

How safe are congregations and clergy from automation?

Judging by the fast pace at which technology is overtaking certain work tasks, clergy seem not to necessarily be exempt from the threat of automation, with several aspects of their work already being performed by artificial intelligence, writes William Young in the religion and science journal *Zygon* (June). Certain professions, such as medicine, law, journalism, and finance, not to mention the majority of clerical jobs, have been seen as particularly affected by digital technology, including artificial intelligence (AI). Because the work of clergy touches on several areas seen as protected from technological encroachment, such as spirituality, creativity, specialized knowledge, and personal contact, the profession has not been seen as likely to fall prey to automation; indeed, a 2013 Oxford University study found that clergy had only a 0.83 percent chance of losing employment due to automation. But Young begs to differ, citing several developments already here or on the horizon that pose challenges to clergy and other religious professionals. First of all, the profusion of online forms of spirituality has created a do-it-yourself religious mentality—most clearly seen in the dramatic rise of the non-affiliated (or “nones”)—that does not view clergy as essential to finding a faith or cultivating a spirituality.

But Young adds that there is also the possibility that artificial intelligence “actually will supplement or supplant human clergy in significant ways—writing sermons, delivering pastoral care, conducting scriptural/theological research, or performing sacramental functions.” Because most congregations only have one full-time employee, the pastor, who provides non-administrative work that might be difficult to automate, there is not a strong incentive for AI researchers to develop applications specifically for the religious marketplace. But “automation within churches might emerge as a niche market leveraging technologies developed for the much larger and more lucrative commercial sector.” For instance, Young sees the technology of AI language generation being used for sermon writing in the foreseeable future, especially since clergy are regularly using online tools for their sermons. As for pastoral care, a new “virtual conversational palliative care coach” developed by Northeastern University and Boston Medical Center incorporates an “explicitly spiritual component” as it seeks to help individuals “manage symptoms, reduce stress, identify and address unmet spiritual needs, and support advanced care planning.” The technology supports a variety of religious traditions as well as atheism, “spiritual

humanism,” and secular humanism. Young speculates that the proliferation of AI into the religious sphere will force clergy and theologians to deal with such questions as the purportedly unique status of humans as beings created in the image of God and whether a “soul” can exist in such digital systems, particularly as this technology relates to sacramental functions.

(*Zygon*, <http://www.zygonjournal.org/>)



Source: <https://pixabay.com/>

Megachurches trading relevance for liturgical reverence?

“Old-school Catholic practices and traditions” are being increasingly used in American megachurches, reports *America* magazine (May 13). The article focuses on New Life Church in Colorado Springs, a prominent non-denominational megachurch that has recently embraced traditional liturgies as well as social justice work without evangelization. The church now recites the Nicene Creed and has communion at most of its services and locations. Members are taught about the liturgical calendar and the church has a home for homeless unwed mothers called Mary’s House. New Life concludes its services with a doxology—a hymn of praise to the Trinity—that most Catholics no longer use. Anna Keating writes that New Life is not alone in adopting more liturgical practices, as other megachurches, such as Matt Chandler’s Village Church in Texas, Willow Creek in Illinois, and Mars Hill in Grand Rapids, Michigan, have made similar

changes [see August 2017 **RW** on how, at the same time, Catholic parishes have been borrowing megachurch techniques].

Mars Hill now limits its special effects in its services, replacing them with an altar, a homemade wooden cross, and altar cloths that are changed to match the liturgical season. Epiphany Church in Fort Worth, Texas, uses incense and candles every week and selects its scripture readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, with congregants reciting traditional responses like “The Word of the Lord” after such readings. The question is why megachurches, created for relevance to the non-churched, should be going down the liturgical path. Keating cites personal situations as partly leading to such changes. In New Life Church, a sexual scandal involving its leader, Ted Haggard, led to a rethinking of the need for relevance and the adoption of more traditional practices. She adds that the market- and niche-driven nature of megachurches has actually led to the adoption of such practices as alternatives to contemporary services. The downtown branch of New Life tends to attract people who feel burned out or turned off by services that do not emphasize theology and are seen as too shallow. Some of the changes have also originated in pastors’ “conversion” experiences to more liturgical Christianity, although Keating did not find many cases of megachurch pastors or members converting to Catholicism. She adds, however, that megachurch seeker services do serve as stepping-stones to more liturgical churches, such as Anglican, Presbyterian, and even Eastern Orthodox churches.

