turban and the dagger. Often the church assemblies resemble gurdwaras, which are Sikh temples or congregations. The Christians have a significant presence on social media, especially YouTube, where they stream services, often from megachurches. From these online sources, Atanasov has counted some 65,000 pastors and missionaries, who are all converts. The most prominent church drawing such converts is the Church of Signs and Wonders in Jalandhar, which is said to be the largest church in Asia, under pastor Ankur Narula. Atanasov adds that even Hindus have joined the revival. Meanwhile, Punjabi political radicals welcome the Christian upsurge since they see it as challenging Hindu nationalism in India and the ruling BJP.

Iran's infiltration of Iraq's politics threatening its Christian minority

With the Trump administration's June 2025 strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities considerably weakening the regime, it is now increasingly focused on Iraq as one of its last footholds in the region, posing an existential threat to the survival of the country's Christians and other religious



Babylon Brigade.

minorities, reports *Providence* newsletter (August 18). After decades of war, unrest, and widespread persecution, Iraqi Christian communities now comprise only 1 percent of Iraq's total population. Hannah Kearns writes that since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, "Tehran has pursued a deliberate, multifaceted campaign to infiltrate Iraq's political landscape, often at the expense of Iraq's religious minorities." She cites the Babylon Brigades, established in Iraq in 2014 and backed by Tehran under the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), as well as its political offshoot, the Babylon Movement, to illustrate Iran's exploitation of Iraq's religious minorities to advance its agenda. Founded by U.S.-sanctioned human rights violator Rayan al-Kildani, these groups are nominally Christian and depend on the support of Iraqi Shi'a. They are widely viewed by Christians as not representing their interests. Strategically based in the Nineveh Plains, Iraq's only Christian-majority region, al-Kildani is reported to have incorporated the explicitly Christian Nineveh Plain Protection Unit (NPU) into his militia.

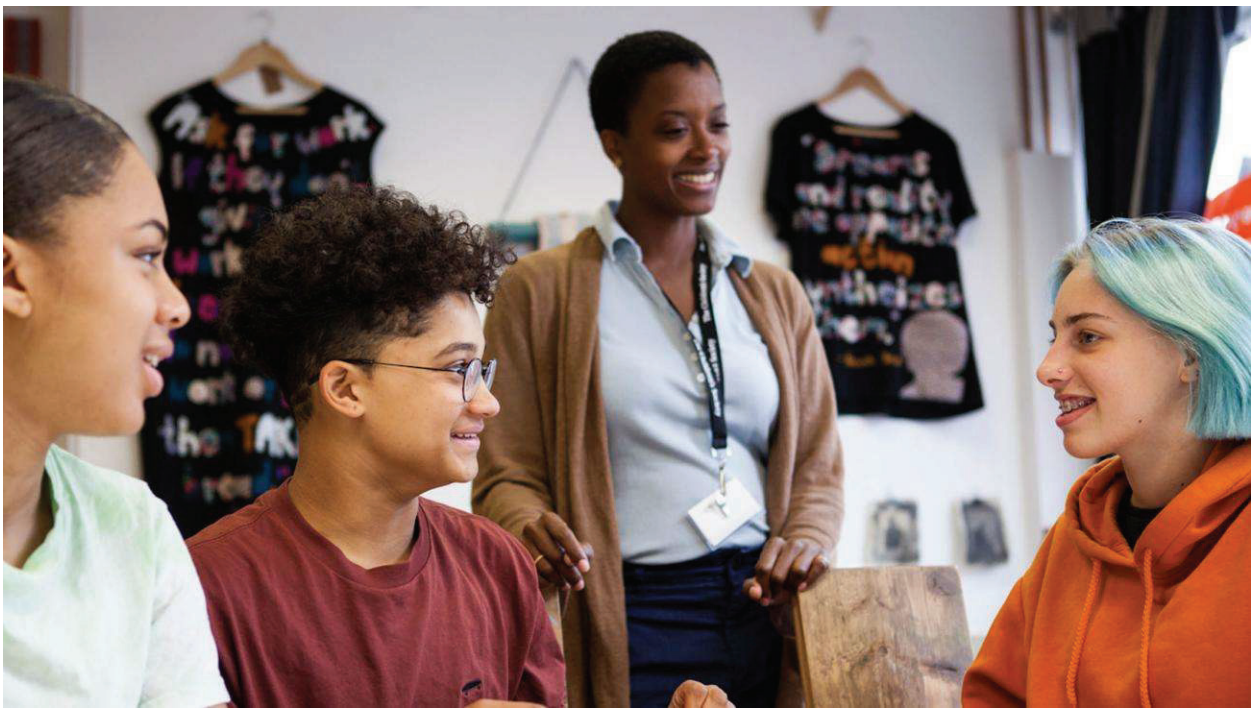
Kearns charges that al-Kildani has further consolidated his authority by silencing the political voices of Iraqi Christians. Iraq's constitution allocates a certain number of seats to religious minorities in the Council of Representatives (COR), with five currently reserved for Christian candidates. Through the loophole of an Iraqi election law that permits anyone, regardless of religious affiliation, to vote for these seats, al-Kildani and his Babylon Movement have "effectively hijacked nearly all Christian-designated seats at varying levels of government in federal Iraq." Kearns adds that Iranian-backed infiltration has extended beyond political exploitation to include, allegedly on al-Kildani's advice, revoking recognition of Cardinal Sako as patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church— Iraq's largest Christian denomination. A bill pending in the COR aims to institutionalize the PMF by establishing a more clearly defined

