

Evangelical cities adapt to pluralistic, non-denominational realities

While Colorado Springs, Colorado, and Nashville, Tennessee, have been viewed as evangelical bastions and bellwethers since the 1990s, the changing fortunes of evangelicalism in much of the U.S. have also been reflected in the changing religious makeup of these cities. But in two separate articles profiling the cities, *Christianity Today* magazine (July/August) notes how evangelicals' culturally and institutionally changed situation has not necessarily meant a loss of influence. Liam Adams writes that in Colorado Springs, where many evangelical institutions relocated during the 1990s, the days of imposing wide-ranging political change and winning the culture wars have passed. The most influential evangelical group to make its home there was the new Christian Right powerhouse Focus on the Family, which turned its activism to city politics and led an initiative (Amendment 2) to restrict gay rights. Liberal opponents often condemned such efforts as attempting to declare a Christian agenda for the city. The city was also the planting ground for the nation's leading megachurches, most notably New Life, founded by Ted Haggard. While Haggard was not an activist, he celebrated evangelical (and his own) access to the Bush White House.

Over 20 years later, much of the evangelical activist current has lost its charge and megachurch and other congregations have redirected their influence toward social service and community outreach. Since founder James Dobson left Focus on the Family in 2010, the organization has become less focused on culture war issues in the city and nationally. Haggard's dramatic fall from grace, under accusations of drug use and visiting a male prostitute, hastened a turning point for New Life to undertake serious community development efforts, including building an apartment complex for 800 single mothers. Church leaders of the prominent First Presbyterian Church said members grew quarrelsome during the culture wars, and like other congregations they have tried to find common ground with their neighbors. Though the city is still a Republican stronghold demographically, non-evangelicals also see evangelicals as shifting toward the moderate middle, Adams writes. Meanwhile, in Nashville the evangelical presence is still growing, with ministries relocating there regularly. The city and the surrounding region have



Source: <https://4wordwomen.org/group/colorado-springs-co/>

shifted from a Southern Baptist hub to a non-denominational center, much as evangelicalism has taken on a non-denominational flavor.

While several denominations still have offices in Nashville, including the SBC, the United Methodists, the National Baptist Convention, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the newcomers flooding into the city do not particularly care about denominational identities or labels, writes David Roach. Non-denominational and “community churches” have proliferated. The \$200 million Educational Media Foundation, which owns the K-LOVE and Air1 radio networks as well as publishing, film, and podcast enterprises, recently relocated to Nashville from Northern California. The city’s non-denominational tone has also been influenced by its prominent contemporary Christian music industry. “As album sales soared, the Christian music industry came to employ more Nashvillians than the country music industry,” Roach writes. But denominational enterprises such as Belmont University, the United Methodist publisher Cokesbury, and the SBC’s Lifeway Christian Resources have either disaffiliated or faded. Roach adds that even the city’s historic civil rights advocacy has shed its denominational oversight as white and black leaders “have forged relationships apart from their institutions.”

(*Christianity Today*, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, 60134)

Western media, political leaders gloss over Islamic diversity in Afghanistan?

The persistent blind spot regarding the role of religion in Afghanistan is continuing after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country for much of the political, media, and academic worlds, according to one analysis. On his blog *NYC Religion* (August 16), Tony Carnes argues that the media and political leaders both neglect the diversity of belief that exists among Afghan Muslims in the U.S. and their home country. He writes that “United States leaders and press have not highlighted Afghan Islamic leaders who with sound theology endorsed what we were doing in their country.... The Taliban knew dissident imams would be a threat. So, their current overall leader, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, put an emphasis on targeting any imam who went against the Taliban’s rigid version of Muslim teaching. The stories that are usually run in American papers have usually been on imams who were killed by the Taliban. So, unfortunately, the American public seldom got to know them except through death notices. There is a widespread intensification of Islamic faith going on among the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Unfortunately, it is a very intolerant type of Islam.”