(*America*, <https://www.americamagazine.org/>)



The campus of New Life Church in Colorado Springs (Adammeliski, 2016, Wikimedia Commons).

American Southwest belatedly draws Catholic colleges

Even though Catholicism has a long history in the American Southwest and Latinos there are an influential demographic force in the church, Catholic colleges are just being established in the region, according to *America* magazine (May 13). Jonathan Malesic reports that while the few Catholic colleges that were established in the region in the past failed to take root, the massive demographic shift toward Hispanic Catholics has now convinced Catholic institutions to transplant or invest in schools in the Southwest. These include a Benedictine University of Illinois campus in Mesa, Arizona, Mary College at ASU, a joint venture of the University of Mary of North Dakota and Arizona State University, and Catholic University of America's new campus in Tucson, which is being started with the help of a \$2 million grant from the Charles Koch Foundation.

Despite the demographic shift, Latino Catholics have had lower rates of educational attainment than other Catholics and have experienced more financial struggle in getting an education. Even though Southwestern Catholic dioceses are among the largest in the country and Catholic school students are a natural constituency for these fledgling colleges, parents have been hesitant to send their children to these institutions because of a lack of name recognition and a concern for their viability. The most unique effort is the cooperative Mary College at ASU, with the college offering courses toward a major and a minor in theology and Catholic studies while ASU students can transfer such credits to satisfy general education requirements. The effort is seen as an “innovative model for Catholic higher education going forward,” Malesic writes.



Source: Benedictine University Mesa, <https://www.ben.edu/mesa/index.cfm>

Pacific Northwest's “none-zone” expands, challenges religious institutions

The Pacific Northwest continues to be the bastion of religious non-affiliation it has been since the early 2000s, only more so, having a significant impact on religious communities, writes Mark Silk in his blog for Religion News Service, *Spiritual Politics* (May 31). Silk cites recent research conducted by the University of Victoria's Centre for Studies in Religion and Society that confirms how the Pacific Northwest (which included British Columbia in the study and is known as Cascadia) remains a “none zone,” with the proportion of adults who say they have no religion

rising from the low twenties to 32 percent in Washington and Oregon, and from 35 to 44 percent in British Columbia. As with the nones in general, the young adult proportions are considerably higher, Silk adds.

He sees Cascadia as a “regional laboratory of demography indicating where North America north of the Mexican border is headed when it comes to religion.” Equally striking to Silk is the study’s findings about the region’s evangelicals. “Two decades ago, they saw Cascadia as a mission territory ripe for making major inroads on the vast number of the unchurched. Then, they understood themselves as at the crest of a powerful evangelical wave sweeping over America. Now they see themselves as living on the shore of ebb-tide Christianity and are finding ways to accommodate to the dominant culture. Increasingly, they have become open to (if not quite affirming of) LGBTQ members. They are soft on abortion. They embrace the environment. Some even go so far as to forswear evangelization.” Silk cites sociologist Michael Wilkinson of Trinity Western University in British Columbia, who observes “an effort on the part of evangelicals [in the region] to redefine themselves. Their confidence is gone.”

(*Spiritual Politics*, <https://religionnews.com/2019/05/31/the-pacific-northwest-is-the-american-religious-future/>)



Cascadia Pride Flag (source: <http://patchpatrol.com/patches/cascadia-pride-flag/>).

CURRENT RESEARCH

• **Belief in the “prosperity gospel”—that God financially blesses faithful believers—does not have a strong effect in making individuals successful entrepreneurs, according to a study by Kevin Dougherty and colleagues of Baylor University.** The researchers did find that prosperity beliefs can be linked to values associated with entrepreneurialism, such as power and achievement, but found no direct relationship between adherence to prosperity gospel beliefs and willingness to take risks, and little relation to recognizing opportunities. According to the researchers, “a belief that God will provide financial benefit to the faithful is not enough to push someone to launch a business. The relationship between prosperity beliefs and starting a business is indirect and inconsistent.” The study, which is published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online April), analyzed data from a nationally representative survey of 1,066 working adults, with participants responding to a three-item scale to measure beliefs about faith and faithful behavior and the connection to success at work and in business.

