

## The “Charlie effect” and the desecularization of the right

While it is too early to say if the ferment and fervor unleashed by the assassination of conservative Christian and political activist Charlie Kirk will have long-lasting religious effects, the events surrounding the tragedy do suggest a revival of the religious right, even if in new forms, according to several reports. In the *Free Press* (September 21), Maya Sulkin reports that in the wake of Kirk’s death, “universities reported increases of 15 percent in student attendance at on-campus religious events...People are using the term ‘the Charlie effect’ online to chronicle their return to church—or their first footsteps into one. Jesus trended as a Google search the weekend following Kirk’s assassination. Some TikTok users are encouraging one another to believe in God and posting videos about how their lives have just been changed. Others are looking for a new church after a decade of atheism. All of this seems to be accelerating a religious reawakening that was already underway in America.”

Conservative thinker Scott Greer writes in his Substack newsletter *Highly Respected* (September 25) that “Most of the evidence for such a revival is found on the Right rather than with the general public. The increasingly overt religiosity of MAGA, as exemplified at the Kirk memorial, encapsulates this. It’s different from what MAGA was like in the first term. More young right-wingers are embracing conservative forms of Christianity.” He adds that the Trump base has become more religious. “This is evident from Fox News—which broadcast far more Christian content than it did in the past—to the Online Right. The Alt Right was very secular, and some of its leaders were openly anti-Christian. The ‘New Right,’ which adopted much of its rhetoric, is, by contrast, overtly Christian. While there’s not an agreed-upon denomination for the New Right, nearly everyone in this sphere thinks Christianity needs to be more involved in the public sphere. More traditional forms of Christianity prevail within the Online Right, complete with their dictates and demands. The apparent consensus is a desire for some form of Christian Nationalism that merges identitarianism with social conservatism. But the MAGA base isn’t quite on the same page. The megachurch spectacle—complete with pyrotechnics, rock music, and over-the-top speeches—is more their speed. They like their worship to be big and theatrical, not somber and contemplative.”

In his columns for the *New York Times*, Ross Douthat has often predicted the emergence of a “post-Christian right,” as the older concerns about abortion and gay rights have been marginalized by the Republican Party. But particularly after the huge Charlie Kirk memorial, attended by close to 200,000 followers, Douthat writes in his column (September 22)



that the Trump turn in Republican politics may not be the “harbinger of a paganized American future” that he once thought, with the president himself serving as a “transitional figure, an agent of destabilization who delivered the coup de grace to the nostalgia-driven moralism of religious conservatism 1.0 while clearing the ground for religious conservatism 2.0, a more intentional and mission-driven and post-secular formation.” Douthat contrasts the “cheerful heathenism” of Trump, expressed in his message of hate for his opponents at the Kirk memorial, with the call for forgiveness issued by Kirk’s widow Erika, saying that such a distance may allow believers to distinguish their faith from the controversial president and partisan conservative politics. The way that conservative politics and conservative Christianity have been closely aligned has been seen as too partisan and has been a problem for evangelicals even before Trump. Douthat concludes that “if the post-Trump Republican Party is immediately identified with Christian revivalism and vice versa, then the pre-Trump dynamic could easily reassert itself, and any Christian renewal can hit a ceiling outside the distinctive culture of the G.O.P.”

Writing in the Christian political newsletter *Providence* (September 25), Miles Smith sees the Kirk memorial and funeral as further “evidence of a transfer of American religious syncretism from classically liberal mainliners to populist conservative evangelicals.” But he fears evangelicals can “lose their theological saltiness to a desire for political power in just the same way their mainline cousins did. Even now, evangelicals are renegotiating long-standing beliefs in order to maintain their place at the Trump table.”

