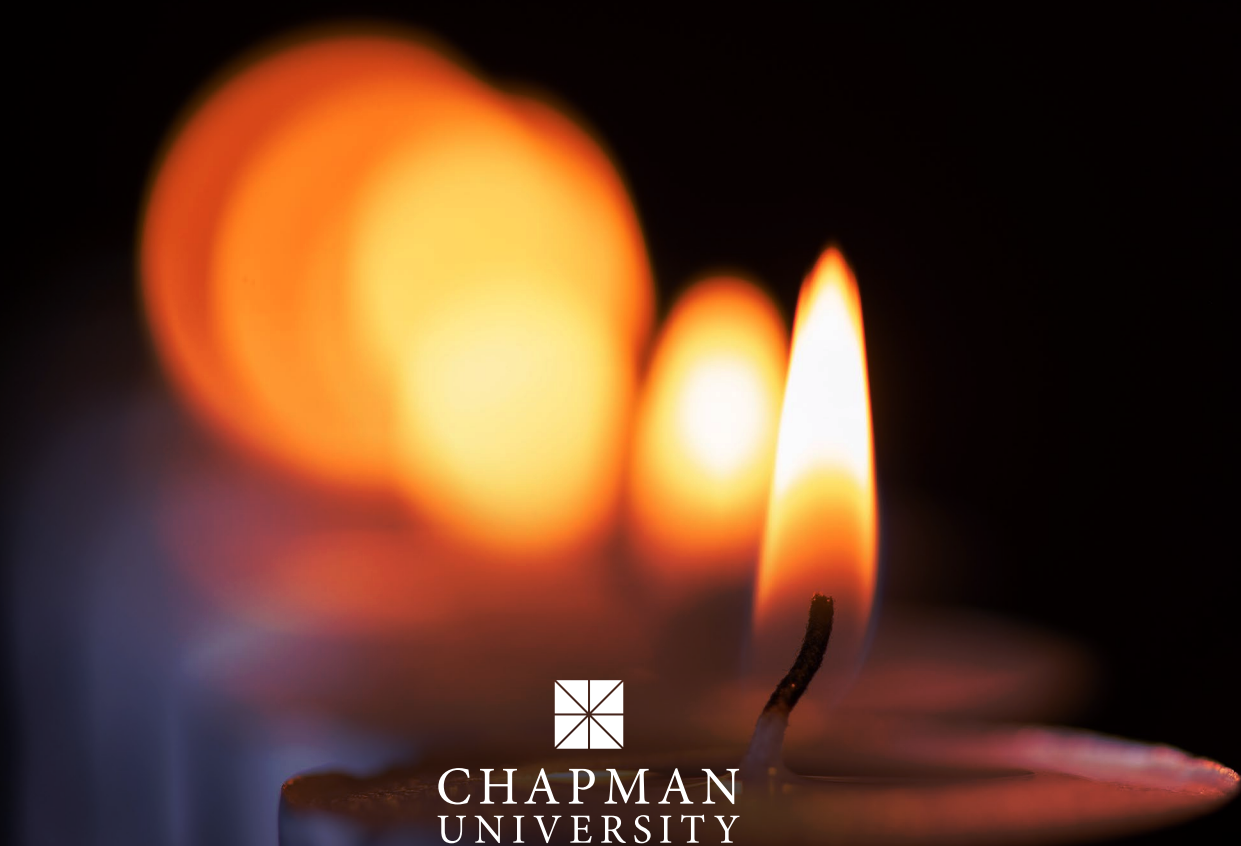

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IS THERE A NEW RELIGIOUS REVIVAL?

Bheki Mahlobo & Joel Kotkin



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Executive Summary

“For most of the past century, religion was widely assumed to be suffering inexorable decline. Faith was largely seen as the detritus of history, a backward array of superstitions with little utility in the modern era. Its triumph could only be counted among the “pretty thick.”¹

Once society became affluent and educated, it was generally argued that people would instead find satisfaction in the secular triumphs of comfort, convenience, and higher living standards. The expectation was linear and uniform, ending in the discarding of the rituals and metaphysical claims of the past.

The decline of religion remains a fundamental reality in most Western countries, particularly in Europe where over 50 percent of those under age 40 do not identify with any religion.² Even in more religious America, according to one expert, there may be as many as 100,000 empty churches over the next few years.³ Meanwhile the ranks of “Nones”, those outside religious communities, have grown so large that, taken together they are as numerous as the Catholics or evangelical Protestants in the US.⁴

Yet surprisingly there are signs that religion is already enjoying more than a nascent revival. This is not to exaggerate — secularism remains deeply entrenched — but there is clearly something afoot. The data emerging from the 2020s suggest not that we are witnessing the burial of a dead God but a complex spiritual restructuring that intersects with economic mobility, demographic resilience, and a profound intellectual realignment.

To be sure, this shift is far from universal and the general trend away from religion remains in place and is particularly marked among the Millennials.⁵ Yet, for the first time in decades, Pew now notes, in the US at least, Christianity has pulled out of its nosedive as more people begin to see the efficacy, and the rewards, of religious faith and practice.⁶ There are some signs, for example, of rising church attendance among Gen Z, notably men.⁷

“...for the first time in decades, Pew now notes, in the US at least, Christianity has stopped its nosedive”

This report attempts to measure three specific dimensions of what appears to be a growing, albeit still modest, shift away from strict secularism. First, we examine the rising social utility of faith. This section challenges the persistent stereotype that religious adherence acts as a cognitive or economic drag on individuals. Indeed, longitudinal data from the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa reveal that religious communities function as potent engines of human capital accumulation, risk mitigation, and social capital. These mechanisms effectively propel adherents up the socioeconomic ladder.

Then we analyze the drivers of the contemporary religious revival. Even in places where religion continues to decline, among the remaining faithful the shift is away from more liberal faiths to those hewing closer to traditional values. For many, traditional religion provides existential security and creates a sustainable sense of community, particularly among people coping with modern atomization. Over time, this shift could power a demographic resurgence reflecting the significant fertility advantage of faithful populations, most notably in Africa.

Third, the report documents a shift in the epistemic upper class. This group is defined as the scientists, philosophers, and public intellectuals who shape the boundaries of acceptable discourse. The aggressive New Atheism of the early 2000s is now challenged by a countermovement in the scientific community that views religious tradition not as a delusion to be eradicated but as a sustainable civilization operating system. Bolstered by demographic shifts, this movement may presage an intentional return to faith that could alter with our understanding of what it is to be modern.

Part I: The Effectiveness of Faith

The relationship between religiosity and socioeconomic status is one of the most contentious areas of modern sociology. A prevalent stereotype, often fueled by psychological studies in the 1920s, suggests a negative correlation between intelligence and religious belief. Yet two meta-analyses in 2013 and 2022 found a very small gap between believers and non-believers of roughly -0.14 between psychometric intelligence and religiosity.⁸

However, raw intelligence is a poor proxy for economic success or life outcomes. When the analysis shifts to economic metrics such as income mobility, wealth accumulation, and educational attainment, the most recent data reveals that religious participation is frequently a robust predictor of success.

