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**FEATURE STORY:**

**The trimming and taming of the academic study of religion**

Declining support for the liberal arts and the growth of administrative bureaucracy and “no harm” policies are cutting into both academic study and research on religion, according to two reports. The academic study of Catholic theology is “undergoing a severe stress test,” as Catholic universities and colleges are trimming their core theology course requirements and are secularizing at the same time that the discipline’s liberal orientation is finding less interest among students, writes Michael Hollerich on *Commonweal* magazine’s website (March 27). Catholic academic theology’s “hold on the undergraduate curriculum” at Catholic universities was linked to the post-Vatican II changes that expanded theological education to the laity, who were subsequently taught under a rising tide of theologians and historians who were often trained in secular and mainline Protestant schools, such as the University of Chicago and Yale University. Today the respect that academic theological offerings were formerly given at Catholic colleges has eroded to the point where, according to Hollerich, “schools like mine are faced with the need to go big or go home—meaning we have to turn more and more to pragmatic vo-tech educational goals, since we don’t have the cultural prestige of Notre Dame or Georgetown to live off the moneyed elite able to afford us. That leads to hiring policies that further secularize the institution,” adds Hollerich, who teaches at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota.

The other side of the stress test is coming from students, especially aspiring academics. These students do not share the same Catholic backgrounds and concerns about academic freedom as preceding generations. “They are far more likely to be anxious about identity questions—what it means to be ‘Catholic’ at all rather than something else. In a situation of market freedom, people choose the specific, not the generic. From the younger generation’s perspective, we can look and sound like generic, dying, irrelevant mainline Protestantism shading toward nothingism,” Hollerich writes. Catholic colleges once provided the feeder system for Catholic doctoral programs, but today’s doctoral students are as likely to come from conservative schools such as Hillsdale College and Steubenville as from Notre Dame or Boston College. “And one wonders where those eager doctorands will ever find jobs if Catholic colleges and universities continue to

reduce core requirements. And if there aren't required undergraduate courses to teach, why do we need those doctoral programs either? I can tell you it's not because the hierarchy is waiting breathlessly for the latest fruits of our research."

More generally, public understanding and tolerance of new religious movements and other forms of radical religion may be waning as universities become more squeamish about causing controversy and "harm" through academic research in these areas, writes Susan Palmer in the current issue of the journal *Fieldwork in Religion* (Vol. 12, No. 2). Palmer looks at the increasing reach of ethical boards (known as IRBs in the U.S.), which are committees that monitor research on human subjects at universities in North America, and how they hamper the work of researchers in approaching and studying radical social and religious movements. Palmer herself was ordered to "cease and desist" in her research on a religious anarchist group in Canada (including surrendering her notes and other records pertaining to this group) for the potential harm it may have caused members to be interviewed about their childhood memories. In interviewing other scholars of new and radical religions, Palmer found that they echoed her concerns about the time-consuming and intrusive nature of working with ethical boards. This was spelled out for sociologist Lorne Dawson and colleagues at Western Ontario University when their research on returning fighters from Iraq and Syria was delayed for over a year by the ethical board's concern about ensuring the anonymity of subjects.



Palmer adds that the secretive nature of these boards, not revealing their members, makes them unaccountable to researchers. More experienced researchers have found ways of resisting the interference of ethical boards, sometimes through "benign fabrication," but graduate students and novice researchers tend to capitulate to the boards' demands, more often forsaking projects that

would cause problems for their careers (the percentage of M.A. students using human subjects in their research declined from 40 percent in the mid-1990s to about 10 percent in the early 2000s in Canada), according to Palmer. Such researchers may also tone down their work or avoid controversy. She adds that the field of researching and writing about new religious movements may be ceded to journalists who don't face such burdens on their work. But Palmer argues that journalists tend to be more negative and sensationalistic in covering such movements, increasing the animosity between society and such marginalized groups.

(*Commonweal*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/do-catholic-theology-departments-have-future>; *Fieldwork in Religion*, <https://journals.equinoxpub.com/index.php/FIR>)

## **Coptic Orthodox search for ways to accommodate American converts**

While the influx of new migrants from the home country tends to intensify Egyptian cultural influence in the life of Coptic Orthodox parishes in the U.S., the church is attempting to create spaces where converts and second- and third-generation people who are fully integrated into the American way of life can feel comfortable, reports Shira Telushkin in *The Atlantic* (March 31). Although the Coptic Church is marked by and proud of its ancient Egyptian heritage, and while its diaspora presence has grown dramatically since its modest beginnings in the 1950s and acceleration from the 1970s, it would be wrong to see it only as a church for migrants. For decades, it has conducted active missionary work in sub-Saharan Africa, answering calls from inquirers in several countries, with its first bishop for those areas consecrated as early as 1950.