## **Gen Z ministry finding new opportunities as baby-boomer influence fade**

Being the “first generation fully free from the Boomer cultural grip,” Generation Z evangelicals are fashioning a distinct approach to ministry and church leadership based on wider opportunities, writes Aaron Renn in his Substack newsletter (September 23). Gen Z evangelicals

are far enough removed from their older boomer counterparts that they may not even know of prominent and recently deceased evangelicals, such as James Dobson and John MacArthur. Renn cites the podcaster and influencer known as Redeemed Zoomer (RZ), who runs Operation Reconquista, as an “example of how many



Gen Z people see the landscape of America very differently than previous generations.” Rather than calling for people to leave the mainline churches for more conservative evangelical denominations or congregations, RZ advocates joining a mainline church and working for renewal within. He thinks that if enough people do this, the faithful will inherit these denominations. Renn adds that while the loss of evangelical influence over mainline institutions had shaped the boomer approach, “Gen Z is arriving on the scene after mainline decline has reached a much more advanced point, and [at a time when] some of the older veterans of previous denominational wars are no longer around. They view these denominations as an opportunity zone.”

Renn cites the example of a pastor who is following RZ’s advice and pursuing a ministry in the mainline Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) rather than the evangelical Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). In order to avoid seminary student debt and long waits to open pulpits in the PCA, he took the mainline option because the PCUSA pays for his education and provides greater ministry opportunities in a denomination where there is a pastor shortage. Renn writes that in a similar way, Gen Z does not aspire to plant new churches like their older Millennial counterparts, mainly due to the “greater opportunity landscape.” A big factor in church planting among Millennials was their feeling squeezed out of existing congregational opportunities by baby boomers who were holding onto the reins of many institutions. Now boomers are finally departing the scene, some via retirement, some through death, and the younger generations are smaller, with the number of people getting ministry-track degrees in seminaries also declining. “This means Gen Z has the realistic chance to go straight into a pastor position, at least in a smaller church,” Renn adds. He sees RZ as representing a new kind of cultural and institutional strategist, much as Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church was for the boomers. “As Keller talked about the strategic nature of global cities, RZ talks about the strategic value of mainline institutions. His YouTube channel has over 600,000 subscribers. His Operation Reconquista Discord has lots of people in it. Movements and institutions like Presbyterians for the Kingdom are spinning out of it.”

## Silent retreats speaking to new generations of seekers

Silent retreats, where participants follow monastic practices based on “quiet and listening,” are finding a new popularity among Buddhists, Christians, Jains, and Jews, reports the Washington Post (September 20). Ben Brasch writes that leaders from various traditions are reporting a growth in demand for their silent retreats, often from non-affiliated people. The uptick in interest is attributed to the upheaval caused by Covid, as well as a weariness caused by technology and grief in general. Participants cite the absence of Internet and television in these retreats, which can vary in length and style. The Drala Mountain Center, a Tibetan Buddhist retreat center in Colorado, ran a survey of its members this summer and found that 46 percent (108 people) wanted silent retreats, second in popularity only to classes on Buddhist principles.

A nun with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie in Pennsylvania says, “I hear a hunger for silence, a hunger for reflection.” The Erie sisters have been running “Stillpoint” retreats since the 1980s, but attendance has risen in recent years, increasing from about 15 to 29 in August, with more young people involved. The retreats may involve different periods of walking, standing, and sitting, with minimal interaction with other participants. Brasch notes that the silent retreat phenomenon has also spread to religions without a monastic tradition, as seen in Jewish interest in mindfulness and meditation.



## CURRENT RESEARCH

• The gap between evangelical and Catholic women supporting the Trump presidency is narrowing, writes Heidi Schlumpf in *Commonweal* magazine (August 29). The much-touted gender gap in support for Trump has actually narrowed, especially among two religious demographic groups: evangelicals and Catholics. While it's true that "Trump made gains among men of all ages, races, and most religious persuasions...He also made significant inroads among some women, especially in the 2024 election. The shrinking gender gap indicates that women, especially conservative Christian women, have warmed to Trump," Schlumpf writes. She cites political scientist Ryan Burge's finding that the female Catholic vote became noticeably more Republican in 2024, increasing 7 percentage points since 2020 and 10 points since 2016. Support for Trump grew more among Catholic women than among Catholic men, although more men than women still voted Republican. Burge found almost no gender gap among white Catholics, although for minority Catholics, the gender gap was 15 percent. Although conservative women may cite their faith to support their voting choices, "many analysts think the move toward MAGA among Christian women has little to do with religion," Schlumpf writes. Historian Michelle Nickerson says that "a lot of what you're seeing among Catholic women is an amplification of overall voting trends among white women."