One subtle effect, most importantly for the poor, is the connectedness that religious institutions provide with the more affluent. This is a critical factor for success, as laid out in the Social Capital Atlas project led by Harvard economist Raj Chetty. Utilizing privacy-protected data from 21 billion Facebook friendships linked to tax records and census data, the report found the degree of social interaction between low-income and high-income individuals to be the single strongest predictor of whether a poor child would rise out of poverty. High exposure to wealthier peers increases lifetime earnings by an average of 20 percent.⁹

Chetty's team found that poorer people are more in contact with the affluent at religious institutions than in secular institutions like high schools, colleges, and workplaces. A low-income individual attending a religious congregation is significantly more likely to form a meaningful friendship with a high-income congregant than they would in a workplace, school, or neighborhood group.¹⁰

That success in capitalist societies would be linked to religion should not come as a total surprise. Modern capitalism, after all, has its roots, notes Rodney Stark, in deeply Catholic Italy.¹¹ Rather than a boost toward upward mobility, the decline in religious attendance in the United States undermined the opportunity infrastructure available to the working class.¹²

The Education Edge

A central tenet of secularization theory was that higher education would inevitably lead to lower religiosity. This pattern still holds in Europe, but in the United States the 2022–2023 Cooperative Election Study, which included nearly 85,000 respondents, indicates a positive correlation between educational attainment and religious attendance. High school graduates report attending weekly religious services at a rate of approximately 23 percent, whereas graduate degree holders report weekly attendance at a rate of approximately 30 percent.¹³ Rather than a sign of cognitive underperformance, the clear positive link between education and attendance suggests that religion is becoming an elite marker in America. This trend is corroborated by analyses of the Cooperative Election Study, which show that while belief in biblical literalism declines with education, communal participation does not; in fact, Americans with advanced degrees are often the most active participants in their congregations.¹⁴

This trend is corroborated by Pew Research Center data, which found that while belief in biblical literalism declines with education, participation in religious community does not. In fact, highly educated Christians are often the most active participants in their congregations.¹⁵ Church attendance, noted one study now 20-year-old study in Demography, suggests regular attendance extends longevity after age 20 by seven years.¹⁶

The health implications of this class gap also are robust. While older research estimated a seven-year longevity boost, a major update from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that attending services more than once a week is associated with a 33% lower risk of all-cause mortality. Conversely, the collapse of attendance among the working class has been linked by economists Case and Deaton to the rising ‘deaths of despair’—suggesting that the protective benefits of religious community are increasingly reserved for the educated elite.¹⁷

Increasingly, at least in the United States, religious affiliation has evolved into form of elite social behavior linked to stability, community leadership, and bourgeois respectability. Indeed, a deep dive into the data shows that, over the last 15 years, religiously engaged people have become more likely to be well-educated, while atheists are less so. Generally, the nones tend to be somewhat less schooled than their more religious counterparts.¹⁸

These findings shatter the notion that religious people are generally less curious, less ambitious, and less intelligent than their non-believing counterparts.¹⁹ Religious groups such as Jews and Hindus, as well as Episcopalians, outperform atheists and agnostics while many others, including Mormons, Lutherans, and other Protestant groups, do as well.²⁰

Table 1: Comparative Weekly Religious Attendance by Education Level

Education Level	United States (%)	Europe (Average %)
High School / Secondary	23%	15%
Some College / Associate	26%	12%
Bachelor’s Degree	28%	9%
Post-Graduate Degree	30%	7%

Data synthesized from Cooperative Election Study (US) and European Social Survey (Europe), 2024.

One explanation for the differences between Europe and America lies with structural factors. In Europe, religion is often viewed as a relic of a pre-modern state-imposed social order.²¹ In the first major country to de-establish state religion, faith has a greater hold. It’s clear, at least for now, that while European data confirms that higher education is strongly correlated with secularism, this is not inevitable but deeply structural. In the United States, religion is a voluntary engine of social capital, whereas in Europe it has retreated to the margins.

Nowhere is the efficacy of religion more obvious than among poorer Americans. In the South Bronx, LA’s barrios, or Houston’s heavily immigrant Sharpstown, educators are having marked

success with young people from very poor backgrounds.²² Inner city boys who attend religious school, notes Tulane sociologist Ilana Horwitz, do far better and are twice as likely to graduate from college as their socio-economic counterparts attending public schools.²³ Critical here, notes Horwitz, are the attributes of the religiously engaged, such as respect for elders and learning, with the deepest divergence seen among working- and middle-class children.²⁴

Nationwide, enrollment in private Christian schools shot up in recent years. As New York City schools are emptying, Catholic-oriented charters have doubled their enrollments.²⁵ K-12 enrollment at the Association of Christian Schools International, “one of the country’s largest networks of evangelical schools,” increased 12% between the 2019 and 2020 school years.²⁶ That jump mirrors other migrations out of the public-school systems, including a doubling of the percentage of kids being homeschooled. In the 2019-20 school year, 6% of all American students, some 3.5 million, attended religious schools.²⁷ The rise of voucher programs, including in such large states as Texas and Florida, has largely benefited religiously oriented schools.²⁸

The Paradox of Pentecostalism in the Global South

Christianity does best among people seeking to improve their lives, most notably in Africa and in immigrant communities. In London, for example, on Sundays a majority of worshippers are from Africa, the Caribbean, and other non-white countries.²⁹ In the Global South, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, Pentecostalism has become a primary platform for upward mobility among the urban poor. In many traditional African societies, surplus wealth is subject to strong redistributive pressures from the extended family and tribe, making capital accumulation difficult. Pentecostal conversion offers a theological mechanism for rupture, which allows believers to break ties with what they view as demonic ancestral traditions and, by extension, the financial drain of the extended kin network.³⁰

Table 2: Intergenerational Educational Mobility in Nigeria

Religious Group	Mobility Rate (Probability of Literacy given Illiterate Parents)
Christian	0.786
Muslim	0.466
Traditionalist	0.229

Data Source: Brown University / Nature Study.³¹

The roots of Africa’s Christian revival lie with missionaries who established schools during the colonial era to attract converts. Regions that were evangelized early have a massive infrastructure advantage. Conversely, Muslim communities often resisted colonial education to preserve cultural identity, a legacy that persists in under-investment in Muslim-majority districts. However, the study notes that in regions where Muslims are a minority living among Christians, their

mobility rates often equal or surpass their Christian peers, suggesting that competition, interaction with others, and minority status can drive rapid adaptation.³²

Religion as Social Insurance

In many countries and communities, religion acts as a substitute for government welfare, particularly in environments with weak state capacity and unsteady economies. A study of the US South during the 20th century found that church membership was significantly higher in counties with high exposure to oil price volatility. In the absence of robust banking or state safety nets, religious communities provided insurance such as emergency cash, food, and job referrals that allowed families to survive market shocks.³³

Similarly, in the Middle East, where economic and political conditions are often unstable, Islam plays a crucial non-governmental role. As in Christianity, Islam commands the affluent to help the poor.³⁴ “The believer’s share on the Day of Resurrection will be his charity,” wrote the tenth century Islamic scholar Al-Tirmidhi.³⁵ In recent decades, the Muslim Brotherhood, in addition to its embrace of violent terrorism, built its mass base by providing a parallel welfare state. Its network of hospitals, schools, and emergency aid functions more efficiently than the government’s corrupt bureaucracy. This linked piety directly to material survival and upward mobility for the lower-middle class.³⁶

In East Asia, Buddhist and Hindu sects play a similar role.³⁷ One of the most well-known and largest charitable institutions in Taiwan is a global Buddhist organization known as the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, the largest owner of private land in the country. Many believe that the foundation, whose assets are not publicly disclosed, is the wealthiest in Asia.³⁸

Throughout US history, religion has played an important role in addressing the problems facing the poor, immigrants, and those displaced by economic change. The Catholic Church, for many new migrants from Ireland, Poland, Italy, and other European countries loyal to Rome often sponsored specific ethnic festivals “merging neighborhood and religion organized life.”³⁹

In New York, Catholic churches in the 19th century provided many of the same services as they do for newcomers today. John Hughes, an Irish immigrant gardener who became New York’s first Catholic archbishop, expanded parochial schools that helped turn a predominately poor and relatively uneducated population into one where white Catholics now constitute a group with well above average earnings and education levels, according to research from Duke’s Lisa A. Keister.⁴⁰ The Seton Academies are hoping to do for today’s poor what worked for Irish, Polish, and Italian communities during their periods of major immigration.⁴¹

The pattern of religiously inspired self-help aided other newcomers, such as Jews, through groups like the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, as well as local synagogues, to adjust to the new country, find them lodging, employment and also means to combat still pervasive discrimination.⁴² Much the same pattern occurred in Britain.⁴³