He cites data from a 2019 survey funded by the U.S., UK, German, and Australian governments indicating that the most trusted leaders in Afghanistan are religious leaders. The survey found that 71 percent of Afghans trust religious leaders, with about two-thirds saying that religious leaders should be consulted before making a political decision. Yet even this survey neglected asking about social issues “focused upon by the religious people. No question on abortion, no question on how to strengthen the traditional family, no question on the quality of religious

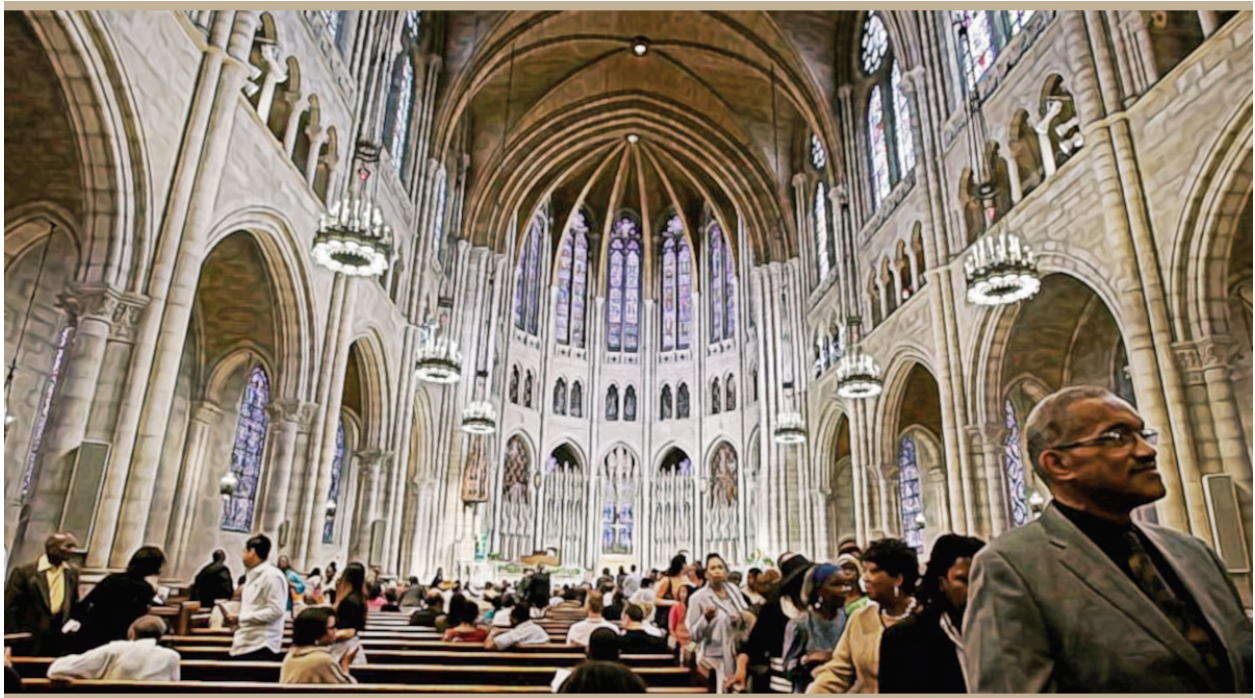


Mujahideen in Shultan Valley, Afghanistan (source: Erwin Lux, 1987 | Wikimedia Commons).

education, no question on how important is religious faith for national leadership.” Such neglect papered over how medical treatment in rural areas is done by imams and “how the local religious leaders also provide counseling (as ‘family secret keepers’) to people undergoing difficult emotional issues, mediate disputes, and sometimes repair watches. The imam is involved in Afghan life from birth to death.” Carnes concludes that the survey “shows the importance of religion, then forgets about it for most of the survey. This was a prestigious survey supported by the main foreign governments with a presence in Afghanistan. Secularization blinded them. Now, we and Afghans are paying the price.”

Black church adapting to social challenges post-Covid-19

Known for its strong physical engagement and social interaction in worship—from holy hugs to high-fives—and its more traditional choir stands and fellowship halls, the Black church has had to make significant adaptations to the reality of Covid-19. Writing in the *Washington Post* (August 25), Mark Moore, Jr., a pastor and marketing consultant, notes that “[i]n addition to navigating families, congregations and communities through the loss of life and the subsequent trauma, many church leaders have had to deal with the added pressure of trying to find answers to impossible questions. Chief among them: What exactly do you do when your entire model hinges on the one thing you can no longer do—gather in person?” Attempting to survive this unprecedented season, congregations, clergy, and laity have mastered Zoom, Streamyard, vMix, and Restream as “new methods for hosting Bible studies, Sunday school lessons and, for some,



Source: The Riverside Church in the City of New York.

even full worship services. Participants have shifted from attending these events in a sanctuary to viewing them on smart devices. Graphic designers are busy creating lower thirds and video frames to help disseminate information during live streams instead of just creating event fliers.”