But Schlumpf adds that the increasing percentage of Catholic women opting for Trump between 2016 and 2024 may indicate that some women were slower to accept or ignore Trump's negatives. Mary FioRito of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, DC, says that working-class white Catholic men were quicker to respond to Trump because he tapped into their feelings of being disrespected by elites. Trump's choice of Catholic convert JD Vance as his running mate and the assassination attempt on him in July 2024 may also have brought around some Catholic women voters, according to FioRito. Abortion is cited as an issue that could have attracted Catholic women to the GOP and to Trump, although the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* gave other issues, such as immigration and the economy, more priority in 2024. The Democratic Party's move to the left on issues like transgender rights could also have turned women toward Trump. And another possible reason for the turn to Trump among Catholic women is that progressive Catholic women may have been leaving the church in reaction to conservative politics. "If progressive Catholic women leave," Schlumpf notes, "the remaining Catholic women are more likely to be conservative—thus the higher percentage of GOP voters."

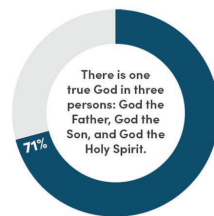
(*Commonweal*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/>)

- **Americans show significant stability in their theological beliefs, according to the latest State of Theology study from Lifeway Research and Ligonier Ministries.** The study found that while societal changes following Covid led to several theological shifts in 2022, these reverted to pre-pandemic norms in 2025. In tracking Americans' beliefs on such matters as God's nature, sin, the Bible and more, the 2025 study found the persistence of fairly traditional beliefs.

### Trinity Troubles

Americans believe God exists in three persons but aren't sure about the particulars.

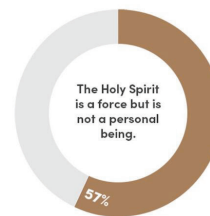
Percentage of U.S. adults who agree



Notes: 55% strongly agree, 16% somewhat agree, 25% somewhat disagree, 15% strongly disagree, and 10% aren't sure.



Notes: 27% strongly agree, 21% somewhat agree, 10% somewhat disagree, 30% strongly disagree, and 11% aren't sure.



Notes: 30% strongly agree, 27% somewhat agree, 8% somewhat disagree, 15% strongly disagree, and 15% aren't sure.

**Lifeway research**  
LifewayResearch.com



More than two in three Americans (68 percent) said that God is unchanging, and seven in ten (71 percent) agreed there is one true God in three Persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. But “many Americans struggle with the logical conclusions of that belief. Most (57 percent) say the Holy Spirit is a force, not a personal being. A quarter (26 percent) disagree. Evangelicals by religious tradition (38 percent) and evangelicals by belief (41 percent) are among those most likely to disagree,” according to the study. The percentage believing Jesus was a great teacher but not God has dropped slightly, from 53 percent in 2022 to 49 percent today, with 40 percent disagreeing.

As for different belief systems, it was found that U.S. adults feel some conflict about the validity of these faiths. About two in three (65 percent) said God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam; 46 percent agreed religious belief is not about objective truth, while a third (32 percent) disagreed. As far as practice, one significant change since the pandemic has been on the validity of worshipping alone or with one’s family. In 2022, following the pandemic, 66 percent of Americans said such private worship is a valid replacement for regularly attending church. The two-thirds who agreed marked a significant increase from 58 percent in 2020. This year, the percentage has dropped but remains above pre-pandemic levels at 63 percent.

