

Biden era signals a liberal Catholic moment and more tension with U.S. church leaders

While the election of Joe Biden as U.S. president seems to be ushering in a new era of liberal Catholic (and, in general, liberal religious) influence, by closely aligning themselves with the Democratic administration, liberal Catholic activists and leaders run the risk of being perceived to be as partisan as evangelicals were under the Trump presidency, according to Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (January 24). Douthat writes that recent presidential administrations have been marked by differing religious cultures—from the evangelical-conservative Catholic alliance of the Bush presidency, to Obama’s mix of mainline Protestant and black church influence (along with a secular “woke progressivism” during his latter term), to the prosperity gospel and Christian nationalist thrust of the Trump era. The Catholic cast of Biden’s Inauguration Day ceremonies was evident in the Jesuit invocation, his quote from St. Augustine, and the ethnic Catholic representation in other speakers and celebrants. By “liberal Catholicism” Douthat is referring not so much to theology but to a cultural strand of the church devoted to the Vatican II teachings, the papacy of Francis, and Catholic social teachings on issues such as war and peace and the economy.

He adds that there is little doubt that many figures in Pope Francis’s inner circle have largely welcomed the Biden presidency. When the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) issued a strong critique of Biden’s position on abortion, “there was apparent pushback from the Vatican and explicit pushback from the most Francis-aligned of the American cardinals.” But Douthat, a conservative Catholic, ventures that liberal Catholicism can plausibly “claim the religious center...[and] fill the Mainline’s vanished role” since it does have an institutional presence (in contrast to American religious individualism), a multiethnic character, and a “fervent inclusivity.” Yet, such Catholic liberalism faces the danger of being subsumed into political liberalism or taken over from within by progressive orthodoxies that could set Biden’s agenda on current social questions. There also remains a disjuncture between this liberal Catholic culture and the American church leadership. In *Commonweal* magazine (January 28), liberal Catholic theologian Massimo Faggioli writes that the U.S. bishops’ rebuke to Biden represents

an estrangement of American Catholic leadership from both the new administration and the Vatican, as well as a significant segment of Catholics. While a few prominent bishops, such as Chicago's Blasé Cupich, criticized the statement, most church leaders will not dissent publicly, Faggioli writes. Even though the day after the inauguration the USCCB praised Biden's rejoining the Paris Agreement, reinstating DACA protections, and reversing Trump's Muslim ban, he argues that the "wrong note" had been struck, signaling strained church-state relations in the years ahead.

(*Commonweal*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/lots-politics-little-legitimacy?>)



Source: Gage Skidmore from Surprise, AZ, United States of America, CC BY-SA 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

Failed Trump prophecies create new divisions in charismatic and Pentecostal churches

There is new division and conflict between charismatic and Pentecostal leaders and their followers over their failed prophecies concerning the reelection of President Donald Trump, particularly after the riots and attempted insurrection of January 6. "Privately and on social media, these prophets and their thousands of followers are slugging it out in an orgy of self-

blame [and] recriminations,” writes Julia Duin on the website *Religion Unplugged* (January 12). Meanwhile, other prophets who have apologized for getting it wrong have faced accusations, curses and even death threats. Duin cites prominent evangelist Jeremiah Johnson, who in 2015 prophesied that Trump would win the White House and, four years later, that he would be



Source: Elvert Barnes from Baltimore, Maryland, USA, CC BY-SA 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

reelected, and who says his life was threatened after publicly apologizing. Several other prophets have cited conspiracy theories behind the January attack. Most of these charismatic and Pentecostal leaders belong to the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), which holds that the biblical offices of prophets and apostles still exist.

