

A cultic revival without the cults?

“Cults are in style again. Or at least it’s trendy to *call* things cults—everything from QAnon to SoulCycle,” writes Jesse Walker in *Reason* magazine (June). Up until recently, “cults,” or new religious movements (NRM), were thought to have little appeal for Americans, especially as compared to the decades of the 1960s to the 1990s. But J. Gordon Melton, an NRM specialist at Baylor University, says that while we may not be reliving the early 1990s, there has been an intensification of cult and anti-cult rhetoric in American culture. This can be seen in everything from documentaries on groups like Nxivm, the purported self-help group whose founder was convicted for sex trafficking, and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh’s ashram, to renewed attention to closed and secretive religious groups and their role in spreading Covid-19. Walker conducted a search of the Internet Archive’s TV News Archive and found “a systematic increase in the use of the word *cult* since November 2019,” both in terms of local news stories and in broader contexts.

Cultic rhetoric and accusations have circulated particularly around politics and politicians, whether in liberal media accounts of devotion to Donald Trump or conservative suspicions about the wave of political “wokeness” emerging during the past year. The rhetoric around transgender rights has pitted parents against their children, charging that they have been brainwashed by the transgender movement. Even anti-cult figures from the past, such as deprogrammer Rick Ross, have made a reappearance to revive theories of brainwashing. [A recent *New York Times* article assigning the “cult” label to the late Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity may be another example.] But the elusive phenomenon of QAnon has generated the most cultic speculation. Interestingly, while it used to be parents who were worried about their children becoming “brainwashed” from NRM involvement, today it is often young adults who accuse their parents of succumbing to the mind control of QAnon, Walker writes.

QAnon itself has absorbed older conspiracy theories about the threats of Satanic cults and pedophiles. But Walker adds that the high estimates of QAnon’s influence among Republicans and even the far right may be inflated, as they tend to bundle views that are not necessarily associated (such as animosity toward “elites” and more well-known QAnon conspiracies).

Actually, only about seven percent of Americans hold to QAnon theories, and many such individuals could not even explain those theories when asked by interviewers. The FBI's designation of QAnon as a "domestic terror threat" also misses the mark, according to Walker, because Qers are largely passive in their beliefs, waiting for an event called "The Storm" to put things right. Even if disappointed Qers were among the January 6 rioters, Q is still viewed by more militant rightists as "the opium of the Trumpite masses," Walker writes.

(*Reason*, <https://reason.com/2021/05/16/cult-country/>)



Source: David Shankbone, 2008 (Wikimedia Commons)

“Successor ideology” putting the squeeze on Western religion in elite colleges?

Is “woke” identity politics squeezing out religious practice at elite American colleges? That is the contention of Anna Keating, a former Catholic chaplain at an unnamed elite college in New England, in a controversial blog article in the *Hedgehog Review* (May 4). Although only focusing on one college, Keating has subsequently said in a video interview [see below] that what she witnessed is fairly common at other elite institutions. Arriving as a liberal chaplain at a