*(The complete report can be downloaded from:*

*TheStateOfTheology.com and LifewayResearch.com/StateOfTheology)*

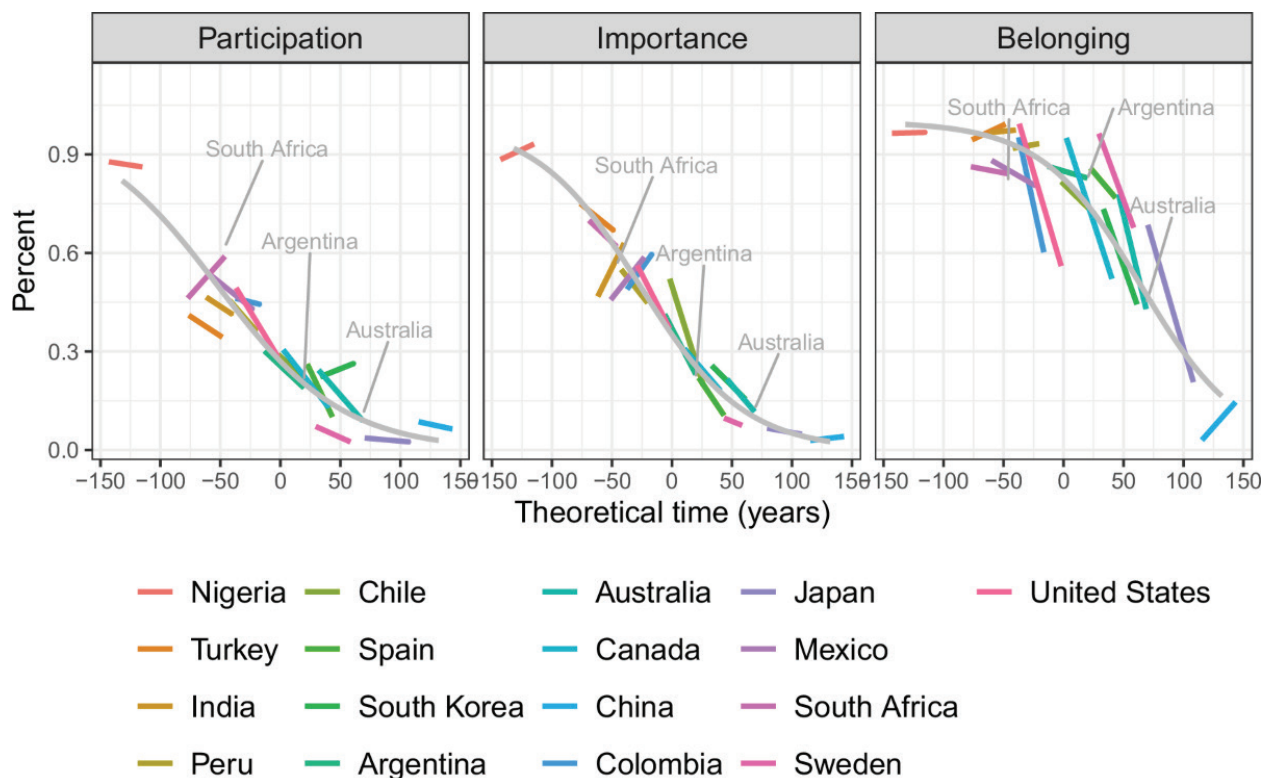
- **American evangelicals have maintained the same level of support for Israel, even over that country’s last few tumultuous years, according to a survey conducted by the polling**



**company Infinity Concepts and Grey Matter.** The poll found that the belief that Jews are God's chosen people has remained statistically unchanged among evangelicals since a 2021 survey. Such support appears to be more spiritual than political, with 74 percent of evangelicals seeing spiritual support of Israel as a priority compared to 60 percent who prioritized political support. The poll of 1,008 evangelical Protestants found that only 29 percent under the age of 35 believed that Jews are God's chosen people. This cohort was more likely to embrace a replacement theology (that Christians are now the chosen people) or express uncertainty. **A**

● **A study of over 100 nations around the world suggests that the first stages of secularization that Western countries have passed through are also being traversed by non-Western countries.** The study, conducted by Jörg Stolz, Nan Dirk de Graaf, Conrad Hackett, and Jean-Philippe Antonietti and appearing in the journal *Nature Communications* (online in August), argues that the three stages leading to secularization are people drifting away from public worship, the importance of religion declining, and, finally, people discarding their religious affiliation, a pattern which describes most Western nations. Analyzing nationally representative samples from over 100 countries, the researchers found that in very religious countries, young people often participated in worship services less frequently, while in moderately religious countries, younger people were less religious according to all of the three aforementioned stages. In largely secular countries, young people were the least likely to report religious belonging.