In America too, the Coptic Church has been attractive for some converts, either religious seekers feeling they would thus reconnect with a most ancient Christian heritage or people wanting to marry a Coptic believer. But many subsequently left for cultural reasons, feeling like foreigners in the church they had joined. Americanization had been progressing, but the arrival of many new immigrants fleeing an uncertain future for Christians in Muslim countries



meant that parishes often answered their needs by going back to a more Egyptian style, both linguistically and culturally. This situation has led the Coptic Church in America to start opening parishes where the liturgy remains the Coptic one, but is celebrated in English, and where preaching is done in an American style. "In the past decade, dozens of Americanized Coptic churches have opened across the United States, concentrated in Texas, California, and along the

East Coast,” Telushkin writes. In 2015, one Coptic bishop launched a structure specifically meant for U.S.-born believers (both people of Coptic background and converts), which now counts several parishes. Not unexpectedly, not all Copts have welcomed such trends. In contrast with those enthusiastic about missionary efforts, some feel culture and faith to be strongly connected and fear that losing one might lead to losing both. They are afraid that a new structure such as the one established in 2015 might end up in breaking with the church. Similar to the way of thinking of religiously diverse migrant groups, others answer that the purpose behind the emigration of Copts from their home country might actually be to spread their faith across the world.

(*The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/coptic-church/555515/>)

## **Canadian Sikhs invest political capital in controversial cause**

Sikhs in Canada, particularly in the province of British Columbia, have political influence beyond their numbers, but their activism has also become a source of recent conflict in Canadian politics. In the *Vancouver Sun* (March 10), Douglas Todd writes that Sikhs, who number about 500,000 in Canada, have long had a disproportionate role in Canadian politics. But Sikh support has come back to haunt Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who was linked to Sikh separatists during a recent visit to India, while the Sikh politician Jagmeet Singh of the New Democratic Party has likewise been associated with militants supporting a Sikh homeland in India, called Khalistan. Todd notes that more than 12 percent of federal Liberal cabinet ministers are Sikhs, and there are 14 Liberal Sikh MPs. There have been renewed concerns about a resurgence of the pro-Khalistan movement in Canada and the role that Sikh temples may play in such politics.

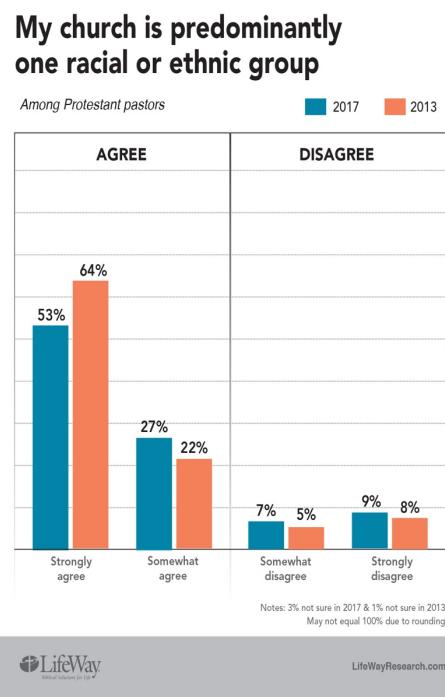


Sikh temples, or gurdwaras, are the main avenue for garnering Sikh support, and it is at the local party level where Sikhs have been most effective. “The competition to run a gurdwara, which acts like a community center even for non-religious Punjabis [Punjab is where most Sikhs live in India], often pits so-called moderate Sikhs against fundamentalists, a minority of whom want to create a separate Sikh homeland,” Todd adds. In addition to gurdwaras, another resource is the traditional high-status Jatt caste of Sikh leaders, which makes it easier to mobilize their relatives, extended families and friends to political causes and candidates. However, Todd reports that while Sikhs over 55 are more inclined to vote for someone based on a recommendation by a prominent Sikh leader due to ethnic, caste, and religious loyalties, young Sikhs, while also showing support of the Khalistan cause on social media, tend to stress political principles more than personalities and are more likely “to quiz candidates on their actual principles.”

## CURRENT RESEARCH

- Despite anecdotal reports of minorities leaving white churches over their support of President Donald Trump, churches, especially evangelical ones, are gradually diversifying in race and ethnicity, according to a recent survey by LifeWay Research (March 20). The survey found that 81 percent of pastors report that their church consists largely of one racial group. While that figure is high, it was as high as 86 percent in a similar survey of both mainline and evangelical churches by LifeWay in 2013. Pastors of churches with 250 or more congregants were less likely (74 percent) to say their churches were mostly made up of one racial or ethnic group. Denominationally, Pentecostal pastors were least likely (68 percent) to say their churches were made up of predominantly one race or ethnicity, while Lutheran pastors were most likely (89 percent) to report such a lack of diversity. The LifeWay data do not include the actual racial and ethnic makeup of churches but only how pastors responded to the statement, “My church is predominantly one racial or ethnic group.”