Moore adds that “[s]ocial distancing has caused many large mass choirs to reduce to ensemble-size praise teams. In fact, many churches have replaced choir stands with virtual music ministry presentations. Many Black church budgets tend to be tight, so leaders are often making these shifts with limited resources.” But he sees signs of innovation that may outlast the pandemic. Before the virus, he hosted a large in-person leadership conference, with the event in 2019 bringing together 5,000 delegates to fill the Georgia International Convention Center’s 400,000-square foot space. Last year he decided to offer an online worship service from an empty room with only a band, some singers and no audience. During the first service streamed online, 50,000 people tuned in. “No large venue, no roaring crowds but we reached significantly more people....” With the pandemic, it is now more common for churches to consider themselves “multisite ministries,” having more than one location. “A church’s in-person location may be at 123 Main Street, but the second location is any place that has an Internet connection.” Moore concludes that “[i]f leaders view our ministries’ online presence as a separate church campus, then it needs some key systems in place to be effective. Methods to gather information about viewers are vital for churches to be successful. This is not just about preserving the institution; members need connection.”

Women finding promotion under Pope Francis

With women starting to be called to important positions at the Vatican, Sr. Alessandra Smerilli, an economist and Salesian nun, was appointed interim secretary of the Roman Curia’s Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development in August, making her the highest-ranking woman ever at the curia. She has also become one of the three leaders of the Vatican Covid-19 Commission, in charge of worldwide post-pandemic projects. Additionally, among other duties, she teaches economic policy at a pontifical university, has advised the pope



Pope Francis embraces Sr. Carmen Sammut, a Missionary Sister of Our Lady of Africa and president of the International Union of Superiors General, during an audience with the heads of women’s religious orders in Paul VI hall at the Vatican on 12 May. Photo: CNS/Paul Haring. Source: <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/why-historic-deaconesses-will-not-translate-to-modern-female-deacons/>.

and the Italian bishops' conference since 2018, and was appointed a councilor of the pontifical commission for the Vatican City State in 2019. She is also a key person in the "Economy of Francesco" project, meant to give "a new soul" to the economy. Sr. Smerilli is representative of a new trend. She is not the only woman entrusted with important tasks at the curia, writes Ulrike Sauer (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Sept. 1). In a trend likely to continue, Pope Francis has appointed a growing number of qualified women to key positions in recent years, including six undersecretaries. In her most recent book, *Donna Economia* (2020), Sr. Smerilli advocates a more human, environmental-friendly, and feminine economic future.

(*The Economy of Francesco*, <https://francescoeconomy.org>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

- According to a survey, more than 60 percent of born-again Christians in the United States between the ages of 18 and 39 are inclined to believe that Buddha, Muhammad and Jesus all offer valid paths to God. In *Ecumenical News* (Sept. 1), Peter Kenny summarizes some of the data collected last year in the survey by Texas-based Probe Ministries. Based on a sample of Americans aged 18 to 55 from all religious persuasions, it provided some unsurprising



Source: Centennial Road Church.

results (like the sharp rise of unaffiliated people), but also revealed that a number of people self-described as born-again Christians may hold unexpected views on paths to salvation or other topics. Asked for their response to the statement, “When He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people,” one-third of born-again Protestants answered either that they did not know or agreed. (The percentage was even higher among other Protestants and Catholics.) Most shocking to the Probe Ministries staff was the discovery that a majority of the born-again respondents did not hold exclusivist Christian views and believed in multiple ways to heaven, although not in a very consistent way.

On the one hand, between 60 and 80 percent (depending on age groups, with the highest percentage among those over 40) agreed with the statement: “I believe that the only way to a true relationship with God is through Jesus Christ.” On the other hand, less than 40 percent disagreed strongly with the statement: “Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God.” Correlating the answers to the two questions, the Probe Ministries staff found that about one-third of the self-described born-again Christians held exclusivist views, having “a consistent biblical view toward pluralism,” that another third were “totally in line with the pluralist position,” and that a final third claimed both that Jesus was the only way to God and that Mohammad and Buddha also taught valid ways to God. Comparing these results with a previous survey conducted in 2010, the researchers concluded that a slide toward pluralist views has been occurring among born-again Christians.