Stolz, de Graaf, Hackett, and Antonietti argue that over a period of 200 years, most countries will follow this sequence of religious decline, with successive generations shedding more demanding traits of religion first, and less costly traits later. Europeans are the furthest along this proposed



secular trajectory, while the highly religious countries are just starting the first stage. Countries in the Americas, Asia, and Oceania are in the middle stage of this global “secular transition,” according to the researchers. The one exception to this pattern is the post-Soviet Eastern European countries and Russia, Georgia, Belarus, and Moldova, which do not show the expected cohort differences. Much of the Muslim world is categorized under Asia, but a recent article in the journal *Religion, State, and Society* (online in September) questions whether the Middle East and North Africa are actually following the secularization pathway. Esen Kirdis (Rhodes College) acknowledges the sharp growth of non-believers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), but finds that personal piety remains strong.

Kirdis notes that there are some differences in the data on the extent of the growth of non-belief in this region, with the Arab Barometer (AB) survey showing less religious decline than the World Values Survey (WVS). For instance, the Arab Barometer shows more respondents being “somewhat religious” than the WVS (even showing a spike and then a decline in the number of non-believers in Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan). The difference may be due to the fact that the AB allows for this “somewhat religious” category, while the WVS questionnaire items follow more of a religious and secular binary. The AB also finds that for 99.2 percent of respondents, religion is “very” or “rather” important. The WVS also finds that religious belief and practices remain high, with even the majority of the “non-religious” saying they pray regularly (70 percent). Kirdis finds that while religious self-identification is indeed decreasing, belief and practices remain high in the region. She argues that it is declining trust in Islamic institutions and in political Islam, which is closely linked with religious self-identification in the MENA, that is mainly responsible for the growth of the region’s “non-believers,” who nevertheless do in fact believe.

(*Nature Communications*, <https://www.nature.com/ncomms>; *Religion, State, and Society*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/crss20>)

● **The three central ultra-Orthodox identities in Israel each have different impacts in shaping social activism within this growing community, according to a recent study appearing in the current issue of the *Journal of Jewish Identities* (July).** While the ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel have long been considered secluded and not activist-oriented, in the last two decades there has been an increasing presence of ultra-Orthodox in academia, the workforce, and public life. Asher Suzin conducted in-depth interviews with 40 managers and activists in ultra-Orthodox civil society organizations, which in recent years have been addressing issues not usually tackled within these communities, such as sexual abuse, the role of women, and the integration of ultra-Orthodox men into the workforce and the armed services. These modern ultra-Orthodox groups “seek to preserve their hold on ultra-Orthodox culture, while at the same time questioning the idea of ultra-Orthodox separation from general society.”

Suzin looked at the three major ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel: the Lithuanian community, the Hasidic Jews, and the Sephardic Mizrahi community. He found that it was the Lithuanian community that was the “most significant factor in the emergence of social activism in ultra-Orthodox society,” with the most social activity within civil society organizations



coming mainly from members of this community. The Lithuanian community's commitment to Torah study, viewing itself as a "society of learners," has fueled the growth of the ultra-Orthodox feminist movement and other social initiatives. Suzin adds that the Hasidic community has a more rigid hierarchical leadership that teaches that holiness is based on obeying the Rebbe and community rules rather than on self-learning and providing solutions for individual needs, as the Lithuanians believe. The strongly ethnic Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox, while close in structure to the Lithuanians, are more isolationist in relation to the wider Israeli society, likely leading to less social involvement.