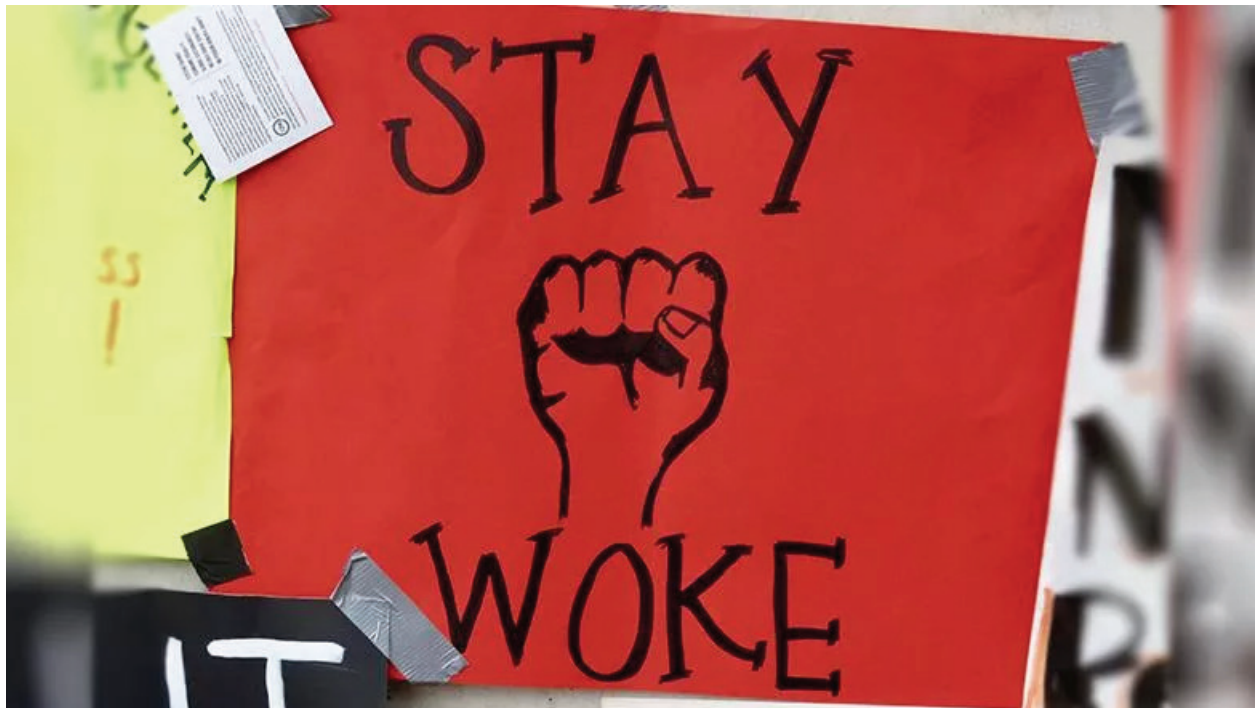
progressive secular college, with traditional views of what a liberal-arts education in the humanities was about, Keating thought she was going to help students explore “Western spirituality.” “I saw religion as another identity to be explored and therefore essential to a student’s experience and self-definition.... And for a while at least, it seemed as though we were filling a need for students interested in religious community.” But Keating saw the pluralistic liberalism that relegated religion to the private sphere being eroded “by what the writer Wesley Yang calls ‘the successor ideology.’ Rooted in the critical race theory of the Ibram X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo school, this ideology is far less tolerant of Jewish kids gathering for Shabbat or Catholic kids for Mass. Under the influence of this form of ideological thinking, students were coming to view religious services or religious observance as part of the structure of ‘white supremacy.’” One student told Keating that it was “taboo to explore Western spirituality, especially in liberal circles. I’m careful who I tell about it.” Other students asked her not to take photos of Mass and post them on social media, because they didn’t want to be “outed” as Catholic.

Keating argues that the “drive to eliminate whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity on college campuses has made entire religious traditions suspect, particularly those that are absurdly lumped together as part of ‘Western spirituality’—despite the inconvenient fact that the majority of the world’s one billion Catholics are neither white nor western, or that Judaism includes Africans and Arabs and other non-European peoples.” One goal of the new brand of antiracism is “leveling group differences,” and college administrators told Keating that members of certain religious groups were overrepresented on campus. This was the reason why the college wanted to get rid of chaplaincy programs and replace them with “wellness” workshops. Because Jewish and Catholic ministries had more students and could get outside funding, Keating was told that “in order to be antiracist we have to have equal resources for Hindu students, Muslim students, Buddhist students, or we need to *do away with* Spiritual Life groups all together [sic].” Keating concludes that “[u]ltimately, the successor ideology benefits academics and administrators who use it to protect themselves from any possible criticism or censure for being insufficiently antiracist, but it provides students with nothing more than an ersatz, feel-good simulacrum of diversity and equity. The cost of entry into America’s elite spaces, the college degree, should not mean leaving behind the traditions and ‘metanarratives’ that have sustained your ancestors—unless, of course, that’s what you have freely chosen.”

