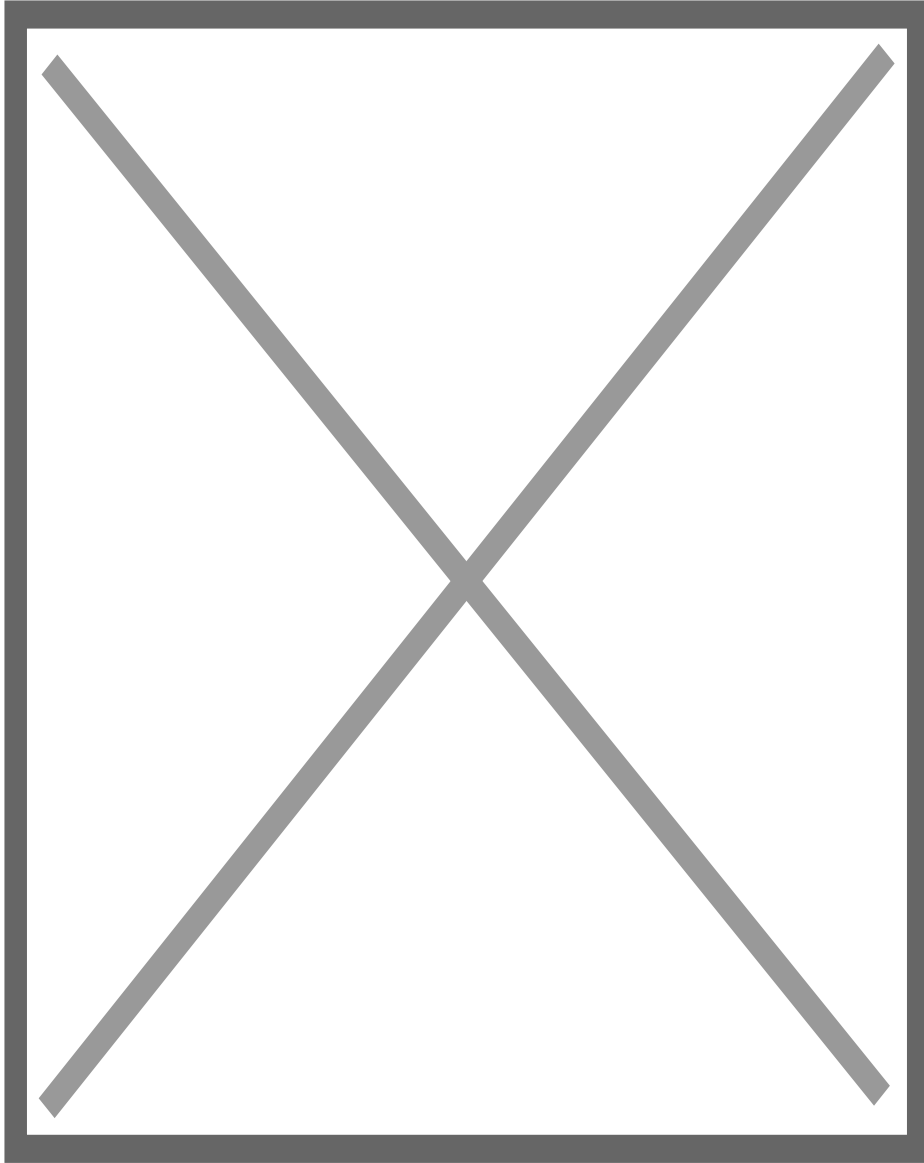


Are we on the cusp of a revival?

Rumors of it are premature but persistent.

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue

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He was a man about my age, who had arrived in my office with the religious resume of a lifelong seeker, and he was considering baptism. We talked about where he'd been, what he'd learned, and his reservations about Christianity. He had struggled with the figure of Jesus, the idea of incarnation, and the concept of the Trinity. A clergy member he'd shared this struggle with before told him not to worry about it, because we don't know

whether Jesus even existed.