(*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/14685906/0/0>)



• **Deconversion may be a gradual psychological process based on an interaction between distinctive elements of reason, criticism, and personal development, and may be increasingly relevant in an environment of disaffiliation and nonbelief.** Sergio Perez and Frédérique Vallières (Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland), writing in the open-access online journal *Secularism and Nonreligion* (April), stress the need to pay attention to such processes given that most of the increasing number of atheists and other non-religious people in traditionally religious countries had some kind of religious exposure before abandoning religious beliefs. The researchers’ data came mainly from testimonies obtained from former clergypersons.

Deconversion appears to be driven by an intellectual impetus, with doubts sometimes starting as early as childhood, which may however be initially repressed until they become too numerous to ignore. Religious experiences also become “reinterpreted in non-supernatural terms.” The second core category in the researchers’ model of the process is defined by “a disapproval of religious institutions, ideas, and behaviors on moral and ethical grounds.” The perception of various attitudes of religious institutions and their representatives contributes to the subject’s disappointment and discontent. The third aspect is the overcoming of internal conflicts, since the waning of faith may be associated with unhappiness, even more so for clergy who start to become aware they are preaching something in which they no longer believe. Reading books and online material about alternative ideas plays an important role in the deconversion process, along with widening social circles, making clear that one is not alone. The researchers found that the process of deconversion frequently took a long time among their subjects, often up to several years.

(*Secularism and Nonreligion*, <https://secularismandnonreligion.org>)



Source: Losing Our Religion podcast (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChUXzW7T0YLLTUIsVFjjQA>)

- **Contrary to the traditional narrative that portrays American Jews as the exemplary diaspora, Canadian Jews appear to be the model group in terms of retaining members in most of the established branches of Judaism, according to a new study of Canadian Jewry.** As reported in *The Tablet* (May 6), a Jewish monthly, the researchers who conducted the 2018 Survey of Canadian Jews argue that lost in the dominant narrative of the community decline of North American Jewry is the story of “Canadian exceptionalism.” Keith Neuman (Environics Institute), Rhonda Lenton (York University), and Robert Brym (University of Toronto) found

that while nearly 50 percent of American Jews intermarry, the rate in Canada is less than half that. American Jews are half as likely to attend community day school, yeshiva, overnight summer camp, and Sunday or Hebrew school compared with Canadians. While in the United States participation has dwindled among non-Orthodox Jews, the same has not been true for Reform and Conservative Jews in Canada.

The study also found that Canadians are significantly more active in their religious communities, and that “American Jews are half as likely as Canadian Jews to belong to a synagogue, and even less likely to belong to other types of Jewish organizations.” Only one-half of American Jews have made a financial donation to Jewish organizations and causes, compared with 80 percent of Canadian Jews. Comparatively few American Jews have a preponderance of Jewish friends. American Jews have a smaller number of Jewish friends than their counterparts in Canada and have a much weaker connection to Israel than do Canadian Jews. In a few years, Canada’s Jewish population may exceed 400,000, making it the largest Jewish community outside of Israel and the United States.

(*The Tablet*, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/284363/why-canadas-jews-are-better>)



• **There continues to be a decline in religious celebrations and traditions of rites of passage in the United Kingdom, according to two studies.** The most dramatic change involves a drop in religious weddings and an accompanying growth of non-theistic “humanist” marriage ceremonies. *The Guardian* (June 2) reports that according to newly obtained figures humanist weddings have increased by a huge 266 percent over the last decade and a half, while most religious English and Welsh marriage ceremonies fell sharply. The latest Office of National Statistics data tracking the different types of weddings—religious and secular—from 2004 to 2016 found that Church of England weddings fell by 28 percent, Catholic weddings by 34 percent, and Baptist weddings by 42 percent. While 287 humanist weddings were recorded in

2004, by 2016 this figure had increased to 1,051. These humanist weddings are in effect double weddings. Because atheist/agnostic unions are not legal in England and Wales (unlike in Scotland or Northern Ireland), couples have to go through a perfunctory “official” wedding at the registry office before they exchange rings in the humanist ceremony.

The newsletter *British Religion in Numbers* (May) cites an analysis of the latest in a series of surveys conducted by Co-op Funeralcare of 100,000 funerals, finding that for the first time religious hymns are not among the top ten pieces of music requested at these ceremonies. In 2016, when the chart was last compiled, three hymns had still made it to the top ten—“The Lord is My Shepherd,” “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” and “Abide with Me.” By 2019, there were none on the list, having been replaced by pop songs, with Ed Sheeran and Westlife making their first appearances. As in 2016, the top three songs continued to be Frank Sinatra’s “My Way,” Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman’s “Time to Say Goodbye,” and “(Somewhere) Over the Rainbow” by Eva Cassidy. The newsletter adds that the trend away from religious music at funerals parallels the decline in preferences for religious funerals and services presided over by clergy of the Church of England.