In his e-newsletter, *Reactions* (May 14), *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat writes that he was struck by Keating’s article “not because I think it describes the fullness of elite reality but precisely because it doesn’t, because it reflects instead a novel tendency within that culture, not nearly dominant as yet.” He writes that “to *be* religious in some traditional or semi-traditional way is not necessarily all that socially difficult in the meritocratic day to day. There are flourishing religious communities, conservative as well as liberal-leaning, on most elite college campuses. I know plenty of serious religious people who move through elite-level graduate programs and professional schools without encountering overt hostility, even if they tread

carefully in various situations....” Yet “there are social and professional costs for the public expression or endorsement of a few particularly unpopular, understood-as-bigoted *teachings* that are common to Christianity, Judaism and Islam [such as opposition to homosexuality]. But those same costs don’t apply to practicing and participating in those traditions, even in their more conservative expressions. Whereas under the emergent, new-progressive circumstances described by Keating, the costs would increasingly apply more broadly: Thus to simply attend Mass, even under the auspices of a liberal Catholic chaplaincy, would become an act of association with bigotry—plus colonialism plus white privilege plus a longer list of Western sins—that risks social sanction, and in its administrative forms liberalism would increasingly look for excuses to marginalize any faith with those associations that didn’t stage a complete break with the Christian or Western-religious past.” While this “animating impulse” is real enough in certain quarters, Douthat concludes that he would make a “bet against this particular anti-religious future coming into being outside the true progressive hothouse.”

(*Hedgehog Review*, <https://hedgehogreview.com/blog/thr/posts/the-problem-with-western-religions-on-campus>; a video interview with Keating can be seen at: <https://iasculture.org/events/hedgehog-noontime-discussion-5>)

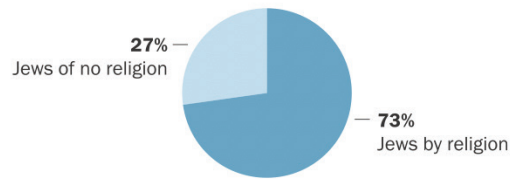


Source: King’s College London, 2021.

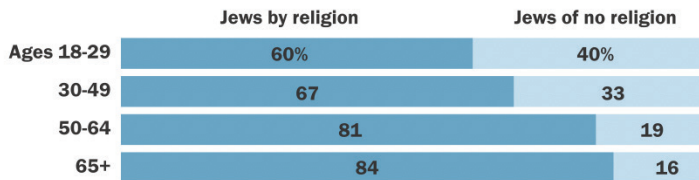
CURRENT RESEARCH

• **A new survey of U.S. Jews finds that, while holding their own numerically, they are increasingly split between secularism and Orthodoxy, especially among the youngest adults.** The survey by the Pew Research Center is a follow-up to its landmark 2013 study. American Jews are keeping up with the wider population, increasing to 7.5 million adults and children from 6.7 million eight years ago. The new study finds, however, that while nearly three-quarters of Jews identify as Jewish by religion, a growing number—27 percent—do not consider themselves as religious, identifying instead as Jewish ethnically, culturally, or by ancestry. This group of Jewish secularists is particularly large among those between the ages of 18 to 29, where fully 40 percent consider themselves Jewish without religion. And although Orthodox Jews represent 9 percent of the overall American Jewish population, they were found to represent 17 percent within the 18-to-29 age group. A little more than half of U.S. Jews identify with the Reform or Conservative movements.

Jewish identity in the United States, 2020



U.S. Jewish identity, by age



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults. "Jewish Americans in 2020"