Unable to stop myself from taking this bait at second hand, I assured the man that my unknown reverend colleague was wrong, that the existence of Jesus is well attested by the standards of ancient people. And then, having stood on my little soapbox to make my little point, I actually wanted to apologize for the professional negligence he'd experienced. His questions had been earnest and well informed. I thought it unconscionable that anyone in my role would respond to them by suggesting that they didn't really matter.

Is there a revival of Christianity underway in the United States? Rumors of it are premature but persistent. The drop in the percentage of Americans identifying as Christians and the rise of nones seem to have stalled. Everything else I've seen on the matter has been anecdotal, fragmentary, or simply dubious. *Data* is not the plural of *anecdote*, and yet a singular instance of data will always appear as an anecdote. So here's mine. I have served my current congregation since 2019. It is not a large church—about 300 members. In my first four years there, I baptized 19 infants and zero adults. In the following 18 months, I baptized three infants and five adults, including the man who'd been assured that Jesus' very existence is an open question.

This could be random variation, or something about our location, or—less plausibly—something I'm doing. But I have heard similar stories from colleagues. After years in which treading water felt like a victory, I hear reports of increased participation. During the second Trump term, religious voices in the public square have sounded more strident and hard-edged—or, if you prefer, more confident. This obviously goes for the reactionary Christian nationalists who have gained cachet in politics and media, but I have felt it too in the language of protesters against immigration crackdowns. The chant heard outside the Chicago-area ICE detention facility—"Love your neighbor / Love your God / Save your soul / Quit your job"—puts the issue in high-stakes religious terms.

If this drift is in fact happening, I don't find it hard to see why. Maybe the story of inexorable secularization was always oversold. Just because people dropped the habit of going to a place each week to engage in prescribed rituals doesn't mean they'd lose a taste for mythical narratives or nonmaterial phenomena. Declining church participation hasn't made us any less likely to see demons in our vaccines or original sin in the events of our history. The master narratives of our supposedly secular age might be exhausting themselves. The development of human knowledge in fascinating new directions hasn't banished mystery from the world. Humanity is still nature's problem child, and nature herself seems to be pretty weird. Why should a religious revival be impossible?

It may be that such a revival is a statistical blip, the apprehension of vibes, a grasping for narrative where there is only noise. Or it may be just a pause in a long-term trend of decline.

But if revival is possible, let alone underway, it confronts mainline Christians with the limits of our own understanding of secularization. We have been identified so closely with decline for so long that it has become a weight-bearing part of our self-image. And our institutions have developed an interpretation of their histories and theologies so acidly critical that I suspect it is in part a response to and justification of that long-term trend of decline. One might get the impression that we think we actually introduced racism, sexism, and conquest into the world—and that our own reforms and renunciations are the only thing that can remove them. I would disaffiliate, too, if I thought that were true.

Alternatively, it has been tempting to lower the stakes of belief in the hope of bringing people to the table. At least, this has been my characteristic temptation: If you struggle with believing something, don't worry—there's nothing all that essential to believe anyway. This, I take it, is what the man in my office had been told about the dubious existence of Jesus himself. It's the mindset that Kierkegaard identified as a fire sale in the world of ideas, in which prices went so low that it might become doubtful whether anyone would even make a bid.

These habits are unsuited to a world that has its own reasons for taking a second look at God. If there is any prospect of revival in American Christianity—and I find I can only phrase the idea conditionally, so accustomed am I to the narrative of decline—it will happen among those communities that speak and act as though their proclamation is worth sharing and worth bearing some inconveniences to embrace. That the reasons to say yes or no are not mere misunderstandings or masks for power, but full of meaning and consequence.

I've spent my ministry career in rooms with one or two or a few people at a time, in the hope that whatever the larger trend, something in their lives and in mine was still open to change. I have, until now, neglected the harder implication: that if a single life can change suddenly in midstream, there's no reason the whole world can't do it, too.