structure for the organization, which critics, including U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, argue would only further integrate the PMF into Iraq's security apparatus and deepen Iran's influence, Kearns concludes.

(*Providence*, https://providencemag.com/category/newsletters/)

Migrant youth make hybrid religious journey to UK

Immigrant and second-generation African young people in Britain are engaging in transnational and hybrid religious practices that contrast with adult patterns of religion and migration, according to a study by Dominic Pasura of the University of Glasgow. Pasura, who presented his study at the August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Chicago, attended by **RW**, noted that most research on migration and religion among Africans has centered on adults, rarely looking at youth. The researcher conducted a multi-site study of Nigerian and Zimbabwean youth in London, Birmingham, Lagos, Harare, and Johannesburg, interviewing 160 young African Christians, Muslims, and indigenous religious participants (as well as 39 key informants). Pasura finds that African immigrant youth venture beyond "home-host" binaries as they engage in "selective, fragmented transnationalism, drawing on pan-African networks, digital platforms and multi-faith spaces." These young migrant and second-generation Africans share less stable religious participation based on ethnicity and nationality than their parents as they seek a spiritual home, attending different churches. Pasura finds that the "hybrid spiritualities" of these youth combine gospel rap, African traditional religion, and online networks.

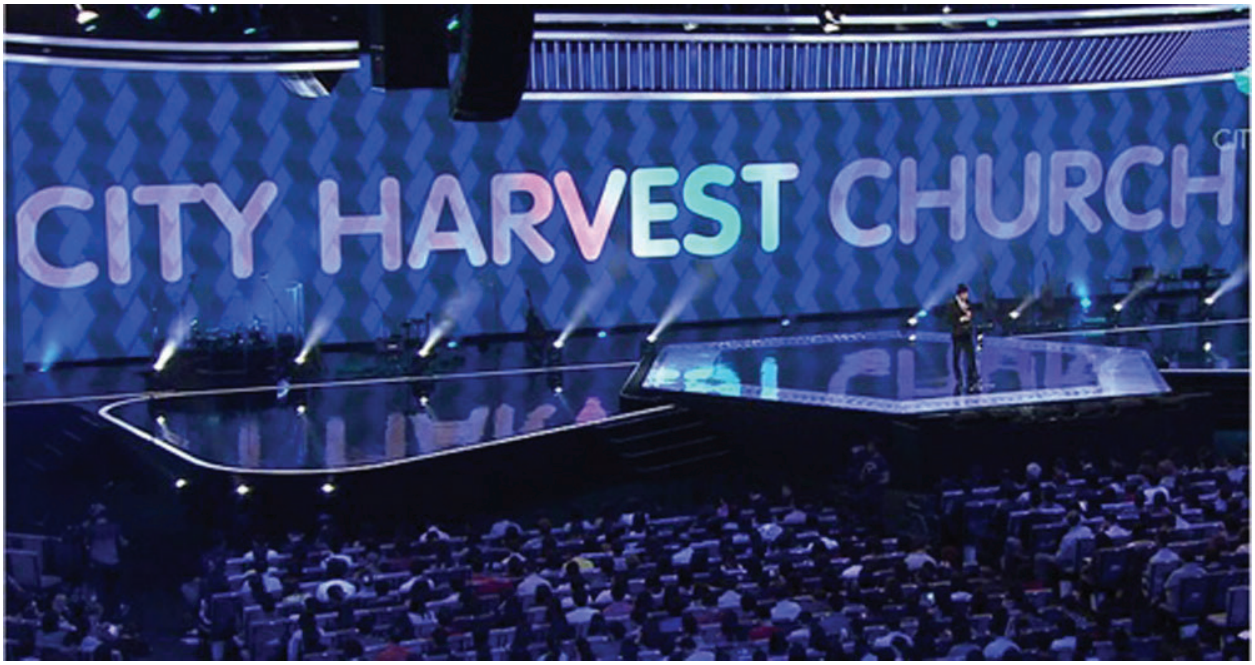


Even before they arrive in the UK, Pasura finds that there are "migration-focused spiritual practices" that are popular in Africa. The "Japa phenomenon" in Nigeria, where young professionals seek to emigrate for financial and social reasons, is seen in clergy encouraging some young members to go abroad. Before traveling abroad, young people may consult ancestors and prophets, who may anoint passports and offer prayers. Migration is seen as a spiritual journey in these cases, Pasura says. The idea of "home" is a shifting symbol for these young