Duin cites Baylor University new religious movement scholar J. Gordon Melton, who found that 40 charismatic Christian leaders had predicted Trump’s reelection. “Only a handful [of prophets] got it right on the 2016 election, so they all jumped into this election,” he says. This is the second time in a year that the movement has faced prophetic failure: at a prophetic summit in late 2019, none of the elite prophets assembled predicted that the coronavirus was coming. James A. Beverley of Tyndale University, who has spent 40 years studying the movement, argues that these failures represent “the most significant crisis in the history of modern charismatic prophecy.” A few other prophets are apologizing, such as Kris Vallotton, the resident prophet of the influential Bethel Church in Redding, California, and Los Angeles pastor and spiritual coach Shawn Bolz. Some prophets have reformulated their prophecies to hold that Trump will be inaugurated “in heaven” and that God will replace Biden with Trump in the near future. Erica Ramirez, president of Pentecostals and Charismatics for Peace and Justice, said that, for most of these believers, January 6 ruled out such options and is most likely giving them a sense of resigned acceptance about the Biden presidency.

(*Religion Unplugged*, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2021/1/12/charismatics-are-at-war-with-each-other-over-failed-prophecies-of-trump-victory?rq=Duin>)

Northern Idaho hailed as promised land for religious and political conservatives

In the face of social and political polarization as well as the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, a segment of religious conservatives are pulling up stakes and moving to northern Idaho, a deep “red” state that is considered friendly to religion and traditional values, writes Tracy Simmons on the website *Religion Unplugged* (December 29). In the past, Idaho has been home to several far-right movements and leaders, but increasingly the state is drawing more mainstream religious conservatives. According to the U.S. Census, Idaho continues to be one of the fastest growing states, and with the pandemic that growth rate is climbing even faster. According to Gallup polls, Idaho was one of 19 “highly conservative” states in 2018, meaning that it had more conservatives than liberals by at least 20 percentage points. Simmons cites Kris Finch, a realtor who sells homes in both Washington and Idaho and sees a trend of families moving to the latter state for religious or political reasons. “I have had a handful of people wishing to move to the area. In fact, they had or have jobs in Washington, but wanted to purchase homes in Idaho to get away from the democratic politics of Washington,” she said, also noting that rural properties seem to be in demand all across the state due to its low rates of Covid-19 infection.

Finch added that in recent years she has sold a home to an anti-vaccination family from California and heard from several Washington residents looking to move to a Republican-run state. “Even though they seemed to believe Idaho would turn blue in the future,” she said of a recent client, “they felt that the laws were more in line with their views on weapons, required masks, etc., and wished to move to Idaho.” Simmons also cites a popular YouTube video of Kory Martinelli, of Live Better in North Idaho Real Estate, who said that he had moved his family to Coeur d’Alene from California in 2009 because of that state’s progressive



Source: GearedBull at English Wikipedia, CC BY 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

politics. According to him, Californian politics and culture had threatened “our spiritual rights, our family values, our economic stability and our constitutional rights, especially the right to bear arms.” He added that “North Idaho is a conservative culture and it’s only growing more conservative with population growth...North Idaho is a direct contradiction to the theory that population growth turns communities liberal.”

(*Religion Unplugged*, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2020/12/29/in-search-of-religious-freedom-christians-flock-to-north-idaho/>?)

UFO research’s bid for legitimacy complicating science-religion relationship?

The orthodox scientific view that has ruled out the existence of UFOs is coming into question—raising new dilemmas and prospects for the relationship between science and religion, writes University of Chicago anthropologist Hussein Ali Agrama in the science and religion journal *Zygon* (December). In the last few years, there have been a series of disclosures of military programs and research involving UFOs that claim encounters with these alleged phenomena. In 2019, the U.S. Navy also announced that it would revise its guidelines for reporting anomalous aerial sightings by its personnel in order to “destigmatize them.” Although receiving less media attention due to the momentous events of last year, the push to legitimize UFOs has now become a multi-platform operation, made up of former intelligence officials, scientists, and celebrities such as musician Tom DeLonge, through the newly founded To the Stars Academy of Arts and Science (TTSA). The group was instrumental in the release of a secretive Pentagon study on UFO research activity. Agrama, who remains a skeptic of UFO claims, writes that the findings of such studies include more than just vague sightings of shiny far-off objects in the sky; rather, the accounts are based on sophisticated military sensors from various vantage points observing fast-moving objects capable of rapid acceleration and able to perform “maneuvers at aerodynamically impossible angles.”