(*Probe Survey 2020*, <https://probe.org/introducing-probes-new-survey-religious-views-and-practices-2020/>)

● **While secularization is often linked to greater modernization, a new study suggests that many of the features of modern life do not necessarily lead to a loss of religious belief and practice.** In a paper presented at the American Sociological Association’s 2021 Zoom conference, which **RW** attended, sociologist Louisa Roberts looked at how populations in 100 countries rated the importance of religion in the World Values and European Values surveys from 1981 to 2014, comparing these measures to measures on modern social conditions. With regard to higher rates of education and levels of



Source: Universal Life Church Monastery.

economic security and income, she found the results to be mixed or inconclusive. Roberts also found a mixed pattern in cases where changes in modernization did not lead to uniform secularization or religious growth. In fact, it was the more religious countries that had seen the growth of the modern process of globalization. It was only in regard to urbanization that Roberts saw some correlation with secularization. In looking at regional patterns, only in one region was there a negative correlation between wealth and religion—Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; in Southeast Asia, the wealth-religion relationship was positive. Only in Latin America and in Eastern Europe and the former USSR was there a correlation between higher education rates and secularization. In updating her findings to 2020, Roberts found that there had been cases of religious decline in Latin America and to some extent North Africa and the Middle East, but she argued that the “traditional version of secularization theory can’t explain [those] declines.”

- **A new study suggests that in religious freedom cases involving gender and sexuality issues, conservative Christians tend to do best when they follow a defensive strategy, claiming some form of social harm.** The study by researchers at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln looked at 1,200 cases from 1980 to 2020 and focused on a subsample of 63 that involved LGBTQ issues. Kelsey Burke and colleagues found that religious actors were most likely to win such cases when they claim to protect their own religious freedom, as seen in a recent Supreme Court case where Catholic Social Services (CSS) in Philadelphia succeeded in its fight to keep government funding while refusing to provide child adoption services to same-sex couples. CSS followed an effective strategy by presenting itself as not imposing its theological views on the public. In contrast, religious groups that clearly opposed LGBTQ rights faced an uphill battle in the courts, receiving a favorable decision in only 25 percent of such cases.



- **Homeschooled students are more likely to adopt traditional gender roles than Catholic and Protestant school students and are less likely to finish or attend college, a new study finds.** Presenting their findings at this year’s Zoom conference of the American Sociological Association, which **RW** attended, Shanna Corner and Julie Dallavis analyzed the 2014 U.S. Cardus Education Study, comparing students who were homeschooled with those from Catholic and Protestant schools. The homeschooled environments enacted gender separation and fostered encouragement of different gender roles significantly more than the Catholic and evangelical Protestant schools, especially since mothers played a maternal role as teachers for homeschoolers. The lower rate in college attendance among homeschoolers may be due to a



Source: Homeschool Students | Liberty University.

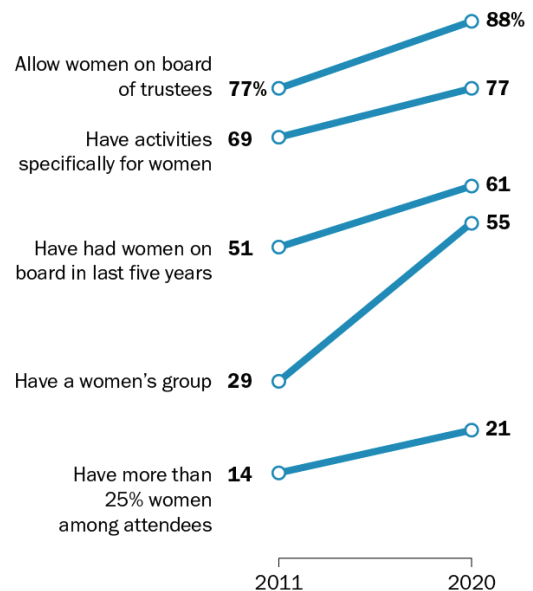
combination of family and school effects. The researchers added that home-based education may lend itself to a desire for independent knowledge rather than institutional learning.