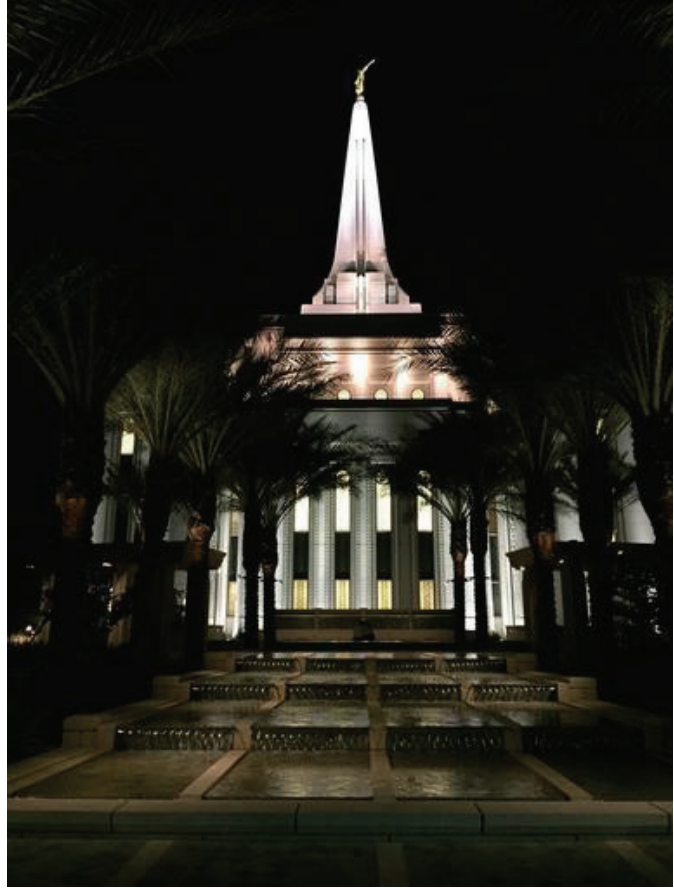
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The Orthodox-secularist rift plays out in politics. Seven-in-ten Jewish adults identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party, and half describe their political orientation as liberal. The Orthodox are almost the reverse, with 60 percent describing their political views as conservative, and 75 percent claiming to be Republican. While age appears to be the dividing line between religious and secular Jews, the Pew survey also suggests that religious intermarriage may be a factor in the growing gap. While a large majority (68 percent) of "Jews by religion" have Jewish spouses, an even larger majority (79 percent) of "Jews of no religion" have non-Jewish spouses.

(The Pew study can be downloaded from: <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>)

• **Despite a plateauing of growth, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) is continuing to build new temples.** In her blog *Flunking Sainthood* (May 20), Jana Reiss notes that the church recently announced the building of 20 new temples around the world, which according to the LDS Church Growth website will bring the total number of Mormon temples to 252. Seventy of these have been announced in just the three and half years that President Russell

Nelson has led the church. Apart from a slight uptick in 2019, there has been a steady decline in new members, both in terms of converts and “children of record.” Although the 2020 numbers have not been released yet and are likely to be skewed by the pandemic, even the pre-Covid trajectory of growth—between 1 to 2 percent a year—was not so high that it would call for the 28 percent increase in planned temples. Additionally, some of these temples are planned for no-growth areas, such as Norway, Belgium, and Austria. Reiss concludes that “[i]f yesterday’s temple was a prize bestowed on area members when they had achieved certain milestones related to growth, today’s temple is a jumper cable, a tool to re-energize the sputtering engine of the church’s numerical growth. Each announced temple represents our hope that positive community interest today could translate into converts tomorrow: ‘If you build it, they will come.’”



Source: Chuck Gray | Pixabay

● **One of the first large studies of the political involvement of pagans in the U.S. finds that they are “true” independents as far as their voting preferences and political ideology, but are engaged in politics in their own way.** The study, conducted by Kathleen Marchetti of Dickinson College and published in the journal *Politics and Religion* (online in May), is based on an analysis of data from the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Survey. Marchetti found that pagans trend toward moderate to left viewpoints and vote with Democrats more than non-pagans do, but they also have lower rates of voting than non-pagans. And they are also more likely to identify as true political independents, with



some voting for third-party candidates, such as from the Green and Libertarian parties. Support for LGBTQ protections is what Marchetti calls a “unified measure of pagan religious identity,” though there is less uniform acceptance of transgender identities in some sectors of the pagan community.

As might be expected, environmentalism is also a shared political ideal. But aside from these two issues, pagans were found to be relatively diverse. Although the pagan community is “women-dominated,” with some pagan religions being goddess-centered, they “hold no distinctive views on women in the workforce,” Marchetti said, and men actually hold a disproportionate number of positions of authority within pagan organizations. With a large majority of the pagan community being white, pagans exhibit no strong feelings as a group about immigration.