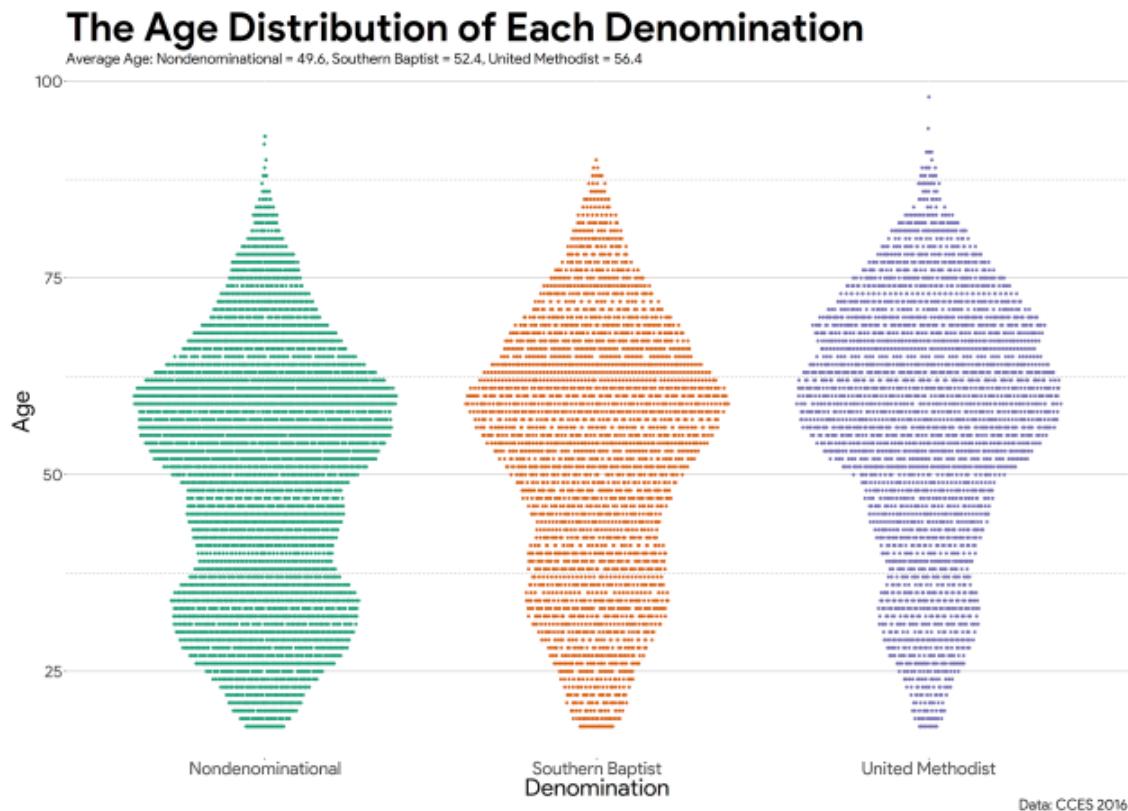
(*Lifeway Research*, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2018/03/20/protestant-pastors-want-churches-to-be-diverse-see-slow-progress/>)



- Non-denominational Christians are similar to Southern Baptists (who are thought to be typical evangelicals), although they tend to be more liberal about the Bible, younger, and more racially diverse, according to an analysis by Ryan Burge in the blog *Religion in Public* (March 7). Non-denominational Christianity has grown sharply in recent decades, and while

members of these congregations have been considered largely evangelical in belief and practice, there has been little research on the phenomenon. Non-denominational Christians differ most notably from Southern Baptists in their age distribution, with 31.8 percent under age 40 (and a large age-range bulge between 25 and 35)—compared to 17.8 percent for United Methodists and 26.2 percent for Southern Baptists. The age difference may help explain the fact that non-denominational Christians are more ethnically diverse. Burge also finds that non-denominational Christians stand halfway between Southern Baptists and United Methodists on their views of the Bible (44 percent of them think the Bible is literally true compared to 60 percent of Southern Baptists and 28 percent of United Methodists). Perhaps reflecting their younger demographic, non-denominational Christians are more liberal than Southern Baptists on same-sex marriage but slightly more conservative on abortion. But on political stances in general, non-denominational and Southern Baptist Christians are very similar.