● **The traditional pattern of women being less involved than men in mosque life is changing among Muslims in the U.S., according to a recent Pew Research Center analysis of a survey of American mosques.**

Besheer Mohamed writes that the share of mosques in which adult women accounted for more than a quarter of all attendees at Friday Jumah prayer services grew between 2011 and 2020. He reports that the new study, conducted by Ihsan Bagby as part of Hartford Seminary's 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey, shows that while women represented more than a quarter of attendees at just 14 percent of U.S. mosques in 2011, that share rose to 21 percent by 2020. Although women make up a relatively small share of the attendees at Friday prayer services, the new FACT study found that most U.S. mosques—55 percent—have a dedicated women's group, and roughly three-quarters have activities targeted at women. These efforts have increased since 2011, when only 29 percent of mosques had a women's group, and 69 percent had activities specifically for women. Today, about 9 in 10 U.S. mosques permit women to serve on their board of directors or trustees, and 61 percent say that women have served on their board in the

Women now play bigger leadership role in most American mosques

% of U.S. mosques that ...



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Faith Communities Today 2020 and 2011 surveys of mosque leaders.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

last five years; a decade ago only about three-quarters of mosques allowed women to serve in such capacities, and only about half said that women had done so in the last five years.

(*Pew Research Center*; <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/04/women-are-becoming-more-involved-in-u-s-mosques/>)

• **Clergy sex abuse cases in Latin America have been less subject to official reports and surveys than have cases in North America and Europe, but new research finds a pattern of more recent offenses and crimes connected with special religious orders in the region.** Presenting their findings at the recent conference of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, Ana Lourdes Suarez (Catholic University of Argentina) and Veronique Lecaros (Catholic University of Peru) looked at clerical sex abuse in Argentina, Chile, and Peru. Only in Chile has a survey been conducted, in 2020, by the country's Catholic University, and it has also had the most documented cases of priestly sex abuse, involving 200 clerics. While Suarez and Lecaros found that, similarly to the rate in Europe, 6.3 percent of all living priests there had been accused of abuse, they noted that Chile has seen more recent cases than the U.S. and Europe, with most incidents being reported after the 1980s. Argentina has had its sexual abuse cases reported by the media, and while these cases have involved a total of 36 priests, the researchers

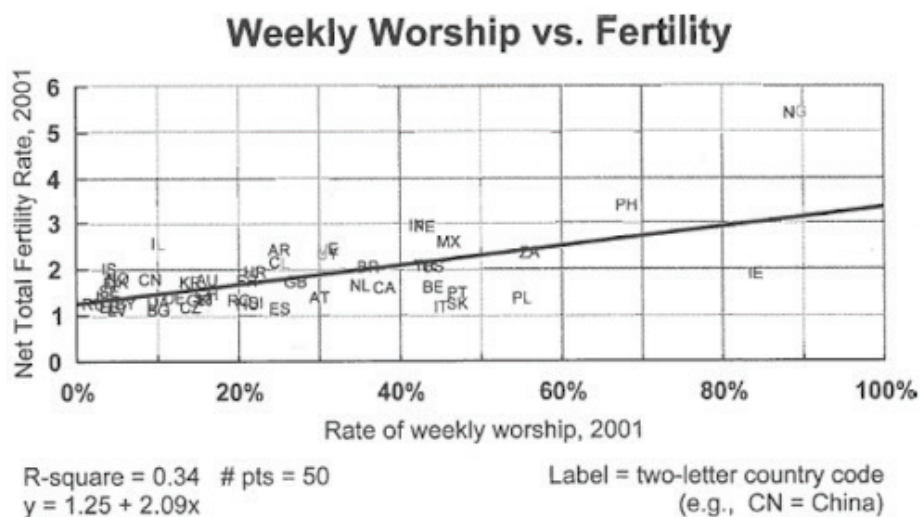


Facade of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, beginning of the evening (source: Wikimedia Commons).

said that the actual number could be as high as 90. Most of the incidents were reported after 1995, and newly created religious institutes have been a central source of the alleged abuse. Most notable in this regard has been the conservative order, the Disciples of Jesus of St. John the Baptist. In Peru there has been no count of abuse cases and, like Argentina, the few incidents that have surfaced in the media have come out of new religious institutes, such as the fast-growing Sodality of Christian Virtue, with ex-members reporting cases of abuse.