Black churches in East Texas, notes historian Scott Sosebee, provided “the foundation of social life, the institution that served as a cohesive bond for the entire community.” As with other

religious traditions, the Black churches served as “an extended family” that helped raise children, providing aid to families in distress and comforting those in despair.⁴⁴

Besides education, religious groups continue to play an outsized role in providing charitable services. Three quarters of all who attend church weekly give to the poor, compared to 41 percent among the non-observants.⁴⁵

“Overall, 73 percent of all charitable contributions come from religious sources while 60 percent of all beds for the homeless are provided by faith-based institutions.”⁴⁶

Indeed, when volunteerism has been on decline among the young,⁴⁷ the young religious are more likely to perform community work than their nonreligious Gen Z counterparts.⁴⁸ Data from a nationally representative survey of nearly 2,000 young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 coordinated by Neighborly Faith reveals that half of religious Gen Zers report volunteering in the community often or very often, compared to 30 percent of “slightly religious” Gen Zers and just 21 percent of “not religious” Gen Zers.⁴⁹

The Crisis of Community: Bowling Alone No More

Religion provides a critical sense of community and ties that are more tangible than those found online at school, or in the workplace. For instance, just 10 percent of religious observants say they have no close friends; the number is almost double among those who profess no faith.⁵⁰ For young families, in particular, religious institutions such as church offer a village to raise children in an era of atomized parenting. This functional utility is a major driver of individuals returning to church in their thirties.⁵¹

The church, notes leading Protestant intellectual Aaron Renn, provides a mechanism, particularly for the young, to escape the loneliness and alienation associated with the “Negative world.”⁵² As discussed above, this attraction is not restricted to evangelical Protestants. The Catholic experience in America’s cities shows how churches can provide an alternative set of institutions that author John T. McGreevy describes as “community as a set of practices distinct from either economic self-interest or bureaucratic obligation.” Even though plagued at times by racial and ethnic division, the church’s role was “not merely socially useful but “part of a gospel obligation.”⁵³

In the end, the growing evidence of religion’s utility, including its provision of spiritual anchor, seems likely to grow by offering a viable alternative to hyper competitiveness and individualism rife in secular-driven societies.

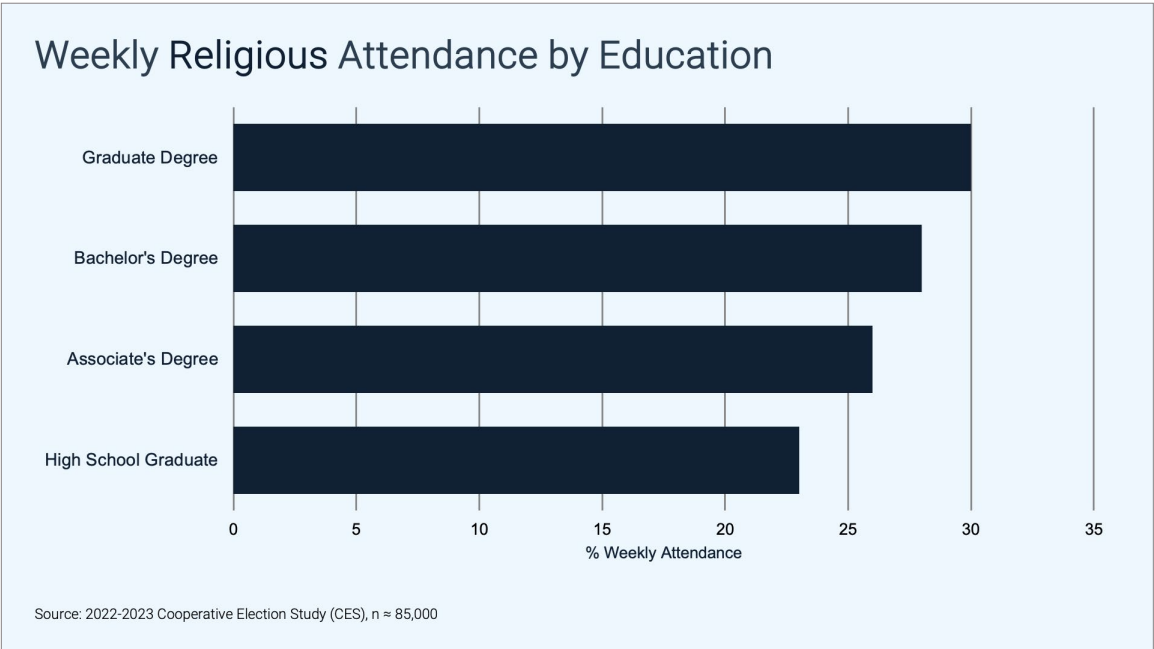
Part II: The Drivers of Religious Revival

Today’s nascent religious revival is very different from those of the past. For centuries, religious institutions sought to preserve their privileged position while offering modes of explanation of the universe and providing critical assistance, from medical care to education.⁵⁴ With the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, belief in God declined, at least among the well-educated.⁵⁵ Faith eroded further during the Industrial Revolution, which tore workers from their villages and landed them in bleak urban dystopias.⁵⁶

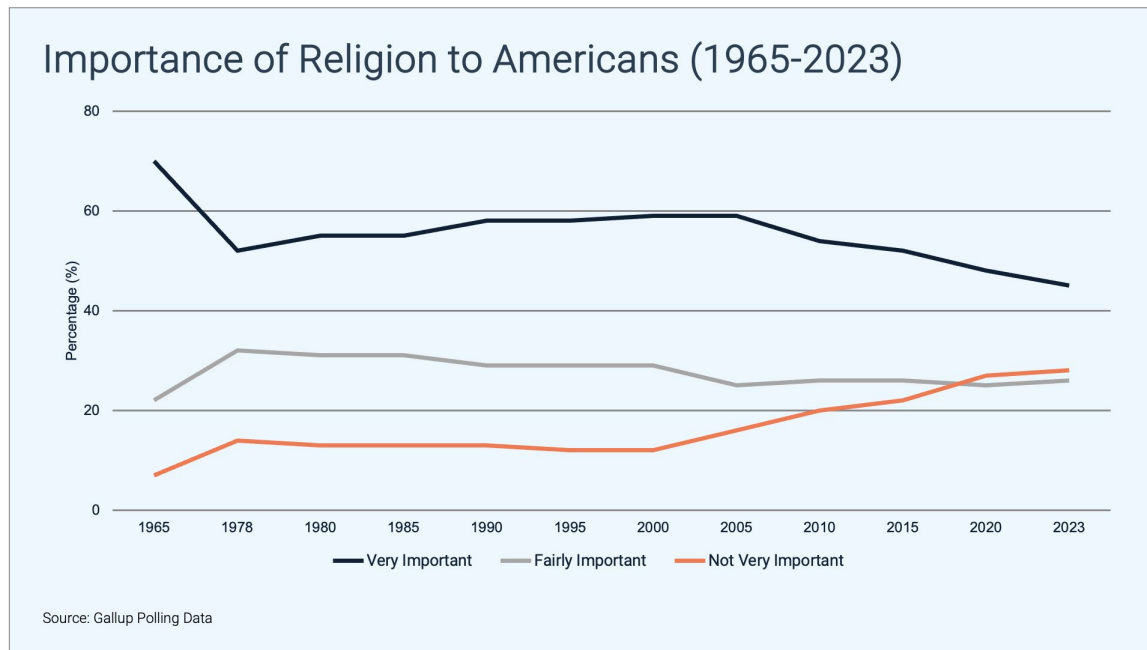
By the 20th century, old religious values were increasingly supplanted by racist politics or materialist philosophy, epitomized by both fascism and Communism.⁵⁷ Even today, China, the world’s last great Marxist power, takes an often-repressive approach towards both Christian and Muslim worship.⁵⁸ Some accounts suggest that these efforts have failed to suppress growing interest in both the Abrahamic faiths as well as more traditional Buddhism and Taoism.⁵⁹