(*British Religion in Numbers*, <http://www.brin.ac.uk/counting-religion-in-britain-may-2019/>)



Source: Humanists UK (<https://humanism.org.uk/>)

• A study by sociologists Yun Lu and Fenggang Yang finds that members of religious organizations are more likely to participate in political protests than nonmembers, particularly in more repressive countries. The study, published in the journal *Sociology of Religion* (80:2), analyzes combined data from the fifth wave of the World Values Surveys, the index of political freedom by Freedom House, and the Religion and State project. Lu and Yang first look at individual-level religious organization membership and find that it has a positive relationship with protest participation worldwide. They also find that religious people in “repressive countries are more likely to protest than their counterparts in free countries.” The authors explain that in “countries with low democratic levels, people who participate in religious

groups have access to resources and obtain protection which is difficult to obtain outside of religious groups. In addition, religious groups under state restriction may become cohesive and resentful, therefore being motivated to join in protests.”

(*Sociology of Religion*, <https://academic.oup.com/socrel>)



Photo by Asad Photo Maldives from Pexels (<https://www.pexels.com>).

• **Islam tends toward greater orthodoxy in Muslim-dominated countries than in nations where Muslims are a minority, according to a study in the journal *International Sociology* (May).** Four countries were studied—India, Singapore, Pakistan, and Malaysia—with the first two representing Muslim-minority nations and the last two Muslim-dominated ones. Researcher Riaz Hassan analyzed data on Muslim religiosity from surveys that he carried out in these four countries in 2007–2008 (for Pakistan and Malaysia) and in 2011 and 2015 (for India and Singapore). In measuring several dimensions of Islamic religiosity—ritualistic, devotional, experiential, ideological, and consequential (involving following divine injunctions)—Hassan found significant differences in the religious profiles of these four countries. While “fundamentalist” and Islamist movements (the latter involving the application of Islamic teachings to politics) are present in most Muslim countries, they find more fertile ground in Muslim-majority countries. Muslims’ drive to achieve equal citizenship and locate “survival goods” in countries where they are a minority limits the growth of Islamization efforts, even though Hassan acknowledges that they can also resort to violence. But “hegemonic religious

cosmologies,” including not only a body of knowledge but also the ability to enforce and regulate orthodox practices and beliefs, flourish most strongly in the Muslim-majority nations.

(*International Sociology*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/iss/current>)



Photo by rawpixel.com from Pexels (<https://www.pexels.com>).

Orthodox Church emerges as a leading social actor amid Greece’s economic crisis

Although affected itself by the economic crisis that Greece has been experiencing since 2009, the Greek Orthodox Church has become an active source of social support for impoverished people, thus seizing an opportunity to position itself as a relevant institution in contemporary society, writes Lina Molokotos-Liederman (*Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, January–March). As a consequence of the shortcomings of the Greek welfare system, families have played an important support role in times of need, but as the traditional family structure has been losing its strength in recent years, families have become less able to provide help in a number of cases. This has reinforced the already existing role of the church in providing social welfare—a role that is actually recognized in Greek law. The church may come to play the role of a “second family” in times of need, providing unconditional moral and social support—not only to its members, but also to migrants and refugees.

There are national coordinating bodies for church welfare work, but practically all efforts take place at the levels of dioceses and parishes, with a dense network that reaches even remote areas having a weak presence of public social services. There have been efforts to professionalize the church's work through its NGO Apostoli in cooperation with International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC). This professionalization is not devoid of risks, since it also aims at identifying people who are really in need to prevent abuses, in contrast with traditional, unconditional Christian philanthropic work. The charitable contribution of the Greek Orthodox Church has been widely acknowledged, but there have also been criticisms, for instance from progressive circles that feel that the church is merely addressing symptoms instead of facing the root causes of the crisis through social activism. There have also been some debates within the church itself about its mission and priorities. According to Molokotos-Liederman, current experiences might emphasize the need for a process of reform and modernization as well as reflection about the role of the church as a partner of the state, possibly leading it to more autonomy in an era of growing secularization.