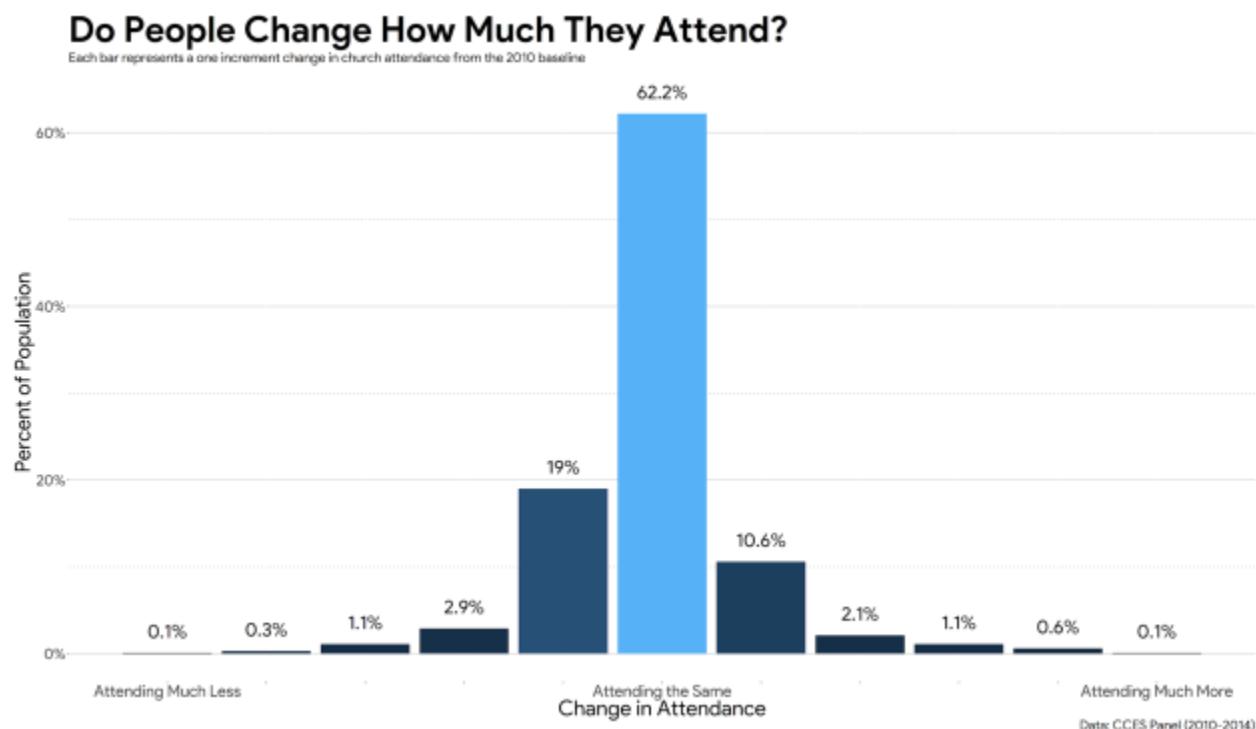
(*Religion in Public*, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2018/03/07/nondenominational-protestants-are-basically-southern-baptists-with-a-few-caveats/>)



- The pattern of Americans' frequency of church attendance is remarkably stable, defying even conversion experiences, reports the *Religion in Public* blog (March 19). Ryan Burge analyzes the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (conducted in 2010, 2012, and 2014) and finds that 62 percent of respondents reported the same level of church attendance in 2014 as they

did in 2010. But it is also the case that the number of people attending with less regularity is nearly 10 percent more of the population than those who are attending church more regularly. Burge finds it surprising that the traditional distinction between mainline and evangelical denominations is not associated with any difference in the percentage of individuals who are attending less. The most stable attendance pattern was among the Mormons while non-denominational Christians showed the most volatility. Of those who experienced a conversion in the years of the survey, only about one-third attended church more frequently.

(*Religion in Public*, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2018/03/19/what-causes-people-to-attend-more-frequently-the-answer-is-not-becoming-born-again/>)



- **The majority-religion of nations is a significant factor in Americans' preference for giving foreign aid, according to a study in the journal *Politics and Religion* (online February).** Previous studies have shown that religion can serve as a marker for threats attributed to a country, such as violence and conflict (often in the case of Muslim countries), shaping foreign aid priorities. Stanford researcher Alexandra Domike Blackman tested whether a country's religion itself determines public support or opposition to giving foreign aid. She conducted two survey experiments (in 2014 and 2016) that asked respondents to rate a country's suitability for receiving aid after reading random national attributes, which included religion. Blackman found that recipient country religion was a significant determinant of foreign aid preferences, "wielding more weight than many other determinants, such as a country's ally or trade status." While Muslim

countries continued to receive the most “penalty” as a potential aid recipient, Buddhist countries also received negative responses, and the influence of recipient country religion on foreign aid preferences was particularly pronounced among Christian and evangelical respondents. “In this case, the relationship manifests itself as increased support for aid allocations to Christian recipient countries among Christian respondents in the United States.”