In the West, religion experienced something of a recovery in the 1950s, an era of resurgent traditionalism.⁶⁰ But by the 1960s, the tide turned first in intellectual circles, inspired in part by postmodernist thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who denounced religion as a screen for the oppression of both society and the individual. In recent decades causes like climate catastrophism, transgenderism, and “anti-colonialism” have taken on a religious cast. The social scholar Jean Twenge, who is very negative about religion’s prospects, thinks these “political groups may for some replace the traditional faith.”⁶¹

Indeed, if we judge by generation, both millennials and Generation Z remain far less committed to religious observance, notes religious scholar Ryan Burge. It would take a full-scale religious revival – which seems unlikely – to narrow this age-related gap significantly.⁶²



To be sure in the past few decades what one author described as “comfortable Christendom”⁶³ has experienced a steady decline. In 1965, a [Gallup poll](#) found that 70% of respondents said religion is “very important” in their lives. Today, fewer than half of Americans (45%) agree.⁶⁴ In Europe, the portion of the populations claiming religion is important stands at one-third. If there’s a hot religion in Scandinavia today it might well be paganism, growing rapidly in Sweden, and now the second largest faith in Iceland.⁶⁵



Such phenomena has led some religious conservatives, like *The New York Times*' [Ross Douthat](#), to see the imminence of “an age of extinction, a world bereft of churches, community and families.” Yet pessimists, like some religious enthusiasts, may be overstating their case. Over the past quarter millennia God has died so many times that he must believe in reincarnation.

The Crisis of Meaning

To be sure, there is considerable evidence, much of it anecdotal, that faith is again gaining adherents, even in Europe. Last year there was 45 percent growth in 2025 of people being baptized in France.⁶⁶ In the UK, according to an April study by the Bible Society, the number of 18- to 24-year-olds saying they attended church at least monthly has quadrupled from 4% in 2018 to 16% today. Among young men, it's jumped 21%. Most of this growth is concentrated among Catholics as well as Pentecostals; the Bible society suggests there are now more than two million more people attending church than in the last decade.⁶⁷

In the US there are also signs of a [spiritual hunger](#) spreading in society, according to Pew, with relatively few “nones” identifying as either atheist or agnostic.⁶⁸ One recent survey showed that young people are increasing their embrace of a higher power, often using [the internet](#) to access traditional beliefs.⁶⁹ Research also suggests that most Gen Z teens are more interested

in learning more about Jesus, with younger cohorts leading the way in the growth of new commitments.⁷⁰

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This is particularly pronounced among men, marking the closing of the so called “God Gap” between the sexes.⁷¹ In a departure from historic norms in the US and UK, Gen Z men are now retaining or adopting Christian identity at rates equal to or higher than their female peers.⁷² Many young men report feeling culturally dislocated or villainized by progressive secular discourse regarding masculinity. Traditional forms of Christianity, particularly Catholicism and Orthodoxy, offer a narrative of responsibility, sacrifice, and hierarchy that appeals to men seeking a defined role in a fluid world.

“In a marked departure from historic norms, in the US and UK, Gen Z men are now retaining or adopting Christian identity at rates equal to or higher than their female peers.

Public intellectuals like Jordan Peterson have played a crucial role in re-enchanting the Bible for a secular male audience. By framing biblical narratives as psychological maps for meaning rather than just metaphysical claims, they create an on ramp for secular men to enter religious spaces. The internet has further facilitated this through the rise of digital orthodoxy, where the aesthetic of antiquity and rigorous discipline appeals to young men over the spiritual vacuity of modern life.⁷³

This shift has been accelerated by events of the 2020s, including the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical instability, and inflation, which have sparked a sense of deep insecurity in the West, triggering religious reflexes. In secular societies like Japan and Thailand, researchers observed a surge in youth engagement with Shinto and Buddhist rituals. Digital natives, facing isolation and the reality of death, have turned to ancient practices to ground themselves.⁷⁴

Even in officially and often repressively atheist China, the “lying flat” movement, a youth rejection of the hyper-competitive work culture, has been accompanied by a quiet turn toward spirituality. For these young people, secular materialism has failed to deliver happiness, leading to a search for transcendent meaning that the Communist Party cannot provide. Veteran journalist Ian Johnson suggests this tendency aligns with a longstanding Chinese interest in achieving “moral certainty” in ways the Communist Party may be unable to provide.⁷⁵

In the West, the appeal of religious faith has been accelerated by positive impacts on personal health. Participation in church generally also correlates, according to a recent Harvard study, with better health outcomes and longer life, as well as with more stable families, which constitutes a critical key to financial stability and success.⁷⁶

Religion may also offer one answer to the pervasive anxiety and social isolation that are particularly acute among the social media-influenced young.⁷⁷ Some congregations now work assiduously to disconnect from their phones, even taking month-long breaks from digital activities.⁷⁸ These shifts represent something of a rejection of the technology-driven ultra individualist ethos, where people create their own “authentic culture,” that dominates much of the high-income world.⁷⁹ Interviewing recent Christian converts in Britain, author Adrian Wooldridge found:

“Hovering over this is a crisis of meaning. Politicians deal in empty sound bites. The internet serves up a toxic stew. The more instant gratification modern technology provides, the more it leaves people dissatisfied. Why not turn to divine truths when the secular world seems so devoid of either hope or meaning?”⁸⁰

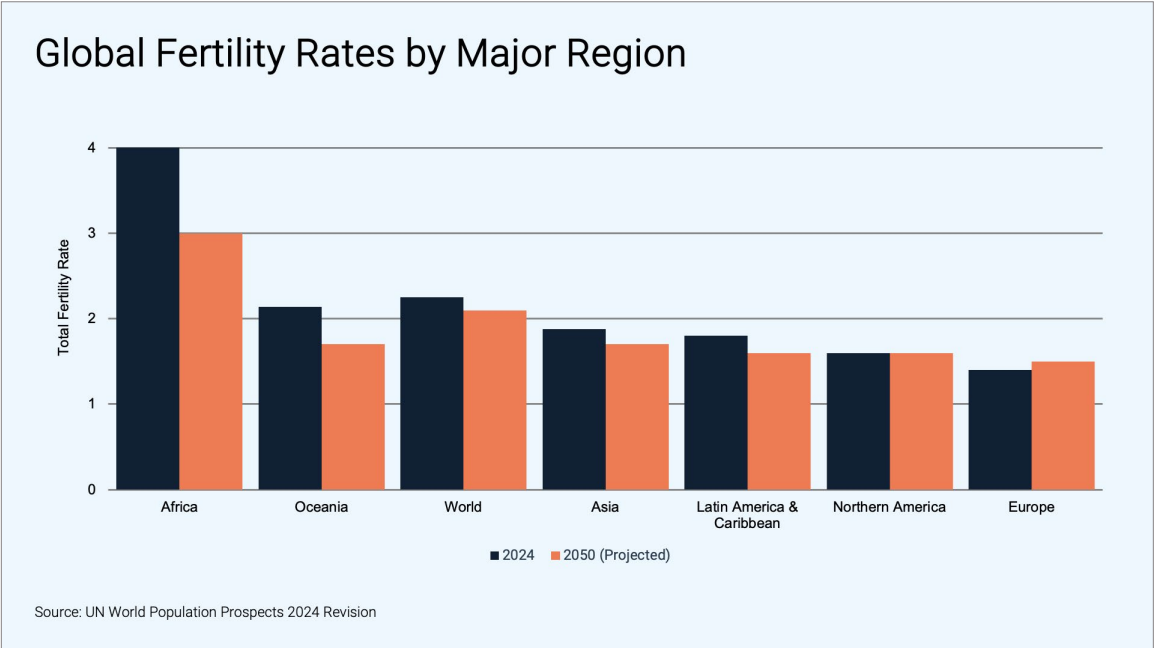
Demography is Destiny: The Fertility Advantage of Faithful

However startling, today’s shifts likely will continue to struggle against the deeply entrenched secular trend. But over time, the higher fertility of the faithful will guarantee greater religious ascendancy. Political scientist Eric Kaufmann, in *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?* argues that secularism acts as a contraceptive ideology, making marriage and child-bearing less attractive than for those who embrace faith.