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

● **Sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church in Germany have contributed to increased rates of exit from the church and have even had a spillover effect on Protestant churches, according to a new study.** In an article appearing in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of*



Interior of Sankt Nikolaus church in Rosenheim, Bavaria, Germany (source: Uwe Schwarzbach, 2019 | Flickr).

Religion (online in May), Bernd Frick, Rob Simmons, and Katharina Moser look at diocese-level data for church exits and how they tend to be nonlinear and to peak at certain times. Exiting churches is a formal procedure in Germany, where one can opt out of paying taxes that go to supporting the churches. It was only in 2010 that records of clerical abuse became public in the country, with 3,677 cases reported between 1946 and 2014. Several financial scandals in the German Catholic churches have also been made public since 2014. Both kinds of scandal are seen as “exogeneous shocks” that can have an effect on religious participation, and the researchers did find that the recent sex abuse scandals had “significantly negative immediate and long-term impact, in the sense that they increased the annual exits from the Catholic Church. Sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church also raised exit rates in the Protestant Church with a delay.” However, they found “zero effects of the financial scandals on exits from the Catholic Church while there [were] positive impacts from these scandals on exits from the Protestant Church.”

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

- **A new study finds that switching across denominational lines among Palestinian Christians is increasingly practiced in Palestine.** In the study, published in the journal *Exchange* (50), Mari Parkkinen conducted in-depth interviews with 35 Palestinian Christians



Palestinian Christians welcome Easter to Gaza (source: Joe Catron, 2013 | Flickr).

from mainline and evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox communities. She found that women and young adults were the most mobile between denominations. One-fifth of her respondents had switched their denomination entirely, about one-third had more than one affiliation, and a little less than half (46 percent) had a stable affiliation. The most common motivation for switching was personal belief, followed by marrying a partner of a different denomination. Christians are a relatively small community in Palestine, with about 50,000 adherents, and the high rate of denominational mobility could be due to the common incidence of ecumenical marriages and social interaction. But Parkkinen concludes that this pattern could also be the result of a more individualistic approach, where family and community traditions are less important.

(*Exchange*, <https://brill.com/view/journals/exch/exch-overview.xml>)

Women challenge ultra-Orthodox authorities on work and reproductive issues in Israel

The view of ultra-Orthodox Judaism as a conservative force in Israeli society is only half the picture and does not account for the changes taking place among ultra-Orthodox women on reproductive and work decisions, writes Michal Raucher of Rutgers University in the online magazine *The Conversation* (May 17). Reflecting on interviews she conducted between 2009 and 2011 with ultra-Orthodox women about their reproductive experiences, Raucher sees many of their liberalizing attitudes reflected in the dynamics in ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel today. Although known only for having many children, Raucher found that after several pregnancies ultra-Orthodox women begin to make their own reproductive decisions, often in contradiction to rabbinic expectations. Knowing that rabbis expect ultra-Orthodox members to consult their rabbis on medical care, doctors might ask a woman who requests some form of birth control about their rabbi's approval.



Source: Adam Jones, 2011 | Flickr.

According to Raucher, this relationship encourages mistrust among these women as they distance themselves from both doctors and rabbis when it comes to reproductive care. At the same time, this rejection of external authority over pregnancy and birth is supported by the ultra-Orthodox belief that pregnancy is a time when women embody divine authority. “Women’s reproductive authority, then, is not completely countercultural; it’s embedded in ultra-Orthodox theology,” Raucher writes.

While gender segregation has long been another feature of ultra-Orthodox traditions, men and women now lead very different lives. In Israel, ultra-Orthodox men spend most of their days in a religious institute studying sacred Jewish texts, for which they earn a modest government stipend. While the community still valorizes poverty, ultra-Orthodox women have become the primary breadwinners and have increasingly attended college in order to support their large families. They are now entering the work force at a similar rate to their secular counterparts and are forging new career paths in technology, music and politics. This can be seen in recent TV shows depicting a more nuanced understanding of gender and authority among ultra-Orthodox Jews, such as the popular Netflix series *Shtisel*.