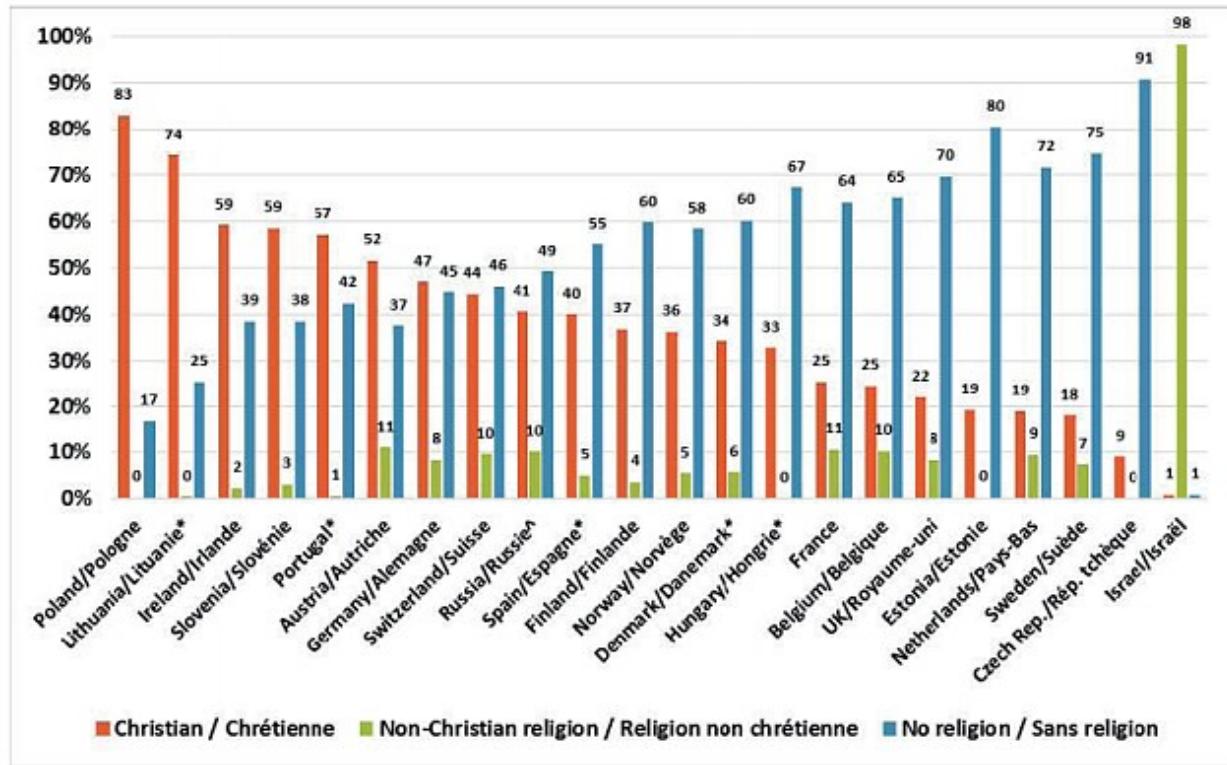
(*Politics and Religion*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/politics-and-religion>)



- A new study of European and Israeli young adults finds a varying pattern of religious belief and practice, but the overall shape is one of increased non-affiliation, according to a new report from St. Mary's University, Twickenham in London and the Institute Catholique of Paris. In 12 of the 22 countries studied by the European Social Survey (2014–2016), over half of young adults claim not to identify with any particular religion or denomination, though only one-third claim no faith in 19 of them. Both the two with the highest rates of non-affiliation (Estonia and Czech Republic) and the two with the lowest (Lithuania and Poland) are post-communist societies. Six of the “most Christian” countries are all historically Catholic-majority societies. In only four countries do more than one in ten 16-to-29-year-olds claim to attend religious services on at least a weekly basis: Poland, Israel, Portugal, and Ireland. However, there is not always a correspondence between attendance and affiliation: Lithuania, Austria, and

Slovenia rank in the top five for affiliation but are among those countries registering in the single digits for attendance. A cluster of Northwestern European countries—France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the UK—plus Spain, are the highest “never attenders” among young people. When asking about rates of prayer, Poland, Israel, and Ireland were found to be the most “prayerful” countries, with half of Polish young adults saying that they pray at least once a week, while Estonia, Scandinavia, and the Czech Republic had the lowest number of young adults reporting that they pray.

(*Europe's Young Adults and Religion* can be downloaded from:  
<https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-mar-europe-young-people-report-eng.pdf>)



- One of the first studies of environmentalism and religion in China finds that religious belief is associated with negative influences on private environmental attitudes while having a positive impact on public environmental behaviors through believers’ religious activities. The study, conducted by Yu Yang and Shizhi Huang and published in the online journal *Religions* (March 7), used data from the Chinese General Social Survey of 2013. The contradictory findings may be explained by the fact that religious believers tend to be from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and are more rural, less educated, and unaffiliated with the Communist Party and so are unschooled in environmentalist ideology that might inform their behavior. Yet being involved in a Chinese religious group had a positive relationship with environmentalism, since such organizations engage environmental issues, such as by running a recycling program. The positive effect was found among both traditional Chinese religions and newer Christian groups, though not

among Muslims. Yang and Huang write that formal institutions, including laws and regulations, have failed to achieve desired environmental outcomes in China, and that religion may thus serve as a bridge between private and public environmental behavior (which is already taking place in arrangements between the government and various Buddhist groups).