In secular Western Europe, a direct statistical link has been established between prayer and fertility. Women who report never praying have significantly fewer children than those who do, even after controlling for income and education. This suggests that the religious worldview—specifically the valuation of the future and the commandment to be fruitful—is a stronger driver of fertility than economic incentives.⁸¹ In contrast, the religiously unaffiliated are projected to shrink as a percentage of the global population because their fertility rates are well below replacement level.⁸²

This is not a new trend, but, notes Chapman Universities, Larry Iannaccone, but started as early as a half century ago, particularly in Catholic countries. For example, once religiously oriented Italy and Spain, observance has plummeted while fertility has gone from above that of

Protestant countries to less. There is a clear connection between lower religious commitment and fertility rates.⁸³



In the past, high fertility in religious groups was often offset by high rates of apostasy. However, retention rates in the most intense religious communities, such as ultra-Orthodox Jews and conservative Evangelicals, are rising. As secular culture becomes more distinct from religious culture, the exit costs increase, and religious subcultures become more insulated and self-sustaining.⁸⁴ In Israel, the very religious Haredim are projected to become fifty percent of the population by 2065. Israeli Judaism seems destined to divert from its largely more secular counterparts in the diaspora.⁸⁵

Part III: From New Atheism to “New Theism” and Post-Secularism

Critically, these changes are occurring even in intellectual circles. The early 2000s were defined by the New Atheism of figures like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, who spoke of religion as a dangerous delusion. By 2025, this movement has largely exhausted itself, replaced by nuanced curiosity and, in some cases, a robust defense of religion among the epistemic elite.⁸⁶

This faith-oriented trend began as early as two decades ago. Even the Marxist author Mike Davis conceded that “for the moment at least, Marx has yielded the historic stage to Muhammed and the Holy Ghost.”⁸⁷ This may be an exaggeration but in recent years more public intellectuals have publicly converted to Christianity or adopted a pro-Christian secular stance, arguing that Western civilization cannot survive without its theological foundations. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former Muslim and once a prominent New Atheist, announced her conversion to Christianity in late 2023. In her essay “Why I Am Now a Christian,” she argued that secular humanism failed to provide the moral resources necessary to combat authoritarianism and the erosion of Western values.⁸⁸

Historian Tom Holland’s influential book *Dominion* argued that concepts like human rights, equality, and secularism itself have their intellectual and spiritual roots in Christian theology.⁸⁹ Even Richard Dawkins identified himself as a “Cultural Christian” in 2024, expressing a preference for a Christian ethos over the alternatives, a significant retreat from his earlier anti-theist absolutism.⁹⁰ Russell Brand’s public baptism in 2024 exemplifies the chaos-to-order narrative. For celebrities and influencers navigating the nihilism of fame, Christianity is increasingly seen not as a set of rules but as a technology for sanity and integration.⁹¹

Scientists and the “Conflict Thesis”

Among the most critical developments regards science and religion. Sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund’s surveys of scientists in eight regions, including the US, UK, Turkey, India, and Taiwan, reveal that scientists in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and India, are often *more* religious than the general public. These men and women of reason view science and religion as overlapping or complementary spheres, not enemies.⁹²

This perspective is emerging in the US as well. Younger scientists under the age of thirty-five are more likely to attend religious services than the older Baby Boomer cohort, suggesting that the rigid secularism of the academy is softening with the new generation.⁹³ In addition, a significant portion of atheist scientists describe themselves as “spiritual,” engaging in practices of awe and wonder that function similarly to religious devotion.⁹⁴

The intellectual framework for this shift was laid by Jürgen Habermas, widely considered the world’s leading philosopher of rationality. In a dramatic reversal, by 2001 Habermas argued that the secular state lives on borrowed capital, relying on moral motivations like solidarity and sacrifice that it cannot generate itself. He advocated what he calls the “Post-Secular Society” where secularism sheds its arrogance and engages again with religious traditions. Habermas argues

that religious communities bear intuitions about human dignity and justice that secular reason has lost and urgently needs to prevent the further commodification of human life.⁹⁵

More scientists are beginning to realize that religious values are a pre-condition of restoring the dignity of humans and understanding them more than collections of natural systems that are intrinsically not much different from other beings, and potentially inferior to the machine minds we create.

Generally many of the best known science figures of our times — Stephen Hawking, Bill Nye, and Neil de Grasse Tyson — have been vocal atheists. Their view of the world, in the words of Richard Dawkins, offers a universe driven by “blind, pitiless indifference,” reflecting what Marilynne Robinson calls “a neo-Hobbsism.”⁹⁶

The shift away from such views reflects not departure but a return to historical norms. As historian Rodney Stark has observed, many early Christian fathers saw science as revelatory of divine presence. Stark suggests that Mosaic religion posits that God is “a rational being and the universe was his personal creation,” leading Christians to yearn for ever greater “human comprehension” of his work.⁹⁷

In the dark ages, the centuries following the fall of the Western Roman Empire, monks were in the forefront of systematizing knowledge, a key precursor to scientific discovery. At a time when the light of learning was dimmest, they preserved the classical scientific traditions and in some cases, as with the Bishop of Lincoln in the 12th Century, actually developed new insights into the physical world.



Illustration of Roger Bacon in Franciscan robes balancing the physical elements of fire and water. Bacon was a major medieval proponent of experimental science. Source: Wikimedia, in Public Domain

As physicist William Barr suggests, many Enlightenment scientists – from Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton to Johannes Kepler and Blaise Pascal—openly embraced religion as they plumbed the frontiers of science. Late in life Einstein, noting that his theories devastated notions of a static universe, moved from an agnostic orientation to one that acknowledges what he called “a cosmic religious feeling.” Einstein’s German contemporary, Werner Heisenberg, described a similar transformation:

“The first gulp of the natural sciences will turn you into an atheist,” he wrote, “but at the bottom of the glass God is waiting for you.”⁹⁸

Similar shifts are also taking place among biologists. New discoveries in molecular biology, notably the structure of DNA, notes Stephen Meyer, suggest that evolution is far less predictable than assumed, and that mutations alone may not fully explain how the organic world and humanity emerged. The Darwinian notion of humanity, as Jonathan Leaf has demonstrated, based on evolution from primates, may itself not be as solidly based as many have assumed.⁹⁹ “The new discoveries in science push us in this direction,” notes Meyer, who received his Ph.D. in the philosophy of science from the University of Cambridge and now directs the Discovery Institute’s Center for Science and Culture in Seattle.¹⁰⁰

There are sign of a revival even in the technological heartland of secular America – Silicon Valley. This is a region where faith in technology sometimes even embraces a merger with machines and assumes that humans are destined for extinction by their more intelligent non-human offspring. As one enthusiast puts it, our mission is not improving humanity but instead “converting non-life into mind.”¹⁰¹



Our Lady of Peace Church in Santa Clara, California. Source: YouTube.

Yet today, the world’s most important innovator, Elon Musk, has recently become more public in his embrace of Christianity, which he described as “a religion of curiosity” and “greater enlightenment.”¹⁰² This embrace of religion extends across a once solidly secular elite; people like Pat Gelsinger, former head of Intel, Gary Tan, CEO of Y Incubator, and Peter Thiel have now openly embraced Christianity.¹⁰³

Even as companies like Google host drag shows, and Christianity is, as one observer notes, “borderline illegal,”¹⁰⁴ the congregation of the Catholic Our Lady of Peace church, located in Santa Clara, has burgeoned to over 3,000 families and, according to Father Brian Dinkel, hears an estimated 50,000 confessions a year. “People who may be doing well also want something more,” notes Dinkel. “Our people work at Google and Apple but there’s a real search for the truth beyond tech.”