(*Journal of Jewish Identities*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/journal/463>)

### **Europe's Catholics seeing American-style culture wars**

Catholics in Europe are experiencing their own version of the same culture wars and internal divisions as their counterparts in the U.S., writes Massimo Faggioli in *Commonweal* magazine (September 21). "The continent is at a crossroads, and the soul-searching extends to European Catholicism. The church is divided over issues like Europe's rearmament, the war in Ukraine, and the future of Israel and Palestine. The church of the old continent is currently undergoing a process of globalization, with a growing number of students, teachers, priests, and religious from other parts of the world—including prelates coming from America to re-evangelize Europe," Faggioli adds. With an American pope, and Europe rethinking its political and economic relations with the U.S., European church leaders are also feeling new pressures. "In particular,

the German-speaking part of European Catholicism, associated with theological and ecclesial progressivism, is visibly nervous about the danger of Trumpism coming to the continent.” Faggioli points to culture war dynamics in Austria, where conservative former chancellor Sebastian Kurz and theologian Gudrun Kugler are encouraging the political engagement



of the conservative Catholic networks to support the ÖVP party in its shift to the populist right.

ÖVP has softened its anti-Catholic sentiment and has embraced “cultural Catholicism as a component of its national conservative platform.” Kugler herself embodies a “new, entrepreneurial Catholic presence,” having started a faith-based dating site active in several European countries. A similar highlighting of Catholic identity was visible in the platform of the Swiss People’s Party in the 2023 elections. In Germany, progressive bishops are grappling with the popularity of the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) party and signs that the church is more divided between right and left. Faggioli writes that “while the episcopates take a publicly anti-populist stance, this doesn’t preclude ideological shifts within the clergy and the laity. This is evident in Italy, where Giorgia Meloni leads a Church-friendly right-wing ideological coalition that has definitively replaced the twentieth-century Christian-Democratic platform.” But the tensions over American influence are as much spiritual as political. There has been a boom in adult baptisms in various countries and an interest in traditional Catholic practices. “It seems there may be a new kind of European Catholicism, having more in common with American Christianity (culture wars, multiculturalism, adult conversions) than with the old model of dialectics between Christendom and secularization,” Faggioli concludes.

### **Conservative Christians take up a new environmentalism in France**

While environmental activism is typically associated with left-wing politics, a less visible and less numerous but significant movement of conservative Christian environmentalists has emerged in France, report Emmanuel Pellat and Côme Torquebiau in the French Catholic daily *La Croix* (Sept. 22). These individuals and groups advocate for what they call “integral ecology”—an approach that combines environmental concern with traditional Christian values on family and bioethics, while maintaining a more moderate stance on economic transformation



than their left-wing counterparts. The concept of integral ecology had been popularized by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato si'*. This approach emphasizes preserving the planet while never losing sight of humanity's central role. The primary representative of this pro-integral ecology movement is the Current for Human Ecology (Courant pour une écologie humaine), founded in 2013 by Christians during the movement against same-sex marriage (“Manif pour tous”). The organization aimed to expand the anthropological questions raised by marriage equality and family law reforms to include ecological concerns. They believe that maintaining a habitable and lovable world requires integral ecology to permeate all human relationships, including family, neighborhood, social, and economic connections.

“Though it remains a minority movement over a decade later,” Pellat and Torquebiau write, “it has developed substantial infrastructure through annual gatherings, training sessions, and lobbying efforts to promote its particular vision of ecology.” While supporting ecological conversion, some Christian entrepreneurs deem rapid systemic change as being unrealistic and choose to advocate for green growth rather than press for a model of radical economic change. Among these Christian environmentalists, there are those who insist that green growth needs to encourage austerity and simple living, or even go as far as pleading for “degrowth” in wealthy nations. Some conservative Christian environmentalists also engage directly in politics to advance their vision, arguing that while the left has politically preempted the environmental issue, ecology actually carries a conservative dimension.

(*Courant pour une écologie humaine*, <https://www.ecologiehumaine.eu/>)

## Israel Defense Forces desecularized by religious influences

The growing interference of the Military Rabbinate in military affairs and the influx of soldiers from religious Zionism have represented a significant shift for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), turning them into something quite different from the apolitical and areligious army dreamed of by the state's founding fathers in 1948, writes Samy Cohen (Sciences Po - Paris Institute of Political Studies) in the *Bulletin de l'Observatoire international du religieux* (September). Traditionally, the Military Chief Rabbinate provided religious services, but it later became active in promoting nationalist religious political views. Cohen identifies the 1967 Six-Day War as the initial turning point, when nationalist and messianic fervor began permeating public opinion. A significant step was the appointment of a religious Zionist and West Bank settler, Brigadier General Avihai Ronski, as the Military



Chief Chaplain in 2006. He believed that rabbis should position themselves close to combat units to instill courage and convince soldiers of their mission's righteousness—serving not only Israeli security but also the Greater Israel project. The article lists several instances showing how rabbis were instrumental in spreading religious nationalist narratives among soldiers.