Some of these reports include the more familiar sensationalized accounts of poltergeist-like beings and human and animal injuries, leading a segment of UFO researchers to search for biological evidence of these phenomena rather than relying on traditional eyewitness accounts. Shortly after the Navy announcement, Agrama attended a conference that for almost the first time brought together researchers from academia, government, and industry to openly develop methodologies appropriate to study UFOs. He writes that although only a few of these scientists believe that these UFO incidents point to extraterrestrial life, “there is now a growing consensus among researchers throughout academia, industry, and government that the UFO phenomenon represents something anomalous that cannot be dismissed as a simple mistake of perception or explained (away) by conventional means, and that therefore merits the kind of investigation that only combined resources would allow.” Just as these findings may bring about a shift in our understanding of contemporary physics and its limits, they may increasingly challenge

assumptions about religion and secularism, Agrama writes. One ethnographic study by Diana Pasulka recounts how NASA engineers have looked into the esoteric practices and powers of saints and psychics to understand UFO technologies. Such developments seem to straddle the line between science and religion, while not falling into either category, with their “uncanniness stretching us to our limits” in a secular age, Agrama writes. He concludes that the growing acceptance of UFOs may not represent a new set of religious beliefs as much as a “new paradigm of religiosity, rooted partly in incontrovertible technological evidence.”

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



Source: Pixabay.

Christian Science fending off obituaries through worldly adaptations

Increased financial capital and growth in the global South (mostly in several African countries) have allowed the Church of Christian Science to cope with a declining number of churches, societies and practitioners, ensuring its continuing existence in the foreseeable future, writes independent scholar Elise Wolff in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (October 2020). In a 1998 article, Rodney Stark, applying his influential model of the causes of religions’ success or failure to the case of Christian Science, had concluded that a variety of factors might even lead to its disappearance within a generation. Wolff’s article attempts to identify factors that have

slowed or countered this predicted decline. Membership is difficult to assess, since the church refuses to publish such figures due to some of its principles. Moreover, a number of participants identifying as Christian Scientists are not formal members. After reaching a peak at some point between the 1930s and the 1950s, membership has declined, and various estimates put it somewhere between more than 400,000 and less than 100,000 worldwide. Church officials themselves claim that membership has stabilized in the twenty-first century. In contrast to this uncertainty, the listings in Christian Science literature provide clear figures on declining numbers of churches, societies and practitioners. In the U.S., the 1,300 churches that still existed in 1995 were down to 800 by 2015. In 2017, there were some 1,440 Scientist churches and societies around the world.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the church

had been on the verge of bankruptcy after huge losses that followed an attempt to create a TV network. Subsequently, after shutting down and selling its radio stations (1997), turning its reputable newspaper, the *Christian Science Monitor*, into an online news site and weekly magazine (2009), reducing spending and selling real estate (namely disbanded church buildings), the church has become more financially sound than it has been in a long time, with over \$1 billion in assets. It has made attempts to present its message to a wider audience, publishing a trade edition of Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health*, and presenting Christian Science healing as "value-added healthcare." Wolff adds, however, that some members have not been



Source: Sarah Nichols, CC BY-SA 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

pleased with what they see as a watered-down version of Christian Science and expressions of laxness. The factors of decline identified by Stark have not disappeared, and Wolff sees indications that the church is attempting to encourage its members to do more to spread Christian Science. For now, however, it seems to have at least succeeded in creating the conditions for continued existence.

(*Journal of Contemporary Religion*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjcr20/current>)

Post-pandemic church forecasts eye struggle and ministry innovation

Among other trends, the post-pandemic future of American churches is likely to include significant growth in co-vocational ministry, smaller satellite congregations, the continued use of digital church strategies to complement live services, and a new emphasis on healthy churches “adopting” and fostering weaker ones, according to church growth researcher Thom Rainer in a blog post on his website Church Answers (December 21). Rainer’s forecasts on church trends in the near future are largely based on the developments and struggles congregations have faced over the past year of the pandemic. He writes that it will be increasingly common for churches to have fewer full-time staff because of financial strains, with a growing number of positions becoming co-vocational. Secondly, a “new manifestation of the multi-site movement will be multi-site campuses with 50 or fewer congregants. The early



Source: Caniceus, via Pixabay (<https://pixabay.com/de/users/caniceus-15612619/>)

adopter churches, estimated to be around 5,000, will define this movement and become the models for future micro-churches.” As for online and live services, some leaders will likely advocate a “digital first” strategy while some insist on an “in-person first” approach. And Rainer adds that, although “we are not seeing a decline in the numbers of churches on the precipice of closing, we are seeing a major trend develop as more of these very sick churches get adopted by healthier churches.”