Father Brian Dinkel. Source: YouTube.

Part IV: Religion's Reemergence and What it Means

The Christian talk show host, Justin Brierley, suggests that we are witnessing “the fall of the New Atheism.”¹⁰⁵ This statement may seem premature. But it is entirely plausible to suggest our religious recovery may be just starting, particularly in an era when the population bomb has morphed into the population deficit that will, over time, devastate secularist, childless populations.¹⁰⁶

Yet it is critical to understand that the current revival will not, and should not, be something that, as often happened in the past, comes as a mandate. It has, quite rightly, evolved into a question of personal choice. Instead, we are moving from cultural religion to intentional religion. People brought up with little faith do not necessarily return to the religion of their grandparents but to one of their own choosing.¹⁰⁷

People are increasingly either secular or deeply devout. Gen Z, notes Aaron Renn, are the first generation free from boomer paradigms, and are “taking a new look at a very changed landscape.”¹⁰⁸ Brought up in a decidedly hostile environment for religion, they come at the issue with a zeal that often embraces conservative positions anathema in the secular establishment. Conservative intellectuals — like Jordan Peterson, Sohrab Ahmari, and JD Vance — ever more identify with religion, both traditional Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and evangelical beliefs.¹⁰⁹



TV series, *The Saints*, a Martin Scorsese project, Source: YouTube trailer

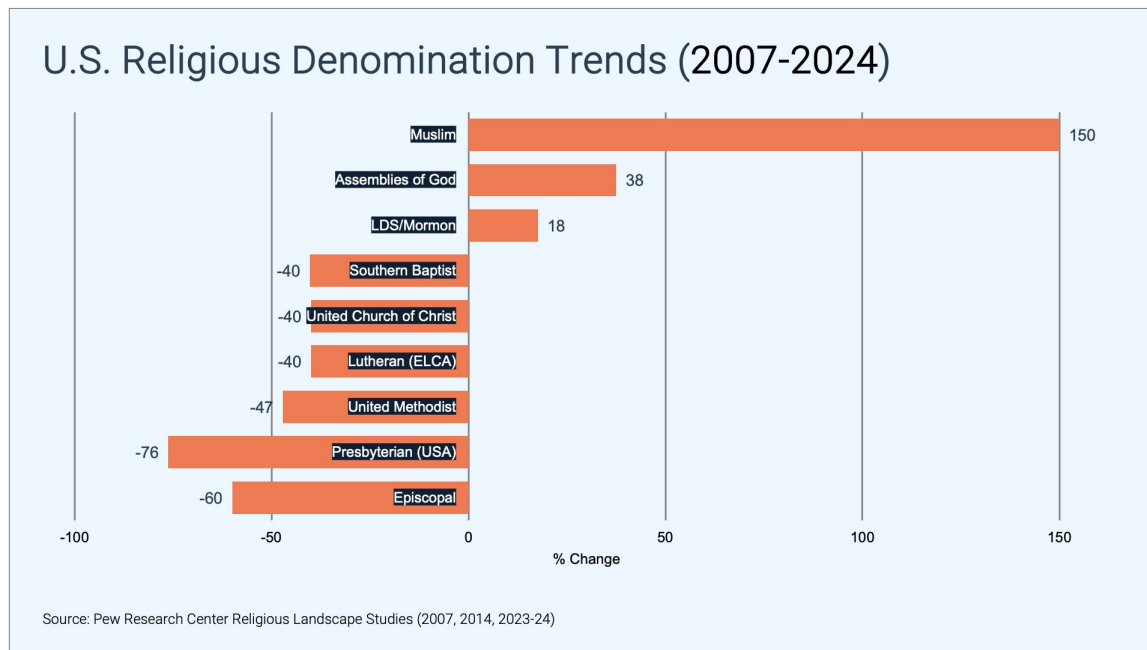
This change in attitude can even be seen in the cultural world, which has been for decades largely hostile to organized faith.¹¹⁰ The successes of films like *The Passion of the Christ*, even with dialogue largely in Aramaic, or two highly profitable movies based on CS Lewis' Narnia series demonstrated this appeal a decade ago.¹¹¹ Faith-oriented productions have been on the

upswing both here and abroad.¹¹² Legacy Productions has won a large audience with its King David miniseries, which gained over 44 million viewers and was Prime's most popular program last year.¹¹³ Today one of our era's most renowned directors, one not known for his religious values, is producing a series called "Martin Scorsese Presents the Saints," dealing with the martyrs of Christianity rather than the Mafiosi, drug addicts, and lost souls who dominated his former oeuvre.¹¹⁴

The Shift to "Full Fat" Religion

Many new adherents crave what Wooldridge describes as "a full-fat version of Christianity." Raised in what he calls "Peak Secularization," these converts eschew the liberal pieties of the modern mainstream church and seek a religion that requires intellectual and personal commitment and demands personal discipline.¹¹⁵

Such changes in religious observance have been a common feature throughout history. Even in the Catholic dominated Europe of the Middle Ages charismatic preachers challenged the faith and sometime led the faithful away from their supposed ecclesiastical superiors. Plague, poverty, and insecurity often drove people to seek out those who promised to secure the future with God's blessing.¹¹⁶



Today any religious revival will not rescue mainline Protestantism, once a primary cultural and political pillar of American life. Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and others now account for less than 11 percent of the population, down 40 percent since 2007, according to the Pew Religious Landscape Study.¹¹⁷ Since 1960, for example, the Episcopalian share of population has dropped by two thirds, the Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ by even more. Lutherans and even Baptists have seen their share shrink by 50%.¹¹⁸ Progressive

dominated sects like the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, and the United Church of Christ are experiencing what one analyst described as “a bloodbath,” with membership down at least 30% since the 1990s.¹¹⁹

Much the same can be seen in Germany, the birthplace of Lutheranism. Today, less than half of Germans still belong to either to the Protestant Church in Germany or the Catholic Church. Thirty years ago, that figure stood at almost 69%.¹²⁰ Across the country, churches are being repurposed as hotels, residences, and restaurants.¹²¹

Some ascribe this to the weakening of traditional beliefs and the espousal of progressive causes. As one former trustee at the United Lutheran Seminary puts it: “time and again, ministry to the faithful took a back seat to left-wing orthodoxies.”¹²² Even once august seminaries like the Princeton Theological Seminary, observes a former student, now focus on “the new consensus: metaphysics was out, social justice was in.”¹²³

Berkeley historian David Hollinger suggests that what he called “ecumenical Christians” undermined their own appeal by essentially adopting the positions of secular liberals. Christianity lost much of its appeal, particularly among liberals.¹²⁴ He notes:

“Progressive Christians accommodated perspectives on women and the family that reduced their capacity to reproduce themselves exactly at the moment in history that they espoused positions on race, empire, and divinity that scared some parishioners away and diminished the possibility of recruiting new ones from evangelical ranks. The ecumenical leaders risked their authority by encouraging secular alliances that enabled some of their young to conclude that the best features of the Christian tradition were more effectively advanced outside the churches than within them, producing a huge population of post-Protestants.”¹²⁵

Catholics too have suffered a loss of adherents among “cradle Catholics” and have witnessed a tendency among the clergy, particularly the late Pope Francis’ Jesuit brothers, to adopt very progressive positions on issues such as transgenderism, gay marriage and open borders.¹²⁶ Some Catholic schools, such as the University of San Diego, even discourage the use of the terms man and woman, embracing a transgender politics that is out of sync with traditional teachings. At the same time, Notre Dame, certainly the country’s most renowned

Catholic school, has restated its “values” by diminishing Catholicism in favor of universal progressivism.¹²⁷