immigrants. Parents may send their children back to Zimbabwe as a corrective measure when they misbehave. The hybridity can also serve as an anchor for the immigrant. One Muslim leader uses Nigerian Yoruba culture, "so the kids born here don't feel much like they've left home. They can have teachings of the culture along with Islamic knowledge." But the hybrid practices may also reflect a shift from parental authority to peer and online sources, as when a Muslim young person said he was "looking into things myself more, trying to understand it myself before even going to other people. So looking through the Quran, asking people online." In the UK, wearing the hijab or public displays of Yoruba spirituality become "acts of identity and assertion" against racism and exclusion, Pasura adds.

Two-way traffic between megachurch and mainline in Singapore

Singapore's megachurches have been known as some of the largest worldwide, but recently there has been some disenchantment about these mammoth congregations and the movement of some ex-members toward mainline churches, writes Robbie B. H. Goh in the current issue of the journal *Studies in World Christianity* (31:2). Singapore and other global South countries (such as the Philippines, South Korea, and Indonesia) have seen the rapid growth of megachurches over the past decades. Such megachurches in Singapore as City Harvest Church, New Creation Church, and Faith Community Baptist Church were known internationally due to their combination of evangelical zeal, prosperity teachings, and seeker- and market-based strategies. Although there have not been surveys of megachurch membership in Singapore, Goh writes that the prominent flow of Christians from mainline churches to megachurches has slowed in recent years. He cites a study of 144 churches in Singapore in 2022 that found a movement of worshippers changing churches during the Covid pandemic, with "very large churches" experiencing an average outflow of 17 percent, compared to an average outflow for all other churches of just 7 percent. A small minority of churches (just 14) reported an increase of attendees compared to pre-Covid years, and these tended to be smaller churches with less than 250 pre-Covid worshippers.