• **A new study finds that while the fertility advantage associated with holding traditional gender role attitudes has decreased, this has had a minimal effect on the religious fertility advantage.** The study, conducted by Laurie F. DeRose, William Bradford Wilcox, Pamela Leyva-Townsend, Javiera Reyes Brito, and Spencer James and published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in August), analyzed World Values Survey data from 1989 to 2020, examining whether the religious fertility advantage has changed over the last three decades. The researchers note that while large families and high fertility have been associated with religion almost everywhere in the world, one aspect of the religious fertility advantage—traditional gender role attitudes—has “eroded significantly.” But in their analysis they find that, even with the growth of gender egalitarianism, the effects of religion remain significant and independent of traditional gender roles. They find that a high degree of religiosity (such as frequent church attendance) has an effect on fertility, and propose that the reason religion may be independent of gender role attitudes in its fertility effects is that there are multiple kinds of egalitarianism, with individualistic-oriented “liberal egalitarianism” supporting high fertility less than what they call “egalitarian familism.”

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



Source: John Mueller, *Redeeming Economics* (2014): 239

● A study of self-professed “deists” in Turkey finds that they are not necessarily in political protest or in the process of becoming atheists and that they show significant similarities to Americans’ views. Selmin Yilmar of Ankara University drew on interviews with 30 self-described deists in his study, which was presented at the recent Zoom meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, which **RW** attended. While in recent years there have been reports of growing non-belief in Turkey following in the trail of political dissent against Erdogan’s Islamic-nationalist government, Yilmar’s interviewees did not view their belief as a form of political dissent or a stepping stone to atheism, although they did seem to be in transition between Islam, deism, and rejecting belief. They did try to keep their beliefs about a distant and non-involved God private, especially with their religious parents. Yilmar did not find that they were confined to any specific social group or status. He did see commonalities between his interviewees’ beliefs and the “therapeutic moral deism” that sociologist Christian Smith studied among American youth, as both use their beliefs for psychological benefits while discarding traditional religious doctrines and practices.



Hagia Sophia, Istanbul (© 2015 Dennis Jarvis | Flickr).

• **International students from China at American universities tend to convert to Christianity as well as Chinese folk religions the longer they stay in the U.S. and the more support they receive, a new study finds.** While there has been a good deal of anecdotal information about international Chinese students converting in large numbers to evangelical Christianity at American universities, the study by Yousef Yang of Sun Yat-sen University is one of the first to confirm this trend and also to show the institutional and personal factors involved in these conversions. Yang, who conducted a cross-sectional survey of 1,911 students at two public Midwestern and Southern universities, found that “missionary intensity” was a strong institutional factor in students’ conversions both to Christianity (with Protestant and Catholic affiliations being combined) and folk religions. Length of stay in the U.S. and degree of support were significant personal factors for conversions to both religions. In looking at intergenerational conversions, however, being male and of an older age predicted Buddhist conversion.

• **Secularity proves to be a significant factor in East Germans’ support of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.** The AfD has grown into Germany’s third-largest party since its founding in 2013 for its strong position against Muslim immigration and refugees, and the party has shown the most growth in Eastern Germany. Anthony Albanese of Penn State University analyzed county-level data and European Value Surveys and found that higher levels



Pro-refugee demonstration in Germany in 2014 (© Montecruz Foro | Flickr).

of secularity were correlated with higher levels of support for the AfD. He also found that high levels of economic deprivation drove up support for the party, but education had no effect. Albanese theorizes that it is the most secular voters who feel threatened by the growth of Islam in Germany (even though most of the Muslim refugees have settled in Western Germany) and may seek recourse in such a far-right party as the AfD.