Catholic scholar George Weigel traces this shift to a misunderstanding of Vatican II, which he believes was intended to “promote evangelism,” and a greater sense of tolerance. But it created what he calls “Catholic Lite,” which has now morphed into “Catholic Zero.” Parishioners now see “moribund local churches marked by a lack of evangelical energy, dismal levels of religious practice, and dissent from settled Catholic teaching on morality, and the sources of human flourishing and social solidarity.”¹²⁸

The Resurgence of Orthodoxy

All mainstream religions face a congregational base that is increasingly conservative, in the West and even more so in Africa, the crucible of the Christian future.¹²⁹ As Ron Dreher has argued, the softer, more politically correct Christianity simply does not inspire people looking for a better way of life. One European new Catholic suggested to him that “tradition is the only safe future we have.”¹³⁰

In this new environment, traditional faiths, such as Greek Orthodoxy, have done particularly well. A survey of Orthodox churches around the country found that parishes saw a 78% increase in converts in 2022, compared with pre-pandemic levels in 2019.¹³¹ And while historically men and women converted in equal numbers, vastly more men have joined the church since 2020. The average age of attendees is 42, with 62 percent between 18 and 45. That’s significantly younger than other major traditions.

“tradition is the only safe future we have.”

The appeal of Greek Orthodoxy, notes religious intellectual and Orthodox convert Matt Mattingly, lies not in politics or race, but ancient values. Mattingly notes:

“I have talked with, I would estimate, a hundred young men headed into Orthodoxy in the past decade or so. It is true that most are strong supporters of this ancient faith’s teachings on marriage, family, sexuality, and gender. Many of these single men are highly motivated to get married and start families. Yes, they are worried about trends in American life and many mainline pews.”¹³²

Even more ascendant are the Pentecostals, who emphasize direct contact with God,¹³³ whose numbers have swelled, particularly among immigrants and in the developing world. The Assemblies of God, a charismatic evangelical denomination, notes Ryan Burge, has grown nearly 19% since 2000. The Presbyterian Church in America, a conservative offshoot of the more progressive, Presbyterian Church USA, similarly has expanded by 31% this century, notes scholar Burge.¹³⁴ Pentecostals, another conservative sector, is considered in some accounts as the fastest growing religion in the world, with over 600 million adherents today and projected to reach one billion by 2050.¹³⁵

Similarly, among Jews, reform and even conservative synagogues are struggling while those of Orthodox Judaism, particularly the thriving Chabad movement, have gained both members and influence;¹³⁶ Chabad has enjoyed the greatest growth in engagement since the Oct. 7 attack on Israel.¹³⁷ In contrast to Chabad's embrace of the Jewish state, some progressive reform rabbis have embraced anti-Zionism, even in the face of overwhelming support among Jews for Israel.¹³⁸



Chabad-Lubavitch centers in the Houston area mobilized to offer relief to those stranded and affected by Hurricane Harvey. Credit: photo by Elisheva Golani, used with permission of Chabad.org.

Today, Orthodoxy represents one in seven Jews but by 2040 that figure is projected to be one in five, as the children of non-affiliated Jews lose contact with Judaism while the offspring of religious Jews become more intensely Jewish.¹³⁹

As is occurring among Christians, progressive-oriented Judaism is losing ground, particularly in the wake of the Oct. 7 Hamas pogrom. Like their Christian counterparts, notes author Liel Liebowitz, some Jewish clerics seek to create a religious experience that appeals to progressive sentiments. This extends to an emphasis on “feeling well” and “feeling welcomed,” placing feelings over doctrine or obligation. He notes the focus on *tikkun olam*, political activism, and

gay events is unsettling for many congregants, particularly at a time when Jews feel increasingly marginalized from liberal political culture.¹⁴⁰

To be sure this shift to orthodoxy could evolve into a threat to liberal societies. The Middle East is a primary source of unreconstructed religion. Israel, once a socialist minded secular country, has become ever more orthodox and narrowly nationalistic while in the Muslim Middle East, conservative Islam is ascendant, even when tied to economic activity.¹⁴¹ In the Gulf, family conglomerates use Islamic values of trust and patriarchal authority, as well as cousin marriage, to manage multi-generational wealth transfer, avoiding the trap of wealth dissipation.¹⁴² The revival of the Waqf (endowment) sector allows for independent capital accumulation protected from state seizure, funding social welfare and creating a buffer against state power.¹⁴³

Similarly in Russia, the dictator Vladimir Putin has employed the Russian Orthodox Church to justify his anti-Western views and his invasion of Ukraine. His notion of *Ruskiy mir*, a Russian world with unique and superior values, parallels how the Soviets used Marxism-Leninism to justify their brutal regime while embracing much of the same Slavic religious nationalism employed by the Tsars.¹⁴⁴ In Nazi Germany, to some clerics, the prospect of creating a racially pure *Volk* represented “the divine will,” as well as the inevitable processes of history.¹⁴⁵

Similarly in America the new radical right includes virulently racist groups like the Proud Boys.¹⁴⁶ Parts of the reactionary Christian right rejects “the enlightenment and the scientific world view”, sounding more like Medieval mendicants than heirs of Adam Smith.¹⁴⁷ Alarming, some Trump supporters, such as War Secretary Pete Hegseth, are aligned with radical preachers who propose requiring all public officials to be Christians, essentially reversing nearly 250 years of constitutional protections for those who are not.¹⁴⁸ With figures such as these, it is not surprising that the media increasingly associates conservative politics with religion reaction.¹⁴⁹

The New Religious Crucible is Africa

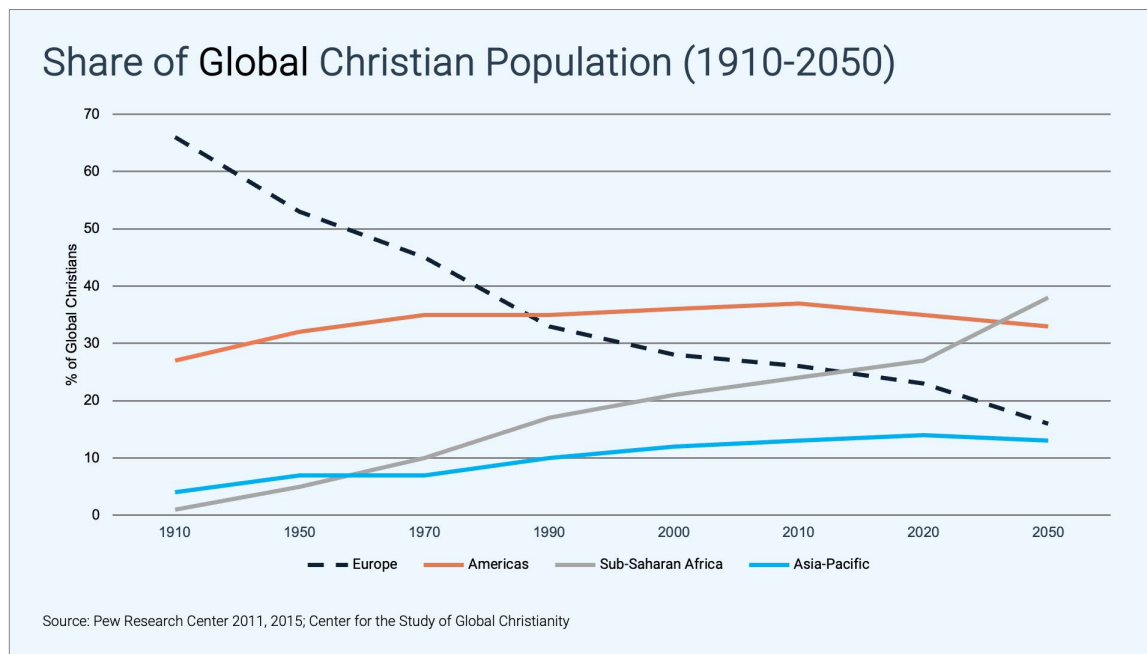
The future of religion, both Muslim and Christian, is taking place in Africa, the one continent with a growing population and the most untapped economic potential. Widely ignored by Western interests, Africa is far from the hopeless basket case it is still widely assumed to be. The continent, according to recent projections, now has eleven of the world's twenty fastest growing economies.¹⁵⁰