(*Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-archives-de-sciences-sociales-des-religions.htm>)



Hungary—a champion of traditional values but not religious freedom?

Even as Hungary has drawn admiration from conservative Christians for its strong support of the traditional family and maintaining its “Christian heritage,” the central European nation has appeared to change little in its tendency to restrict the freedom of minority religions in the last

decade. Glowing reports on how Hungary serves as a beacon of traditional values in a pluralistic and secular Europe have become prominent especially in the conservative Catholic press. For instance, the *National Catholic Register* (April 2) reports positively on the country's increasing birth rate and family-friendly policies (such as favoring large families and discouraging abortion), while decrying the European Union's "campaign of harassment against Hungary for daring to have a national vision that is explicitly, even audaciously, independent. The



Statue of St. Stephen, Budapest (photo by Dimitris Kamaras, 2017, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/127226743@N02/>).

Hungarian government has pushed back against numerous policies favored by globalists including open borders, same-sex marriage, gender ideology and legalization of drugs." The article concludes, "What many refuse to recognize is this: Hungary suffered an atheist, dictatorial regime for over 40 years and it is returning to its Christian heritage in order to restore human dignity."

In the current issue of the journal *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* (April), H. David Baer reviews recent legislation concerning religious freedom in Hungary and finds that though the legal furniture may have changed, restrictions on religious freedom have remained in place ever since the Fidesz party of Viktor Orbán came to power in 2010. Two decades after a policy of treating all religious groups equally was established in 1990, the Hungarian Parliament instituted a distinction between registered churches (including about 32 churches) that would receive substantial rights and privileges (such as receiving funds from taxes) and unregistered churches and religious associations that would be denied aspects of the right to religious freedom. There was considerable outcry from the European Court of Human Rights against this two-tiered system, which subsequently led to a more complex, maze-like four-tiered model in 2018. Baer writes that those religious groups in the lower classifications still face considerable disadvantages and arbitrary treatment from the state, even if they can now receive tax funds.

"Deregistered" religious groups are treated as "religious associations," making it difficult for them to move up the ladder to registered status and, in some cases, leading them to close their doors. For instance, the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (HEF), which operates numerous homeless shelters and schools for the Roma people and has been one of Orbán's major critics, is a deregistered church with a high enough membership of 10,000 to qualify for registered status (a certain size is another qualification for registration). But a catch 22-type law stipulates that to achieve such status a church must either certify all tax donations it has received or give up all

sources of financial assistance, while the HEF has been prevented from collecting church taxes for five years.

(*National Catholic Register*, <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/vgaetan/hope-in-hungary-abortion-down-marriages-up-families-valued>; *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/>)

Church fires more than accidents in France and point to multiple culprits

The fire in Paris' historic Notre Dame Cathedral in early May was mourned as a loss to French Catholicism, but there has been a trend of church fires and desecrations in France that are more mysterious and even suspicious, writes Nina Shea in the *National Catholic Register* (May 12–25). She writes that, “For those who track religious-freedom threats, the [Notre Dame] fire itself may be less of a surprise than that it apparently was started by accident. Hundreds of other French churches are being quietly burned or damaged—in deliberate attacks.” In recent months, three other Notre Dame namesake churches and a Catholic bookstore in other parts of France were vandalized and desecrated, though the incidents drew little notice. An official from the watchdog Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians in Europe told Shea that church attacks have been relentless for the past four years. Although the majority of these attacks have been against Catholic churches, they have also taken place against Protestant ones.



The most recent suspicious fire was in March at St. Sulpice, Paris' second-largest church after Notre Dame, though it, like the others, was seen as not directly related to anti-religious hostilities

but rather connected to thefts. “But many times, the culprits are a variety of extremists enraged by the identities and teachings that the churches symbolize—Christianity, French nationalism and Western civilization at large,” Shea adds. Judging by the graffiti left behind in these attacks, a mix of ideologies appear to be behind them, ranging from those of anarchists, militant secularists, and radical Muslims, to even that of a small contingent of self-proclaimed Satanists. Last July, after Saint-Pierre du Matroi Church in Orléans was attacked by arson, “Allahu akbar” was found graffitied on its surviving walls. The Cathedral of Saint-Jean of Besançon was vandalized with the slogan, “our lives, our bodies belong to us,” along with the anarchist “A.” Religious symbols have also been targeted, such as crucifixes, holy water fonts, consecrated communion hosts, and statues of Jesus and Mary. Unlike in other parts of the world, such as Sri Lanka and Nigeria, the churches are usually empty when these attacks are perpetrated, although there have been a few attacks against clergy and at churches during Mass. Shea criticizes the French government for inaction in investigating these occurrences while also noting that the French Catholic hierarchy has avoided addressing the issue, refusing to adopt a “discourse of persecution,” in the words of Archbishop Georges Pontier, head of the national bishops’ conference.