Goh adds that the flow from large to smaller churches documented in this study does jibe with anecdotal reports from mainline pastors about ex-worshippers' concerns and disenchantment with big-church models. While these pastors point to megachurch scandals and controversies that have led to this exodus, such as City Harvest's alleged misappropriation of funds, they also cite a more general dissatisfaction with the lack of intimacy in large church settings and the dominance of the lead pastor. An earlier qualitative study by Goh (in 2018) showed similar attitudes accounting for why megachurch worshippers were making the transition to mainline churches.



Additional reasons voiced by them were the celebrity status of pastors and the alleged controlling and abusive nature of cell groups, and even shallow and selective treatment of the Bible in preaching and teaching. But Goh acknowledges that the losses in Singapore's megachurches are not necessarily seen in other countries, particularly in their American birthplace. He argues that there is a distinctive church market in Singapore that has facilitated this shift. Mainline churches, largely Anglican and Methodist, are similar to megachurches in their use of contemporary worship and even their adoption of a cell church format—and are not in a state of decline as in the U.S. Indeed, overall church membership is stable and even growing in Singapore. Goh also adds that there is a greater liberalization and more social outreach in American megachurches, preventing a significant flow of members to mainline churches.

(*Studies in World Christianity*, https://www.euppublishing.com/journal/swc)

Salafi Muslims step up for fitness training

Organized fitness training is being adapted by young Salafi Muslim men as they create communities and transnational networks that foster spiritual and physical strength and well-being, writes Sergio Altuna Galán in the journal *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* (August). As the practice and communication of Islam shifts away from institutionalized settings toward more "personalized, visually driven forms of interaction," adherents of the strict Salafi form of Islam have taken to social media to "showcase muscular bodies, workout routines, and halal dietary recommendations alongside collective prayers, fasting tips, and advice on integrating fitness with religious observance." What Altuna dubs "Salafitness" might start online but then move to meetups, clubs, training camps, and workshops that often serve as exclusive spaces, limiting membership to devout followers. For instance, "Full Force" in the Netherlands and the

"Basin Movement" in the UK "began as an Instagram-based fitness-calisthenics project [and] evolved into a self-described 'army of brothers' with a highly developed system of frequent in-person events," he notes.

This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the Caucasus region, which has a strong tradition of wrestling and combat sports, but "Salafitness" is popular among young Muslims around the globe. A key pillar of the movement is the concept of jamāʿa, which means order standing in opposition to chaos and division, and which serves as a "recruitment tool…to attract new members to the community." Altuna writes that it also "functions as a mechanism of internal cohesion, acting as a safeguard against both internal schisms and external influences." He makes the more controversial argument that the Salafi fitness programs and communities and the way they have become increasingly self-contained may be paving the way for a new wave of Islamic extremism, since other extremist groups—from white supremacist to Pagan groups—have also become involved in starting martial arts and fight clubs. "The rhetoric of 'defending the ummah' and 'being part of an army' used by some of these communities, coupled with the glorification of physical endurance, can potentially blur the lines between spiritual resilience and ideological militarization." Galan points to the recent arrest of "Salafitnesss" influencers in Spain accused of embedding jihadist propaganda into their content.

(*Currents in Islamist Ideology*, https://www.hudson.org/policycenters/current-trends-islamist-ideology)

Findings & Footnotes

■ *Global Lutheranism in the Contemporary World*, edited by **RW**'s editor, Richard Cimino, provides accounts and analyses of the Lutheran situation in a wide range of countries and societies. The new book from Routledge brings together 21 contributors to examine trends in Lutheranism in the U.S., Canada, Spanish-speaking South America, Brazil, Australia, Indonesia, Chinese societies in Asia, Japan, India, Tanzania, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Russia, Slovakia, Germany, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. Even as we can speak about globalization making for interdependence and commonalities in various countries, as well as the wider forces of secularization, the book shows, perhaps fittingly in a world marked as much by nationalism and populism, that the Lutheran situation is mediated by particular cultures, governmental structures, and faith traditions and histories. Readers interested in a hardcover copy of the book for a discounted cost of $48 (including shipment) can email the editor for more information at: relwatch1@msn.com.