(*Religions*, <http://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions>)



- An analysis appearing in the journal *Religions* (March 22), based on the most recent Australian census of 2016, finds the Chinese community to be divided between religious believers and non-believers, often based on families' region of origin and when they migrated from China. Yu Tao and Theo Stapleton find that in comparison with the general population of Australia, “members of the Chinese community are far more likely to claim that they do not have any religious belief,” making them more secular than even secularizing Australians. Among Australia’s religious Chinese, the most popular affiliation is among Christian denominations, followed by Buddhism. Regional variation is the strongest factor in the different rates of religious affiliation: while almost 58 percent of those reporting Taiwanese ancestry claim to have no religion, the figure is far lower for those with Tibetan ancestry, who overwhelmingly claim

Buddhism as their religion. Those with both parents born in China have high “no religion” rates, especially those coming after the 1980s, when state secularization was the strongest.



## ARTICLES

### **The new way of the pilgrim—non-believers included**

While the contemporary interest in the practice of pilgrimage started later in England than in other parts of Europe, it is now attracting a growing number of people there, though with a variety of motivations going beyond the classical Christian model, reports Markus M. Haefliger in the Swiss daily *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (March 29). When it comes to pilgrimages in Europe, Santiago de Compostela (Spain) has been an amazing success story. While in the 1980s there were apparently less than 500 pilgrims a year following in the footsteps of their medieval predecessors walking across Europe to the famous Spanish shrine, the number had reached more than 250,000 in 2017. At a more modest level, the renaissance of pilgrimage has now spread to England, where the British Pilgrimage Trust (BPT), formed in 2014, is reviving the practice on great routes, such as the “Old Way to Canterbury,” a 350-km journey from Southampton to Canterbury (18-day walk).

The goal of the BPT is to “advance British pilgrimage as a form of cultural heritage that promotes holistic wellbeing, for the public benefit.” As Haefliger remarks, these modern pilgrims “bring along their own beliefs with them.” Some are Christians of various denominations while others are “spiritually interested,” or may even be non-believers. Interest in historical sites or in the beauty



of nature motivates some, while others see pilgrimage as a spiritual experience. The BPT actually wants “to help pilgrimage become an open spiritual activity without religious prescription.” It has designed an “Open To All” (OTA) symbol, which holy places are encouraged to use as a way of promising a “universal welcome into the holy place that bears it.”

(*British Pilgrimage Trust*, <http://britishpilgrimage.org>)

## **Completing the work of reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Balkans**

Although Northern Ireland and the Balkans signed peace agreements at around the same time, these countries’ efforts at religious reconciliation have had mixed and sometimes diverging outcomes, according to two reports. Two decades after the “Good Friday” peace accord in Northern Ireland, reconciliation efforts between Catholics and Protestants have been sustained, although generational changes and immigration have posed new challenges to these programs. Layton E. Williams reports in *Sojourners* magazine (March) that since the peace accord of 1998, “various efforts at reconciliation have taken root all over the country.” For most Protestant and Catholic churches, these reconciliation efforts have largely consisted of joint services, usually around Christmas time. The article focuses on the reconciliation ministries of Whitehouse Presbyterian Church and St. Mary’s Star of the Sea Catholic Church in Belfast, which started when the first congregation was set on fire in 2002. St. Mary’s donated significantly to the church’s restoration, which led to a steady stream of joint programs in social ministry and even theology. The churches hold classes where each communion learns about the other’s theology and practices, and they join with Methodist and Church of Ireland congregations for Holy Week and even Easter services. Children from Whitehouse’s primary school will visit St. Mary’s, while children from the Catholic primary school will visit the Presbyterian church.



The reconciliation efforts have found the most support and involvement among older church members. This may be because they share the memory of how, before the “Troubles” and displacement of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, the two groups lived and worked side by side. The concern about younger members sharing the same level of commitment to reconciliation is found in both Protestant and Catholic churches, according to Williams. There has been a dwindling of church membership in Northern Ireland, not least among younger people who “want little to do with religion when it seems to have given rise to nothing but conflict. Young people from different backgrounds make friends with little concern for the Protestant/Catholic

divide.” Another indication that the sectarian conflict of earlier days may have decreasing relevance in the church lies in the growth of immigrants in congregations. For instance, the newest and youngest members of St. Mary’s are Filipino and Indian immigrants “who have created their own worship services and come from an entirely different cultural context, one free of the centuries of Northern Ireland’s conflict. How these rapidly growing immigrant communities will impact and be impacted by those who lived through the Troubles remains to be seen, but what’s clear is that the future of Northern Ireland will be more diverse and complex than ever,” Williams concludes.