A proliferation of new formal and informal leaders in ultra-Orthodox society, such as the rise of assistants or informal helpers to rabbis, called askanim, has also led to a diffusion of authority. Understanding ultra-Orthodox women’s experiences would have helped explain why they have turned to theories that are repackaged in ultra-Orthodox language, like anti-vaccination campaigns. These women would also have revealed that poverty and cramped living spaces make social distancing almost impossible. Raucher argues that, rather than focusing exclusively on prominent rabbis who have rejected public health measures, “attention to women’s complicated experiences with the medical establishment would have highlighted the mistrust and doubt that permeates the ultra-Orthodox community’s relationship to public health measures.”

(*The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/ultra-orthodox-jewish-women-are-bucking-the-patriarchal-authoritarian-stereotype-of-their-community-160148>)

Buddhist response to Covid-19 proceeds under watchful eyes of Chinese state

Facing disease and death, many in China have found solace in Buddhist teachings and practices during the pandemic, while the state has been careful to curb large gatherings at religious places, possibly not only for health reasons but also because of their potential for sparking criticism of the state’s handling of the crisis. In a special report for the Georgetown University website *Religion & Diplomacy*, Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank note that Buddhist temples are managed by the state-approved Buddhist Association of China (BAC), which is charged with ensuring that Buddhist groups are patriotic, serve the needs of society as defined by the Communist Party of China (CPC), and cooperate in the state’s soft-power promotion of Buddhism. As everywhere, the pandemic has fostered religious rituals online. Performance of



Source: William Cho, 2007 | Flickr.

rituals for the dead was conducted online, which was made easier because of the development of many temple websites a decade ago in order to reach younger generations.

However, much online worship is organized outside of the control of Buddhist associations, through networks on social media and chat platforms, which are not encouraged by the state and the BAC. On the other hand, the authors remark that online rituals also prevented physical gatherings that could have led to criticism of the state's handling of the situation. Access to religious places was restricted during the Tomb Sweeping Festival last in April 2020 despite an easing of the lockdown at that time, since the gatherings might have led to a blaming of authorities for the loss of loved ones. These were replaced by a national moment of silence of three minutes to mourn the dead. "This is a moment of the state taking the role of popular custom and belief in grieving and remembering those who died in a national public health [crisis]," the

authors write. Even in a time of pandemic, the Chinese authorities have not forgotten to use Buddhism for supporting China's soft power, for instance through the joint organization of ceremonies by the BAC and Buddhist communities abroad to send blessings to people affected by Covid-19. Charitable activities by Buddhist groups have also been encouraged by the state (such as donations of masks or food domestically, or medical assistance sent by Chinese Buddhists abroad at a later stage of the pandemic).

(*Religion & Diplomacy*, <https://religionanddiplomacy.org/2020/04/20/special-report-impact-of-covid-19-on-chinese-buddhism-and-soft-power/>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ The journal *Mormon Studies Review* devotes most of its current issue (Vol. 8) to politics among Latter-day Saints, both on a global scale and in the American context. The lead article looks at how the rapid global expansion of Mormonism has had some impact on members' political commitments. Laurie F. Maffy-Kipp writes that the LDS church has lived in the tension of maintaining an American uniformity of teachings, practices, and structure throughout the world (which non-Western converts value) while increasingly adapting to and innovating in different societies. Thus in Western Europe, the LDS church can be more political than in the U.S. or Africa. In Oceania and New Zealand (which is also the subject of a separate article), the church finds members pressing for indigenous traditions and practices. Another article focuses on the LDS church and its conservative activism on issues of gender and sexuality, particularly LGBTQ and prolife issues. K. Mohlmann makes the case that these issues have dominated the church in place of the racial concerns of previous decades. The final article uses survey data to argue that the church's involvement in the same-sex marriage issue has alienated a segment of younger Mormons and that this tendency to political liberalism may hold sway over Mormon identity throughout the lifecycle of these young adults. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://www.press.uillinois.edu/journals/msr.html>.