From top to bottom, Catholic Church in Germany pushing for liberal reform

The announcement on March 14 by Cardinal Reinhard Marx that the Catholic Church in Germany would start a “synodal process” to deal with issues of priestly celibacy, teachings on sexual morality, and clerical power marks an attempt to assert its peculiar identity and to promote a reform agenda of its own, writes Jean Bernard in the conservative Catholic monthly *La Nef* (May). Initiatives of the German Catholic Church have a special significance due its financial strength and intellectual resources (maintaining an important network of theological faculties)—despite the drop in priestly ordinations (there were twice as many priests in Germany in 1970, with the number down from 26,000 to 13,000) and the large number of people leaving the church (around 160,000 per year on average in recent years). According to Bernard’s assessment, a majority of the German Catholic leadership can be considered as “progressive.” While the election of Pope Francis, which was “widely encouraged by German cardinals,” might have seemed to bring dominant trends in the German Catholic Church into harmony with impulses coming from Rome, and while Cardinal Marx gave the assurance that the synodal process was in line with Pope Francis, there have been several misunderstandings in recent years, such as over the issue of access to the Eucharist for divorced Catholics who have married again or for Protestant spouses of Catholic faithful, as well as debates over homosexuality.

The serious crisis around the issue of sexual abuse has been identified as an outcome of “clericalism” and has offered an opportunity to raise questions about power in the church, sexual morality and priestly life—topics which will be addressed by three forums that will involve laypeople through the participation of the powerful (and rather progressive) Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken (Central Committee of German Catholics). Some of the demands that are



Maria 2.0 supporters in front of the cathedral of Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, in May 2019 after the ordination of a priest (Andreas Schwarzkopf [CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>]).

likely to come out of the synodal process might create frictions with Rome, but the result will most probably not create a break but rather lead both sides to make some concessions, thus actually pushing reforms forward while (temporarily) giving up the most radical demands (e.g., the ordination of women). Bernard concludes that developments in German Catholicism during the coming months may have deep consequences for the future orientation of the entire Catholic Church.

The pressure for reform is coming not only from the church leadership but also from activists on the ground, as seen in the emergence of a new Catholic protest movement among women of German-speaking countries, known as Maria 2.0, that is calling for greater roles for women in the church. *The Economist* (May 13) reports that the movement started in Münster, a bastion of German Catholicism, and extended to 100 other locations in Germany, with strong support in Austria and Switzerland, mainly through a “strike” where participants stayed away from Mass, held outdoor services, and withdrew from their voluntary work in church institutions. The women in the movement have pushed for (and have been promised) a 30 percent quota for management positions in the church, but they have also aimed higher and are pushing for

“ordained ministry” [which could mean ordination into the priesthood or the diaconate, a move that Pope Francis has been considering in recent years]. Although such decisions obviously are made at the Vatican level, the movement reflects the conflicted state of German-speaking Catholicism. The two mainstream German Catholic women organizations have shown considerable support for Maria 2.0.

(*La Nef*, <https://lanef.net>)

Islamic State turning to its African cells to maintain image and even build a new caliphate?

“Africa is emerging as an important remnant of the Islamic State, even if the continent is too divided along cultural and tribal lines to restore its caliphate,” reports *Bloomberg Businessweek* (May 22). Paul Wallace writes that the loss of the core of the Islamic State (IS), the caliphate, was a devastating blow to the movement. Thomas Abi-Hanna, a security analyst with Stratfor, says “They are really trying to play up the gains they’ve made elsewhere, and Africa’s arguably the place where they’ve made the most gains.” Because many African states are struggling with a mix of dire poverty, corruption, and soaring populations, the Islamic State has proved adept at recruiting fighters and gaining support among locals. In a recent video, IS founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that he accepted a pledge of loyalty from a group in Burkina Faso and spoke of plans to gain footholds in Algeria and Sudan. The Islamic State is reported to have had more than 6,000 fighters in Africa since last year, according to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. The largest cell is the Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP), with 3,500



members, mostly in Nigeria. Wallace notes that this would make it the second-largest terrorist organization in Africa after al-Shabaab, which is based in Somalia and connected to al Qaeda.