*Commonweal* magazine (March 9) reports that reconciliation efforts in the Balkans, particularly Bosnia, have been more fraught with unresolved ethnic and religious conflicts. Thomas Albert Howard writes that “under the mantra of ‘transnational justice,’ NGO’s have flocked to the region, or have arisen internally, in an effort to nourish institutions of civil society” since the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995. But recent discoveries of hundreds of mass graves and reports of more missing graves and cases of vandalism against mosques have put a chill on interfaith relations. That Bosnian Muslims have been among the highest number of recruits to the Islamic State, with Salafi Islam imported to much of the region has also dampened reconciliation. Such organizations as the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina have managed to monitor attacks on religious sites throughout Bosnia, as well as promote education and outreach programs.

The Council is particularly targeting younger theologians and religious leaders and hosting conferences in cities across Bosnia, “often ones that have been flashpoints of violence in the past,” Howard writes. Other initiatives include setting up programs where those of different faiths can visit each other’s place of worship and organizing prayer gatherings at sites where religious violence has taken place; for instance, a Catholic priest may visit a vandalized mosque and pray there, in the presence of Muslims, “for peace, understanding, and reconciliation.” With limited time and resources, the Council gives less attention to older generations, whose opinions are more likely to be settled; older religious leaders, such as the bishop of Mostar, have not endorsed its work. The Council’s director, Bozana Katava, and others argue that teaching history in an impartial and honest way is the main way that religious and ethnic reconciliation will succeed.

(*Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/>)



## Political Islam takes center stage in Indonesia and Malaysia

Since the beginning of this decade, conservative and often Islamist groups have amassed power in Indonesia and Malaysia. While they have done so by organizing within democratic politics, they are recently more aggressively seeking to implement laws based on sharia and rolling back protections for religious minorities, writes Joshua Kurlantzick in the *Council on Foreign Relations Expert Brief* (February 27). “In the run-up to Malaysia’s 2018 national elections and Indonesia’s 2019 presidential election, these groups could play central roles in determining the countries’ paths and could possibly undermine hard-won political and legal gains,” he adds. Indonesia and Malaysia have had strongholds of conservative and Islamist ideologies, but the hardline parties and organizations have never attained national power, with elections favoring moderate leaders, such as former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid. More recently, the two countries have witnessed an upswing in harder-line Islamist sentiment. The conservative party known as PAS has moved to bring about legislation increasing the power of some religious courts and possibly imposing sharia-type punishments for some criminal offenses such as theft.

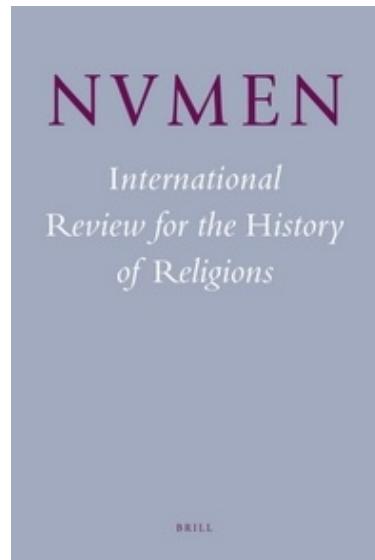
For the first time last year, the Islamic Defenders Front and other Islamists played a major role in deciding an election outcome in the capital. In that election, popular incumbent Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, known as Ahok, was challenged by the Islamic Defenders Front and other conservative organizations, who sometimes focused on his Chinese ethnicity and Christian faith. Ahok was later convicted of blasphemy for comments he made on the campaign trail and sentenced to two years in jail. The article notes that the leaders of both countries failed to pay attention to the rise of hardliners. Yet part of the support for political Islam is due to changes on the ground; Islamists have taken advantage of the weak public school systems in Indonesia and Malaysia, building hundreds of new private Islamic schools in Malaysia between 2011 and 2017. Indonesian Islamist groups also have become skillful organizers on social media. Kurlantzick concludes by noting that “Perhaps even more dangerous for Indonesia’s future, religious hard-liners are apparently building alliances with Prabowo Subianto, a former lieutenant general who...appears to be laying the groundwork for a populist-military-Islamist alliance for the 2019 election.”

(*Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org>)



## Findings & Footnotes

■ The current issue of the journal *Numen* (65) devotes several of its articles to religion and terrorism, especially focusing on how foreign policy still tends to downplay the religious dimensions of such forms of violence. Guest editors James Lewis and Lorne L. Dawson note how the “significance of a linkage between religion and political violence has been a thorn in the side of the dominant secularization paradigm in the social sciences for some time....” In a separate essay on the “curious erasure of religion” among those addressing terrorism, Dawson elaborates on how this secular bias has been seen more often in many of the academic and think-tank studies on terrorism written by psychologists, political scientists, international relations scholars and others over the last decade or more. The very religious first-hand accounts of terrorists themselves are still too often discounted by such experts or perceived as personal forms of radicalism or “fanaticism” that are isolated from these perpetrators’ actual beliefs.