He projects that “church fostering,” where a healthier church helps a less healthy one for a certain period of time (usually less than a year), will become more prevalent. “We anticipate 30,000 churches (meaning 15,000 foster churches and 15,000 fostering churches) will enter into this relationship in 2021.” As for post-pandemic church attendance and denominational figures and rates, Rainer estimates that average worship attendance will be down 20 to 30 percent from pre-pandemic levels. Yet he is finding quicker recovery among smaller churches, suggesting that churches over 250 in attendance (pre-pandemic) will have the greatest challenge in recovering. Because of these large-church struggles, he writes that the “new definition of a large church will be 250 and more in average worship attendance. These ‘new’ large churches will be in the top ten percent of all churches in North America.” Before the pandemic, by contrast, a church would need an average worship attendance of 400 to be in the top 10 percent. Rainer also forecasts that denominations will begin their steepest declines in 2021. In comparison to non-denominational congregations, denominational churches have long faced decreasing membership and average worship attendance, so they will begin at a greater rate of decline. There will also be fewer new churches in the denominations, with a combination of church closures and church withdrawals from denominations being greater than previous years. As other observers have forecasted, giving rates will also be down, declining 20 to 30 percent.

(*Church Answers*, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/twelve-major-trends-for-churches-in-2021/>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

- **While religious attendance is negatively associated with women’s egalitarian attitudes toward gender , this relationship depends on a country’s rate of gender inequality and religious affiliation, according to an analysis of survey data from 37 countries.** The study, published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in January), is based on a survey of gender roles by the International Social Survey Program that measured women’s religiosity and attitudes on gender. Conducted by Santa Clara University sociologist Di Di, the study looked at how national religious context shaped the interaction between religiosity and gender attitudes. In both India and the Netherlands, religious women perceive gender norms to be different outside of their faith and construct boundaries that differentiate themselves from the “secular other.” Thus in the Netherlands, religious women construct more traditional gender roles and attitudes than those prevalent in their secular environment, while in India, women who more frequently attend religious services have more egalitarian gender ideas compared to the traditional gender norms prevalent in the wider society.

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



Source: Noelia Demaria, via Pixabay (<https://pixabay.com/de/users/noeliademaria-3275898/>)

● **While the number of missionaries being sent from countries in the global South continues to rise, those countries with the largest share of Christians still tend to receive the most missionaries, according to an annual review of world Christianity in the *International Bulletin of Mission Research* (January).** Authors Gina Zurlo, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing note that their projected figures for 2021 do not take into account the changes wrought by Covid-19, adding that demographers will not know the effects of the pandemic for years. But their projections for 2021 and beyond suggest that the center of global Christian influence, including missions, continues to shift to the global South. More specifically, they find that the number of missionaries being sent from countries in the global South continues to rise, with 203,000 (43 percent of the total) in 2021, increasing from 31,000 (12 percent) in 1970. While North America and Europe, due to their greater wealth and resources, continue to send the most cross-cultural missionaries (53 percent), Brazil, South Korea, the Philippines, and China each send large numbers as well. The researchers add that “a striking reality for the global missions movement is that the countries with the most Christians receive the largest number of missionaries...An increasing number of Protestants and Independents are being sent to Africa and Asia as well as being sent from there.” They note that there are still 4,000 cultures (out of



Source: Royal Mayhem, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

14,000) that have not encountered Christianity, most of which are Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist in the global South.