■ The binary Western frame opposing “radical” and “moderate” Muslims tends to reduce diversity among Muslims to the extent to which they pose a security threat. But Muslim individuals, governments, and religious institutions also engage with this frame, write Margaretha A. van Es (University of Utrecht), Nina ter Laan (University of Utrecht), and Erik Meinema (University of Cologne) in their introduction to

the current issue of *Religion* (52:2), which proposes new perspectives on the politics of moderation in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority settings. Authored by Brussels-based researcher and policy analyst Serafettin Pektaş, one of the six articles in the issue examines three reputable religious institutions upholding the “moderate” vs. “radical” distinction and contrasting peaceful Islam with jihadist violence, especially with an increased emphasis after the emergence of the so-called “Islamic State” (IS). These three institutions are al-Azhar al-Sharif (Azhar) in Egypt, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia, and al-Rabita al-Muhammadiyah lil-Ulama (RMU) in Morocco. Although their respective legal statuses differ, all three are leading authorities associated with “official Islam.” Each actually integrates a particular notion of “moderate Islam” with their respective state’s understanding of “official Islam.” They “synchronize the authoritative Islamic rulings with the changing situation and political needs.”

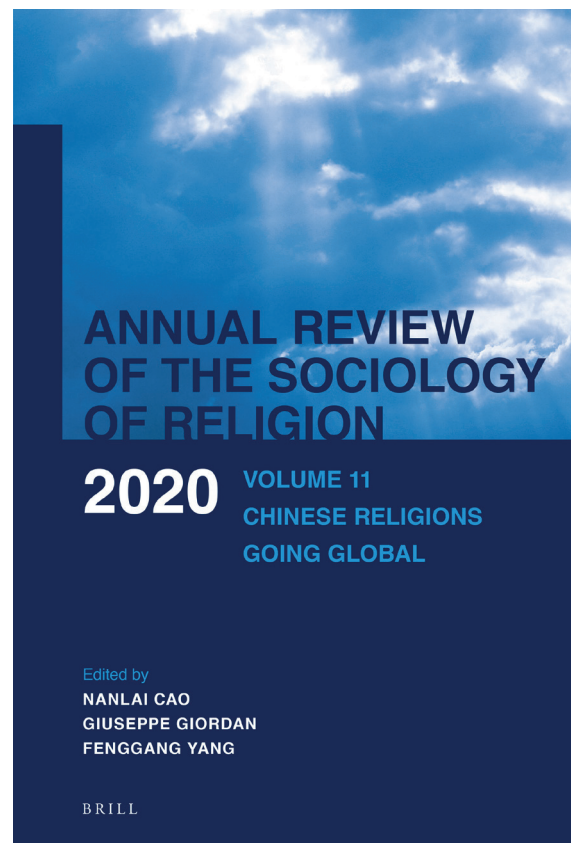
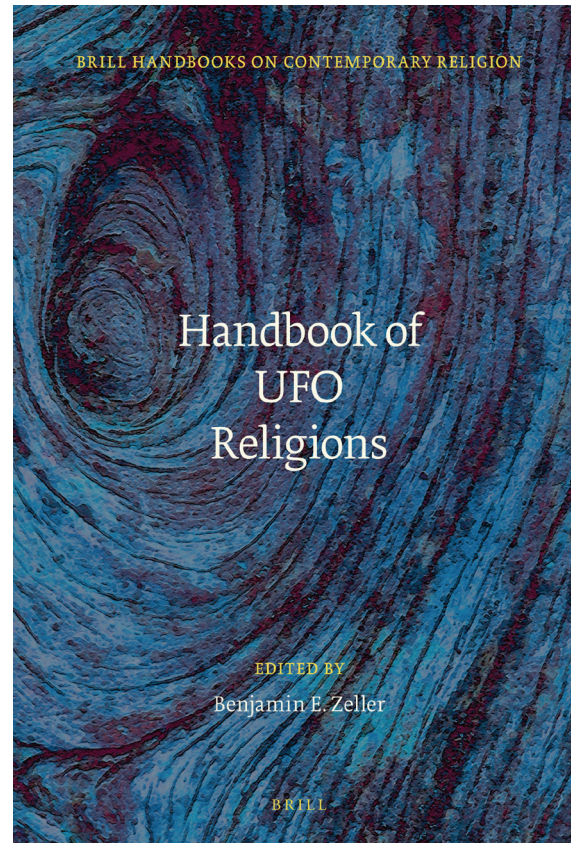