The massive influx of religious Zionist soldiers, fundamentally changing the character of combat units, was encouraged since the 1980s by the IDF, as it faced an exodus from combat units among kibbutz youth and upper-middle-class secular Ashkenazi Jews—previously the backbone of combat leadership—who turned toward high-tech careers. The army's human resources branch actively recruited religious youth, considered more motivated and fervent supporters of Israeli presence in occupied territories. Various institutional arrangements were made for religious conscripts, who proved devoted, disciplined, and courageous indeed, but the process also allowed nationalist rabbis to promote their views (including hostility to the recruitment of women) and to gain influence. Religious Zionists are now overrepresented in lower and intermediate military command levels. It is estimated that 25-30 percent of combat unit recruits adhere to religious Zionism (though they represent a smaller percentage of the general population). Religious officer candidates in infantry units rose from 2.5 percent (1990) to 31 percent (late 2000s) to 35 percent currently. Religious symbols have now become prominently present in military spaces, and religious regulations are increasingly being felt. Once a marginal group in Israel's early decades, nationalist rabbis have successfully politicized and religionized the army, with manifest influence over combat units.

(*Bulletin de l'Observatoire international du religieux*, <https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/bulletin/limpregnation-religieuse-de-tsahal/>)

## Evangelical growth in the Philippines raises questions for the Catholic Church

Although Catholicism remains central and widespread in the Philippines, the religious landscape is diversifying, with a noticeable growth and development of evangelical churches, writes J  r  my Ianni in *Ad Extra* (September 26), a French Catholic website of the Paris Foreign Missions Society, dedicated to reflections and dialogue about missionary work. While Catholicism, a legacy of Spanish colonization, still greatly shapes Filipino society, its dominance is slowly eroding. Over the past two decades, the proportion of Catholics has declined from 82.3 percent in 2000 to 78.6 percent in 2020, while evangelical groups have doubled their share from 4.1 percent to 8.2 percent. These changes have led Catholics to attempt understanding the roots of this (still limited) decline in church adherence. Scandals involving corruption and abuse within the Catholic Church, and harsh criticisms from political figures like former President Rodrigo Duterte, are said to have played a role. The Catholic Church is also seen as rigid and slow to modernize, leading some to perceive it as out of touch with everyday realities. The strict codification of Catholic worship is contrasted with the less formal and more emotional experience of new evangelical groups.

Not all evangelicals are growing at the same pace; in fact, the most vibrant segment is reported to be those going by the name “born again” a more flexible movement than the organized and hierarchical Baptist or Pentecostal megachurches. Often more vibrant and festive than the other groups, they attract especially younger generations. The born again groups emphasize small congregations, often a lay leadership, with no special training requirements for leaders, and they offer contemporary worship, accommodating also those people who would not feel comfortable in classical church environments. Their missionary approach also contributes to their success.



“Whereas the Catholic Church is structured around parish life, the born again leave it behind, organizing worship services in parks, visiting prisons, and distributing meals and basic necessities in poor neighborhoods.” Of course, the Catholic Church is far from collapsing. “Processions, festivals, and sacraments continue to punctuate the lives of millions of people.” But a religious restructuring seems to be underway.