(*International Bulletin of Mission Research*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ibm>)

● **A new poll of Britain’s Generation Z finds that both older and younger teens are more likely to believe in God than are millennials, the demographic group ahead of them.** The survey, conducted by YouGov in late November and reported by *The Times* (December 28), found that 23 percent of Britons aged 16 to 24 said they believe in God, with an additional 13 percent saying they believe in a “higher spiritual power.” In contrast, only 19 percent of those aged 25 to 39 said they believe in God, with 16 percent saying they believe in a higher power. Both groups score lower than the wider British population in its belief in God (27 percent). The proportion of Gen Z members who say they believe in God is up from 21 percent in January 2019 (when the question was asked of 18 to 24-year-olds), suggesting that some may have embraced religious belief over the course of the pandemic. The pollsters add that it is not clear if these figures hint at a significant shift toward religious expression for this age group. However,

the newsletter *Counting Religion in Britain* (December) views these findings with some skepticism, arguing that “too much significance should not be read into a variation from one data point to the next among a subsample numbering just a few hundred, especially when the age bands were not consistent. More noteworthy, perhaps, is the continued overall slide in the proportion believing in some kind of life force at all, down from 58 percent in 2012 (and 49 percent on the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic) to 43 percent today, a further indication that coronavirus is not turning the nation to religion.”

(*Counting Religion in Britain*, <http://www.brin.ac.uk/counting-religion-in-britain-december-2020>)

About two in five Britons believe in a god or a higher power

Do you believe in a God or a higher spiritual power? %



Growth of solstice ceremonies suggests rituals without religion in Denmark

The new presence of atheists and humanists in Denmark during the past two decades has led to a growth of winter solstice celebrations that appeal to a diverse secular and religious public, according to an article in the journal *Religions* (12:74). Astrid Krabbe Troll writes that since 2010, there has been a marked increase in these rituals, which are often based on local traditions and natural surroundings. Before 2010, solstice celebrations were mainly frequented by nationalists, artists, and those in the Viking and Old Norse Pagan subcultures, but the trend has since caught on among a wider population seeking non- and pre-Christian rituals. Solstice observances have long been put to political purposes to bring about national unity, but through an

analysis of newspapers, Troll finds that such events were not celebrated locally before the year 2000. Most of these celebrations involve some element of water (as Denmark is a country of islands), reciting poetry, singing songs (some of them traditional with religious elements), lighting bonfires and torches, and stressing environmental awareness. Troll adds that these celebrations “testify to the local level ritualization of a diverse religious and non-religious landscape. As such, they can be viewed as non-religious rituals that represent alternatives—as well as supplements—to Christmas celebrations in December.”

(*Religions*, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/2/74>)



Source: Gerhard Lipold, 2020 (<https://pxhere.com/en/photo/1633209>).

Belarus protests involve believers and divide religious leaders

The mass protests against the presidency of Alexander Lukashenko that have rocked Belarus since last summer have involved the country’s Orthodox and Catholic churches, although the Orthodox hierarchy has been more divided on the issue, while Protestants and other religious groups have remained neutral. Petro Kraliuk and Yuriy Plyska, writing in the current issue of the journal *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* (December 2020), report that while many believers from most religions joined the protests over the contested reelection and continued rule of Lukashenko, despite harsh repression by his security forces, religious leadership have expressed greater caution about such actions. The authors note that Belarus is one of the least religious countries in the world, with its main Orthodox Church having a low rate of active membership and attendance. Yet recent events have demonstrated the importance of the religious factor in the country’s social life. The risks of danger and of repression of religious organizations have led to different strategies by the Belarusian Orthodox Church, with its

hierarchy shifting from “soft opposition” to loyalty to Lukashenko. The church has shown a dual loyalty, being part of the Russian Orthodox Church and thus loyal to the Russian government, with its leading bishops being ethnically Russian, while also being subservient to the Lukashenko regime.