The comparison between the discourses of the three organizations shows divergent emphases on theological and socio-political factors. All three consider extremism as a distortion of Islam, but they link it to different sources. For instance, Azhar focuses more on the role of Western foreign policy and international dynamics, while NU—though not denying social factors—puts a strong emphasis on the influence of intolerant Wahhabism and other root causes in the Middle East. Through their promotion of moderate and peaceful Islam, all three institutions gain political legitimacy and visibility, but also attract more attention from an international audience and allow them to seek international cooperation. However, Pektaş notes that, while the fight against religious extremism opens up a new political space for these organizations, it also presents risks, since strong association with the state may cost them their moral credibility, as is already quite obvious with Azhar. *For more information on this issue, visit: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rrel20/current>.*

■ With UFOs receiving mainstream media coverage, with even the U.S. government recently revealing records about unexplained aerial disturbances, the new *Handbook of UFO Religions* (Brill, \$239) may take on new relevance. The new attention to UFOs, as government researchers are keen to point out, strictly concerns explaining unidentified flying objects in the technical sense and is skeptical about the UFO community and their quasi- and actual religious beliefs about extraterrestrial beings and abductions. But as editor Benjamin Zeller points out in the book’s introduction, even the government’s and other mainstream institutions’ broaching the subject of unidentified flying—and crashed—objects plays into a century of American and world folklore on UFOs and the way it has intersected with political and religious thought. Zeller writes that UFO culture and religion concerns far more than flying saucers and extraterrestrial visitors; it embraces everything from Theosophy and occult communication with other planets to evangelical end-times beliefs about the satanic deception of UFOs, to Hindu nationalist beliefs about “flying machines.”

The book is divided into sections on UFO beliefs, the various spiritual leaders associated with UFO teachings, and the related groups and movements. Chapters include an overview of theological and mainstream religious approaches to UFOs and extraterrestrial beings, showing a surprising openness to their existence. Several chapters cover the more recent millennial groups like the Valley of the Dawn and the Raëlians, which offer visions of massive social transformation through beneficent guidance by extraterrestrials. Another chapter looks at how Japan has become the leader in producing UFO groups in Asia, most notably Kōfuku no Kagaku or the Science of Happiness movement, which sees alien races as already being incarnate on Earth today. This book suggests that there are likely to be conflicts between the “orthodox” science now becoming visible on UFOs and the mystical, quasi-scientific, and often fantastic approaches of UFO religions in a way similar to the battles over evolution and creation. But there may well also be new convergences between mainstream science and UFO religion depending on what is actually discovered and identified about these mysterious flying machines.

■ *Chinese Religions Going Global* (Brill, \$195), edited by Nanlai Cao, Giuseppe Giordan, and Fenggang Yang, looks at the trend of Chinese religions circulating around the world and then often returning in changed forms to their birthplace. The book is unique for its geographic focus on Europe, including case studies of Chinese religion and Chinese religious communities in Italy, France, Britain, Germany, and Austria, as well as new immigration centers like Dubai. While much of the literature on immigrant Chinese religions has tended to be based on research in the U.S., Europe is becoming the new center of global migration from other countries and provides a new framework for theorizing about religion in contexts that lack long histories of settlement overseas. The book looks at other important trends, such as the way overseas Chinese Christians leverage economic skills and networks in



their settlements (in this case, through the coffee houses they run in Milan, Italy) and the tensions they experience in the secular business world.

Another important development is the way the “Sinicization” of Chinese religion, in other words, the drive by China’s Communist Party to make religion authentically Chinese, is carried out by migrants. This is reflected in an ethnographic account showing how Christianity has become a vital social force and moral resource in binding Chinese merchants and traders in the European diaspora. Other noteworthy chapters include ones on the growth of Yiguandao, probably the most transnational indigenous syncretic Chinese religion; the transnational Chinese Christian networks linking south Fujian and southeast Asia; and the growth of Chinese Catholic churches in Italy.