Clearly Africa's demographic exceptionalism makes it a key. The population of sub-Saharan Africa grew by an extraordinary 31% between 2010 and 2020 alone, reaching 1.1 billion people.¹⁵¹ United Nations projections indicate this rapid growth will continue, with the population expected to increase by two-thirds by 2050, a period during which Europe and North America are forecast to remain largely static.¹⁵² By the end of the century, seven of the world's fifteen most populous nations are projected to be in Africa, a stark contrast to 1950 when only one African country made that list.¹⁵³

In Africa Islam has doubled its share of the population since 1900, but the preponderant growth is in Christianity, embraced by nearly 57 % of all Africans, compared to 29% for Islam.¹⁵⁴ In the

span of a single century, Christianity has moved from a minority belief to a decisive majority. In 1910, Christians accounted for just 9% of sub-Saharan Africa's population.¹⁵⁵ A century later, that figure had soared to 63%. Africans generally see religion in a more positive light than in most Western countries, even more than Americans.¹⁵⁶

Africa now accounts for most of the numerical increase in Christians globally.¹⁵⁷ A century ago, two-thirds of the world's Christians¹⁵⁸ lived in Europe.¹⁵⁹ Today, that figure is roughly a quarter. By 2050, projections indicate that four out of every ten Christians in the world will live in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶⁰ The region's share of the global Christian population is expected to rise from 24% in 2010 to 38% by 2050, while Europe's share is projected to plummet to just 16%.¹⁶¹



The likely impact of Africa's youthful Christian population – its median age stands at 20 compared to a global Christian median of 30¹⁶² – is likely to lean towards more social conservatism.¹⁶³ Yet African Christians may not be inflexibly conservative. In overwhelmingly Christian South Africa, 84.5% of the population identifies with the faith¹⁶⁴ yet its post-apartheid constitution is one of the most progressive in the world, with the country showing the highest rate of religious tolerance of any major country. In 1996, South Africa became the first country to constitutionally ban discrimination based on sexual orientation.¹⁶⁵ Parliament passed the Civil Union Act in 2006, making South Africa the fifth country in the world, and the first and only in Africa, to legalize same-sex marriage.¹⁶⁶

Conclusion: An Incipient Religious Revival

Religion's resurgence brings many potential conflicts, as we see in parts of Africa, the Middle East and increasingly Europe and America. Yet it also offers a counterweight to what author Marilynne Robinson describes as "radical moral decline," as seen in marriage, family, community and civil society, processes accelerated by the growth of digital technology, declining familialism and hyper-individualist philosophy.¹⁶⁷ When religion declines, morality and the notion of human dignity tend to lose their hold, except as political expedients.¹⁶⁸

Religion has proven not only resilient but adaptively superior in many modern contexts. Economically, religious communities provide the social capital — specifically economic connect-edness — that is scarce in the modern age. Communities of faith function as high-trust networks that lower transaction costs and provide insurance against volatility.

But religion, noted the late Lord Jonathan Sacks, provides more than a contract, or a spur for good behavior, but "a covenant" that reaches to "bonds of belonging and of collective responsibility."¹⁶⁹ He noted:

“The voice of morality — the very voice that has been progressively weakened over the past fifty years — has to intervene and explain explicitly what is unique about mankind, and what we must cultivate and protect in the coming years.”¹⁷⁰

Religion's ability to provide a deeper commitment to the future, and to humanity, is evidenced by higher fertility rates as well as higher educational and professional achievement. The secular certainty of the 20th century has given way to a post-secular humility, acknowledging that while technology can shape *how* we live, perhaps only ancient wisdom can provide the *reason* to live. People often considered unsophisticated or simply "thick," it turns out, are the ones likely to thrive in the future — not by rejecting the modern world, but by navigating it with a map that secularism discarded.*

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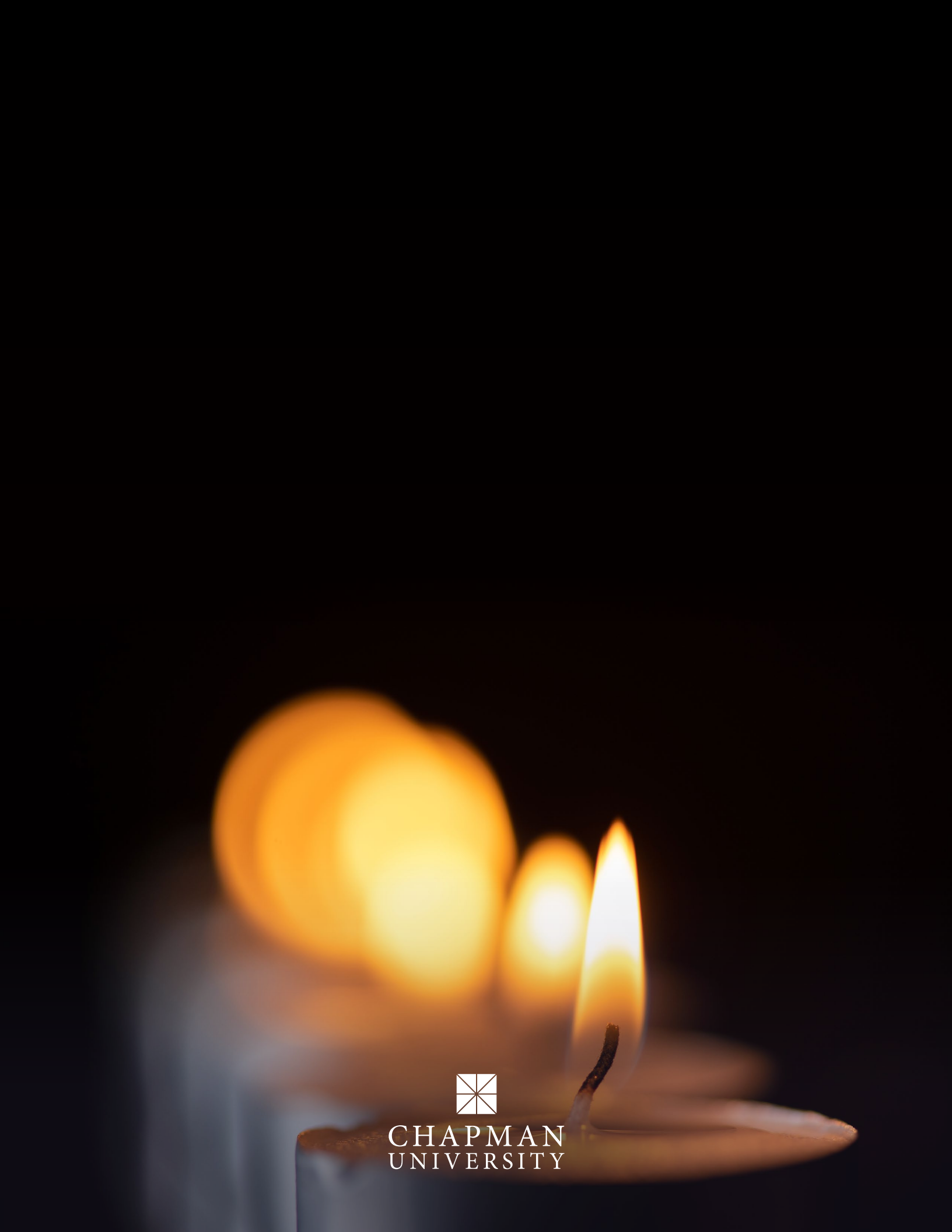
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