While considering himself an “Orthodox atheist,” Lukashenko has sought to work with the Orthodox Church, condemning what he calls “bad religions,” such as the more independent Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and, increasingly, the Catholic Church. Caught between loyalty to Russia and the concerns of lay members, Exarch Paul, presiding bishop of the church, expressed support for the protests, sensing that Russia was also critical of Lukashenko. But when Russian leaders reached an agreement with the president, the fate of Exarch Paul was decided, and he was replaced by Exarch Benjamin, who has remained officially neutral about the protests even as he has sought to cooperate with Lukashenko. The situation is quite different for the Catholic Church, the second largest church in Belarus, which has a more Western orientation. A significant number of Catholic clergy have participated in the protests, with its head Metropolitan Tadevush Kandrusovich taking a critical stance toward Lukashenko. Kandrusovich’s condemnation of state violence was enough for Lukashenko to deny him reentry



Source: A_Matskevich (https://pixabay.com/de/users/a_matskevich-12470786/).

into Belarus after he visited Poland, leading to a campaign by Belarusian Catholics on his behalf. Meanwhile, the minority religions have taken a neutral official stance toward Lukashenko (even as laypeople have joined the protests), with some Protestants seeing him as a “lesser evil” compared to the liberal democracies of the West.

(*Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss10/3/>)

Ultra-Orthodox Jews wield growing influence in Israeli politics

With the ultra-Orthodox community (Haredim) having tripled from 4 to 12 percent of the Israeli population since 1980 and projected to grow to over 20 percent by 2040, the culture war over issues related to the identity of the “Jewish state” will become even more significant as the Haredim aspire to shape public affairs. Peter Lintl, head of a project on “Israel and its regional and global conflicts” based at the Middle East and Africa Research Division of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), analyzes these matters in a new report (December). The demographic rise of a group with relatively high birth rates (averaging 7.1 children per woman), that is not a product of Zionism, and that sees itself as the representative of authentic Jewishness gives rise to debates and tensions around the Jewish identity of the state. This development also calls attention to the relationship between the state and religion, the special rights of the Haredim community, and issues of public normativity. But the growing share of Haredim in the Israeli population also raises dilemmas for the ultra-Orthodox themselves around their aspirations to change the state versus their fears of being changed through their involvement in politics and mainstream society. “Some call for isolation, others for integration into the state, and yet others for taking over the state,” Lintl notes. The hesitation between withdrawal and attempts to influence society is also explained by the fact that the Haredim also need the state in order to safeguard their way of life.

Many secular Israelis see the Haredim as having too much influence and resent them as an economic burden. Except for a strictly anti-Zionist minority, ultra-Orthodox participate in the Israeli democratic system for pragmatic reasons, not wishing to leave it to others to decide their fate and seeking to preserve their world. However, Lintl notes that, especially since the 2010s, the Haredim’s will to shape the religious aspects of the state’s identity has been noticeably growing. During the same period, there has been an increasing identification with the political right. The importance of coalitions in Israeli politics offers them possibilities of influence. Also, changes in part of the ultra-Orthodox population during the past 20 years should not be underestimated. Making up between 8 and 30 percent of the ultra-Orthodox (depending on sources), this “new Haredim” are modernizing and interacting much more with mainstream Israeli life. While more than 50 percent of the new Haredim still stick to the classical model of



Source: Anna Annouk (<https://pixabay.com/de/users/annanouk-478937/>)

isolation, two other subcurrents lean toward integration, including the promotion of a kind of “Torah conservatism,” on the one hand, and “a resolute politicization of the ultra-Orthodox worldview in the sense of an ultra-Orthodox conception of the state,” on the other. Whatever course is taken, Lintl seems convinced that the country will become more conservative and religious under the influence of the Haredim.

(The full report in English can be downloaded in various formats from the SWP website: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020RP14>)

Lebanese evangelical churches’ openness to refugees reaps harvest of converts

Evangelical churches in Lebanon have undergone a resurgence as they have opened their doors to refugees from Syria, writes Scott Gustafson in the *International Bulletin of Mission Studies* (January). From 2011 to 2020, Syrian refugees, mainly Muslim, flooded into neighboring Lebanon to escape war and unrest in their country. By 2015, Lebanon had become the most densely populated country in the world in terms of refugees, with one in every four persons then in the country seeking refuge from the war—a reality that churches were not prepared for. Showing compassion to the refugees divided many churches, with some seeing their Muslim identity as a threat. Yet numerous mercy ministries were started, and evangelism and conversions have now become commonplace. By shifting their mission strategies and engaging in new partnerships with other churches and organizations, the churches have experienced “exponential

growth,” Gustafson writes. One important cause of growth was the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development, a Baptist-founded group that helped create international partnerships between churches, foundations, and even government agencies to support relief efforts.