Another article by Mark Juergensmeyer looks at the prospects for religious terrorism in a “post-ISIS” Sunni Arab culture. He writes that it is difficult to write the obituary of the Islamic State (IS), for its military and geographic dimensions may be eclipsed at the same time that its apocalyptic thrust (including terrorist violence throughout the world) finds new outlets and support. The IS has also been a movement for Sunni Islamic empowerment against Shia movements and regimes, and this need for power and the temptation toward extremism may continue unless there is some degree of conciliation between the two branches of the religion. Juergensmeyer concludes that “external conditions” such as rehabilitating IS fighters and giving Sunnis greater access to political life in Iraq and Syria, need to be addressed as much as internal ones.

For more information on this issue, visit: <https://brill.com/view/journals/nu/nu-overview.xml>.

■ The newly launched *Swiss Metadatabase of Religious Affiliation in Europe* (SMRE) attempts to provide statistics and consolidated estimates on religious affiliation for all European countries and regions, covering 50 countries and regions. Built by a team of researchers at the University of Lucerne under Antonius Liedhegener and Anatas Odermatt, in cooperation with several international partners such as the Pew Research Center, the database has been financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and is freely accessible. While statistical data about religious affiliation can be a sensitive topic in contemporary Europe, figures vary greatly. Interestingly, for several countries, the project assesses the data quality as being higher for the period 1996–2005 than the period 2006–2015. While the database may seem only to offer very general statistical information at first sight, exploring it further quickly reveals its usefulness, since it offers access to a wide range of primary information in one location. For instance, within the section “Countries and Regions,” one is able to select for each country the “Dataset Comparison” mode and to see side by side, as a table or graphical overview, the figures provided by each source, and thus the (sometimes significant) statistical variations across sources become obvious.

Depending on the data one chooses to use, different pictures emerge. The example of France is striking, as the researchers note in a working paper published in February. "Some statistics list [French] Catholics as high as 78.7 percent, some others as low as 36.7 percent." Based on their patient statistical work, the authors remark that, in most European countries, "the religious composition of its population is remarkably stable." However, Eastern and Western European countries have been "drifting apart somewhat in recent times." The authors note a Western European trend toward more religiously plural societies, "whereas influential Eastern [European] countries are becoming more homogeneous in terms of religious affiliation" (that is, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Azerbaijan). For more information on SMRE, visit: <https://www.smre-data.ch/>; more on the background, issues, purpose, methodology and results of SMRE can be found in a working paper by Liedhegener and Odermatt, available at: <https://www.smre-data.ch/en/content/download/159>



■ RW's editor, along with researchers K.T. Chun and Lina Villegas, recently published a denominational report in the *Review of Religious Research* (online in March) on ethnic church planting. Both evangelical and, more recently, mainline denominations have invested in planting churches targeted to ethnic groups, but there have been few studies on how these new churches relate to their denominations. Based on an ethnographic study of 15 congregations started within the past 10 years, we found most in our sample did show loose denominational ties. The report looks at how a combination of denominational cultural and structural factors and ethnic dynamics may play a role in such "denominational drift." The brief report can be downloaded at: <http://rdcu.be/l5k3>. Readers interested in getting the complete study can e-mail RW's editor.



■ *Dream Trippers* (University of Chicago Press, \$27.50), by David A. Palmer and Elijah Siegler, tells the complex story of how Daoism was reshaped in the West as a form of spirituality and then exported back to China—and then sometimes back again to the West. The term "dream trippers" refers to tours of Daoist holy sites in China by Western pilgrims organized by Healing Tao, one of America's main providers of Daoist practices such as meditation and healing. Among the most popular of these is the "Daoist qigong"

tour, but these programs, started in the early 2000s, are now offered by most American Daoist organizations. Through a decade of ethnographic research, Palmer and Siegler trace the “transnational circulation” of this popular form of Daoism, raising questions about the authenticity and ethics of “appropriating” foreign religions for Western consumption and entrepreneurialism. The book is especially interesting in portraying the miscomprehension and wary encounters between “native” Chinese Daoist practitioners and Western converts.

These converts distinguish institutional religion (especially the Christianity of their upbringing) and its moralism and dualism from the perceived subjective and holistic nature of Daoism. The Daoism practiced in China developed in the crucible of Chinese national identity and Confucianism, and stresses a collective more than an individualistic identity. The notions of priesthood and ordination in Western Daoism come from Catholic sources in the U.S. rather than China. The authors take a critical stance toward both the Western Daoist pilgrims and the Chinese Daoist “traditionalists.” Their case study of both groups’ confrontation with each other at a Chinese Daoist monastery reveals, under modernity, the “fragility of a fully autonomous spiritual self on the one hand, and the crumbling away of the traditional authority of Chinese Daoism on the other.” Palmer and Siegler conclude by describing a wedding ceremony the dream trippers invent on their tour that is a hybrid (“third culture”) between Western individual spirituality and China’s Daoist traditionalism, while leaving it up to the reader to decide its authenticity.