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

1) The prediction of Christ's return in 2011, known as the **May 2nd movement**, gained considerable traction among evangelicals, although now it only exists as a remnant of end-times believers. Harold Camping, a Bible teacher and president of the evangelical Family Radio Network, initially made his prediction of Christ's return for 1994 based on an arcane interpretation of scripture, but then recalibrated it to 2011. Camping also taught that the end of the "church era" was in 1988 and called on Christians to withdraw from their congregations. His message was promoted not only on Family Radio stations but also the Internet, a small network of Bible fellowships teaching his views, and caravans that displayed the 2011 message in cities around the world. Since Camping died in 2013, his message has been reaffirmed by followers, especially with the Alameida Bible Fellowship he founded in northern



Sign for Family Radio's prediction of the end of the world, predicted for 21 May 2011 (source: O'Dea, Wikimedia Commons).

California still operating (for although Camping viewed the institutional church as defunct, his movement started “Bible fellowships” to expound on his end-times teachings).

In Camping’s absence, Family Radio has reverted to much of its evangelical origins, although it has been reduced to only a few stations and has experienced a serious loss of revenue from its high-water mark in 2011. Under its new owner, Tom Evans, the network no longer offers end-times predictions, and the teaching of the “end of the church” had been repudiated by 2018. The Alameida Fellowship and the online E-Bible Fellowship, led by Chris McCann, still have a strong prophetic thrust, either reaffirming Camping’s timetable—with some revisions—or, in the case of the latter, making new predictions. Before he died, however, Camping, who admitted to failing to interpret the end-times and disavowed date-setting, disassociated himself from McCann’s prophetic ministry. (**Source:** *paper presented by Charles Sarno at the Association for the Sociology of Religion conference, Zoom session, August 2021*)

2) An Orthodox **church-yurt** for nomadic people has been consecrated by Russian Orthodox bishop Feofan (Kim) of Korea in Tuva, a Southern Siberian republic of the Russian Federation bordering Mongolia. This church is the second of its kind, as the archbishop had consecrated another one in 2020. The liturgy is celebrated in Church Slavonic, with some songs in the local language. Despite urbanization, a large number of people in these areas are still living in mobile tents. With only 10 parishes, the Russian Orthodox population is a small minority in this republic where Tibetan Buddhism and local shamanism dominate. This is not the only instance of Russian Orthodox clergy adopting unusual ways for ministering



Source: SouthWorld, 2020.

to people and ensuring liturgical life in faraway places, as illustrated by the existence of chapel boats. In Siberia, since 1996, Orthodox priests have been sailing regularly on a missionary boat church for reaching remote areas. A self-propelled boat church built in 2004 has been active on the Volga River. Yurt churches have also been launched by evangelical missionaries ministering to people of Mongolian descent. (Source: *AsiaNews.it*, August 30)

3) The politically and religiously heterodox **Life Zen Temple** has become the latest entry on China's list of forbidden religions (*xie jiao*). Last spring, Public Security and agents of the unit specialized in combating *xie jiao* raided Life Zen Temple's two communal settlements in Guizhou province, and officials proceeded to take members away to be "deprogrammed." The case of Life Zen Temple follows a recent trend regarding the *xie jiao*: initially banned by decrees of local authorities at the provincial level, they are then denounced as *xie jiao* by the China



Source: Freedom House.

Anti-Xie-Jiao Association and for all practical purposes become part of the national list of the *xie jiao*. Life Zen Temple has more than 2,000 members, most of them hidden in China, with their leader and founder Zhang Zifan, known to his followers as Xuefeng, safely living in Canada. Other Life Zen Temple groups exist in Thailand.

Beginning in 2009, Xuefeng had started founding communities in China, which were initially tolerated by the authorities, who found their references to communism and Chairman Mao reassuring. The group has been described as "a communist experiment" and a "utopian pastoral community" somewhat reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, with members engaging in subsistence farming. While Xuefeng insists that the Life Zen Temple is not a religion and does not have rituals, believers are supposed to acknowledge that the founder is a divine incarnation who will lead them into the Millennium. The Temple believes that a 30-year period of tribulations started in 2018 and that in the subsequent Millennium a perfect "classless society" as prophesied by Marx, Lenin, and Chairman Mao will be realized. The Temple's communism includes a spiritual element that points the way to immortality in the Millennium and to "Buddhahood" and enlightenment on Earth. It also criticizes the CCP for "having put Mao's thought on the shelves" and revived elements of capitalism. Another feature of "Xuefeng-style communism" is the elimination of the bourgeois family, replaced by free love and the communal education of children. (Source: *Bitter Winter*, August 2)