One prominent church drawing on these resources is Resurrection Church in Beirut, which has grown from 70 attenders to 1,300 in a few years, and another hub of relief work and evangelism has been True Vine Church in the Beqaa Valley.



Source: SAT7-UK (<https://www.sat7uk.org/beirut-church-shares-love-refugees-across-arab-world/>)

There are reported to have been about 38,000 converts added to the churches in the last few years. Much of the growth has come through new home visitation programs the churches use in conjunction with Bible studies that are organized in residential areas. The Arab cultural trait of “thick hospitality” is one reason these home visits have been so effective, Gustafson writes. But he sees the overall change from a closed, defensive stance to a more open and “holistic,” outreach-oriented approach as the main reason for the churches’ success. Gustafson concludes, however, that the challenges are just starting for the churches; they have to develop educational programs for the new converts and prevent people from using their churches mainly for material needs and financial gain, as well as discouraging the congregations themselves from stressing numbers and fund-raising over long-term commitment. Lebanon’s evangelicals (Gustafson does not mention mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Maronite churches) now see themselves as part of a revival movement of Muslim conversion to Christianity that is also taking place in Iran and the broader region.

(*International Bulletin of Mission Research*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ibm>)

Worldly Buddhism expands in Taiwan

With the earliest religious reform efforts being launched by refugee monks from China about 60 years ago, the resulting movements within Pure Land Buddhism in Taiwan are succeeding in combining traditional Buddhist values with a desire for worldly engagement in altruistic as well as capitalist activities, writes Sumanto Al Qurtuby in the current issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (October 2020). The author focuses on such movements as Fo Guang Shan (Buddha’s Light Mountain), Tzu Chi Gongdehui (Compassionate Relief Merit Society),

and Fagu Shan (Dharma Drum Mountain), which have not given up basic doctrines and traditional religious norms but endowed them with new meanings that take into account contemporary developments.

These movements' impact goes beyond Taiwan, with Fo Guang Shan having branches in some 50 countries and Tzu Chi having a presence in 14 countries. Animated by a spirit of entrepreneurship and an ethos of philanthropy, the movements have been developing both businesses and humanitarian services, and are behind a variety of initiatives ranging from educational institutions to medical care and



A ceremony in Taiwan to honor outstanding women in Buddhism (<https://www.tzuchi.org.tw/en/index.php>).

international relief. The roots of the views promoted by these movements can be traced to the legacy of Chinese Buddhist reformers going back as far as the nineteenth century. But Qurtuby stresses that the “unique kind of spirit of capitalism in Taiwan” has encouraged Taiwanese Buddhists to be involved in such activities. “Those innovative ideas in reforming Buddhism can be understood as outcomes of the dialectics between modernization and tradition.”

(*Journal of Contemporary Religion*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjcr20/current>)

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

Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU) is having a significant influence on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, as it attempts to bring together the politics of the broader movement with the religious ideals of the denomination. Started in 2015, BLUU has transitioned from a denominational caucus meant to strengthen African-American representation in Unitarianism to a “spiritual resource and home for BLM activists who are wary of traditional black churches.” Rather than just passing out flyers at BLM events as many churches may do, BLUU takes part in and funds these events, putting a priority on forming solidarity with other social justice organizations. While seeing itself as in line with its Unitarian past as a center for abolitionism and advocacy for civil rights and integration, the new organization now seeks to be “a community of black religious liberals with the funding to control their own organization

and the drive to improve the lives of those on the margins, especially black women and LGBTQ individuals.” Although the ultimate goal is for BLUU to become the spiritual home of activists in the BLM movement, organizers have noticed that many BLM participants are already unofficial “adjacent” members of the group, using its spaces and coming to its events. Like the wider movement, there is often an acceptance of secularism and non-Judeo-Christian faith, such as the African rituals and spiritualities of many black activists in BLUU. The group’s leadership matches the cultural progressivism in BLM, with the majority being “queer-identifying and transgender.” (Source: *Free Inquiry*, January/February)



Source: <https://www.uua.org/giving/areas-support/funds/promise-and-practice/history-black-lives-uu>