(*Ad Extra*, <https://adextra-mission.com/des-bancs-de-leglise-aux-guitares-electriques-enquete-sur-les-philippins-qui-quittent-le-catholicisme-pour-devenir-born-again/>)

## Findings & Footnotes

■ With this issue, **Religion Watch** enters its fifth decade of publication. It seems like a short time ago that we celebrated the 25th and 30th anniversaries of the newsletter; the first issue (see photo) rolling off the printing press (if readers can remember those machines) is still fresh in this editor’s mind. In another sense, however, the momentous changes in the worlds of religion, media, and society in the last decade make 1985 seem like ancient history. The outlets and opportunities for covering news and trends in contemporary religion have expanded in the new media environment. Yet the shrinking of the religion beat in newspapers—already well underway in the early 2000s—has not really been replaced by new media forms, such as countless Substack newsletters and podcasts, which are long on commentary (some of it very good and informed) but short on reporting. Related to this change is the sharp polarization and politicization of society during the last decade, where both religious and secular media feature less disinterested and unbiased treatment of religion. Added to this is the growing tendency of academic research to treat religion more as a “dependent variable” shaped by a host of social factors, particularly race and gender, rather than as a cultural force in its own right.

All of this makes the work of RW more challenging, since we depend on the above sources for our content, but also more necessary. Not to end on a down note, we still think religion is worth covering, despite its institutional deficits, and would argue that its unpredictable nature will yield many surprises—both positive and negative—in the next decade. It was during the last decade that the Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR) at Baylor University became the publisher of RW under the initiative of the late Rodney Stark, and we thank ISR’s current director Byron Johnson for the continued support. We are likewise grateful to Jean-François Mayer in his long-time and indispensable role as associate editor. We thank Brian Bartholomew for his thorough copyediting work, and Neil Luft and Derek Stephens at Internet Imagineering for their production skills in turning out RW every month. Finally, we appreciate our readers and their enduring fascination with religion and their support for Religion Watch.



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

1) **Baptize America** is a new movement that seeks to encourage revival by holding baptism events for adult converts to Christianity. The movement was first founded as Baptize California by Pastor Mark Francey of the non-denominational Oceans Church in Orange County in 2023 and has since expanded nationwide. The movement draws on more than 650 churches, with around 60,000 people baptized so far. Francey says that Baptize America is drawing on a surge of adults becoming baptized, particularly among Gen Z men [the trend of adult baptism has also been seen in European Catholic churches]. The movement is planning a synchronized baptism event on Pentecost Sunday in 2026. While the organization seeks to link up and organize baptisms in joint events by any interested area Christian churches, its publicity shows baptisms done by immersion, a trademark of many evangelical congregations. Often the baptisms are done outside of church structures, such as at a beach. Francey says that "Getting in the ocean to do something so transcendent in a transcendent place like the ocean, it's just a really special way to connect with God." He believes that the U.S. is experiencing a spiritual revolution comparable to the 1970s [where young adult baptisms were also prominent, such as in the Jesus movement]. (Sources: CBS News, September 30; *Baptize America website*, <https://baptize.org/>)



2) The story of **Elvira Tsai**, a Chilean Catholic who has become a ritual leader in a Taiwanese temple, provides a remarkable example of transnational circulation, the evolution of ritual roles, and cultural adjustment. Initially, she met a Taiwanese businessman in Brazil in the 1980s and followed him to an agricultural village in Taiwan, where temples formed the center of communal life. When her husband, who had served as the caretaker for Wan'an Temple, died suddenly in 2002, leaving her with two young sons and no nearby family, she took up his role in the temple. Villagers urged her to stay, and after

consulting the temple's deity, General Fushun, she assumed leadership—marking an unprecedented shift in a role typically held by local men.



Chilean Priestess Elvira. © One Little Day (小日子), 2023 (first published in *Religioscope*).

Elvira had to master both Taiwanese and Mandarin, learning alongside her children and with community support. She adapted to practices that initially shocked her—thick incense smoke, ritual pig sacrifices, and wearing black for soul-calling ceremonies. Despite these challenges, she came to believe in General Fushun's protection while maintaining her Christian faith in her heart, embracing a syncretic spirituality shaped by necessity and devotion. Her authority emerged not through formal appointment but through daily practice: opening the temple at dawn, preparing offerings, folding talismans, performing rituals, and becoming part of village social life. Her story demonstrates how belonging transcends bloodline, emerging through sustained participation and trust in a community that accepted her foreign origins without question. (**Source:** *Religioscope*, September 16)