Wallace notes that the IS leadership provides strategic and theological advice to these cells and helps publicize their attacks through its slick social media operations and newsletters, while the cells' ties to the Islamic State make it easier for them to attract and retain fighters. Their physical separation from IS also allows for tactical independence. This can be seen in ISWAP's split from Boko Haram, which was once affiliated with the Islamic State and is known for kidnapping children, and in its unique strategy (among the Islamic State's affiliates) of targeting soldiers rather than civilians. The group seeks to win hearts and minds by distinguishing itself from Boko Haram and helping civilians by digging wells and providing some health care. Wallace adds that "Western powers take the threat of Islamic State and other jihadis in Africa seriously. The U.S. has thousands of forces on the continent [and] provides intelligence and military support to several governments...[Although] Washington sees little risk of attacks on U.S. soil by the African cells of Islamic State,...it fears that could change if it takes over large territories or creates a caliphate on the continent akin to its former structure in the Middle East. Even if it doesn't achieve that, Islamic State is already reaping benefits from its efforts." Judd Devermont, a former CIA analyst who is now Africa director at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, says that the Islamic State is in effect saying: "We're undefeated. We remain a player."

Role of religion at issue in disputed Sudanese transition

While leaders of the pro-democracy movement in Sudan seem reluctant to make Islamic law a source of legislation, the country's ruling military council insists that "Islamic Sharia and the local norms and traditions in the Republic of Sudan should be the sources of legislation" (*BBC*, May 8). At a time when tensions between the democracy movement and the military that in April ousted President Omar al-Bashir after a 30-year period of rule have grown dangerously and make the immediate political future quite uncertain, one should keep in mind that the debate is not only about civilian rule but the political role of religion in Sudan. A draft constitutional document presented by a



Protestors near the army HQ in Khartoum (photo by M.Saleh, April 2019, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>).

coalition of protest groups and political parties to the Transitional Military Council (TMC) in early May was criticized by the military rulers for omitting any reference to Islamic law, which had been used by the former president as a source of legitimacy and is defined as Sudan's guiding principle by its current constitution (*Al Jazeera*, May 8). Not only the military but also Islamic activists have started criticizing pro-democracy leaders for what they call misguiding people. According to them, the mistake of the former regime was in its selective application of elements of Sharia rather than implementation of the whole law. They do not want a secular country with a legal system inspired by liberals, notes *RFI Afrique* (May 25).

Findings & Footnotes

■ The fact that the latest (2019) edition of the *World Almanac of Islamism* (American Foreign Policy Council, \$119) has expanded to two huge volumes (totaling about 1,500 pages) suggests that there has been a significant increase in groups and individuals involved in Muslim-based political activism. But it should be noted that the term "Islamist" is defined in the almanac as seeking to influence or impose Islamic values and beliefs through politics, which can mean anything from the Islamic State and Al Qaeda to the mainstream Muslim Student Association (MSA), which hosts events on Palestinian issues. Nevertheless, the volumes do provide a continuing record of actors and actions involving the political dimensions of Islam. In the introduction, the editors note that in some ways Islamism has receded, the most dramatic case being the rollback and even disintegration of the Islamic State, at least in its territorial grasp.



At the same time, however, Africa is emerging as a fertile ground for militant Islamist groups, such as Nigeria's Boko Haram and Somalia's al-Shabaab. In Europe, the rise of far-right parties has led to an "explosion of protectionist, anti-immigrant policies and attitudes," with terrorist attacks only hardening attitudes toward refugees. Eurasia is seeing new Islamist mobilization, which can range from Uzbekistan's successful promotion of tolerant forms of Islam to Afghanistan's continued struggle with the Taliban and a growing presence of the Islamic State. In Asia, there are new signs of religious intolerance and hardline Islamism in Indonesia, while China has stepped up its pressure and repression of its Uighur Muslim population. Along with its country-by-country tracking and analysis of Islamism, the almanac also has a section on a range of Islamic political groups and movements. The editors find that as the world becomes more globalized, "Islamic movements are in increasing competition with one another for both resources and recruits. But they are also in greater communication than ever before, a dynamic evident in the growing sophistication of extremist media and messaging."