

Religion in 2021: different key but same melody as 2020

Although religion in 2021 was eventful on several fronts, last year's trends also reflected shifts that were vividly on display in 2020: a continuation of the pandemic and its wide-ranging effects on religious institutions, the religio-political tensions and polarization leading to the January 6 riots, and the battles over teaching gender



Source: First Tuesday Journal.

*and race. But there were other important developments in the international arena that caught observers more by surprise. We do not include the pandemic as a separate trend in this review since it originated in 2020, but it obviously continues to shape religious life, as is evident in our steady coverage of the crisis (including in this issue). As in previous annual reviews, after each item we cite the issue of **RW** in which the trend was first reported.*

1) Through his *motu proprio* letter, *Traditionis Custodes* (issued July 16), Pope Francis overturned the 2007 document by his predecessor Benedict XVI, *Summorum Pontificum*, that had allowed more frequent use of the Latin Mass regularly celebrated before 1970. The new document made it clear that the pope no longer grants the traditional rite the status of an “extraordinary form” of prayer coexisting alongside the modern “ordinary form.” Intending to make the liturgical reforms irreversible, Pope Francis has placed restrictions on the use of the pre-1970 rite and has seemed determined to prevent its spread, considering groups that use it to be hotbeds of opposition to the Second Vatican Council. “The clear intent is to condemn the extraordinary form to extinction in the long run,” said Cardinal Gerhard Müller, whose

assessment seems confirmed by the further restrictions announced in a document from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (December 4). It remains to be seen how strictly the measures will be implemented across dioceses. It is unlikely that all priests and faithful attached to the old rite will bow to the pope's demands. **(July RW)**

2) In Afghanistan, the Taliban came back to power earlier and more completely than expected, raising many questions about the results of 20 years of U.S. and coalition military forces in the country, but also about the impact of the events on Islamism at the international level. According to a commentary released by the International Crisis Group (Oct. 27), Islamist insurgents around the world have been inspired by the Taliban's return to power, but the question of whether and how they might benefit as a result is more complicated. Al-Qaeda's local branches function largely autonomously and ISIS affiliates are opposed to the Taliban. In Syria, Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is drawing lessons from the Taliban and feels encouraged by its strategy of political engagement. In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) sees the victory of the Taliban as a triumph for jihad as a "legal and realistic way to restore rights [and] expel the invaders and occupiers." In the Horn of Africa, Al-Shabaab insurgents applauded the Taliban victory, but "the ramifications for its own struggle in Somalia are less certain." And in the Sahel, the events in Afghanistan are "unlikely to have an immediate impact on the conflict between jihadists and state authorities," although they might raise the morale of jihadists facing counter-insurgencies. **(September)**

3) Whether considered an "insurrection" or not, the January 6 incident at the U.S. Capitol building highlighted the how a segment of the followers of former President Donald Trump have joined their political grievances to their faiths. Observers have noted the ad hoc and individualistic versions of conservative Christianity (and other faiths and quasi-faiths, including QAnon) that were on display at the riot, but it is more difficult to connect that event and its conspiratorial overtones to broader currents in religion and politics. Just how the Biden administration's agenda on "domestic terrorism" will handle the religious dimensions of such resistance and protest will be of interest to watchers of church-state relations. In any event, it is clear that the departure of Trump did not weaken the populist-nationalist strand of political conservatism and that this tendency has great appeal for conservative Christians of many stripes (Catholics and Protestants). Contrary to political pundits who seem ready to declare the death of the culture wars, the ongoing challenges to *Roe v. Wade*, the widespread skirmishes over critical race theory (both in religious and secular institutions), and the unexpected Republican gubernatorial victory in Virginia suggest that a mix of religious populism and activism—from the right and left—will remain a significant force in American politics. **(July)**

4) The support that many charismatic Christians gave to Trump early on came under fire last year, as the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) movement was forced to face its failures in prophesying his reelection. Many of the prophets in this movement have actually not formally recanted their prophecies or apologized to their followers, but the NAR has nevertheless

experienced a crisis of credibility that may take years to rebuild. Already a small segment of prophets have proposed reforms to the practice of prophesying, although it is unclear if they will convince the leaders of the movement. **(October)**

Venture capitalists bullish on religious apps

Religious apps are seeing not only a growing number of customers but also increased venture-capital funding, largely due to the dislocation and anxieties caused by the pandemic, reports Isaac Taylor in the *Wall Street Journal* (December 21). Startup founders and investors find that the apps are drawing more funding and customers from among those who were already religious to begin with rather than those who were not. Faith-based, for-profit apps drew \$175.3 million in venture funding through mid-December of 2021, up from \$48.5 million in 2020 and \$6.1 million in 2016, according to figures from PitchBook Data. While the number of unaffiliated Americans continues to rise, surveys have also found that a third of Americans say their faith has become stronger since the pandemic. Because many people are found to engage with these apps on Sundays, analysts believe users are supplementing their faith rather than using the apps as replacements for religious involvement, writes Taylor. The most popular of these apps, such as the Catholic app Hallow and the more evangelical Glorify, help people build prayer habits as well as connect with fellow believers. The appeal of these apps has also been helped along by celebrity investors, such as Michael Bubl , James Corden, and Peter Thiel.

Connie Chan, a financial analyst, said that the ways these apps tap into a core part of people’s identity and build a sense of community explain why they have longer retention than other apps. She said the market for these apps is largely untapped, citing as an example the YouVersion Bible app that has logged more than 50 million downloads. Chan remarked that if this app were a for-profit company, “it would have been a unicorn [a private company worth over a million dollars] many times over.” She added that “Consumers



Source: CornerstoneSF.

have always been using these apps, but investors are starting to realize some for-profit companies are being formed that are delivering great experiences.” The for-profit nature of these apps is drawing criticism from religious leaders, who argue that making people pay for prayer functions violates the integrity of the faith. Some apps, such as Hallow, do have a free component, though

the majority of the content is available through subscriptions. Taylor concludes that the interest in these apps is being driven not only by the pandemic but the country's political divisions, which are making people tired and in need of spiritual rest and peace.

Congregations striking truce on worship wars?

As mixed-use congregations become more common, the longstanding “worship wars” between evangelical congregations favoring traditional services and those using contemporary music and worship are simmering down, writes Thomas Kidd of Baylor University in a blog on the *Christian Coalition* website (December 13). Kidd reviews a new book by Melanie Ross, who argues that the fading “traditional vs. contemporary” dichotomy of the worship wars—which was never really as clear a distinction as polemicists charged—is now settling into a “mosaic” model of worship styles, varying by congregations. Ross studied a range of evangelical congregations’ worship practices and competing views about worship styles and songs. Nearly all of the evangelical churches she studied tended to be nondenominational, urban/suburban, and were usually connected to the historic evangelical or charismatic movements. Rather than the strict traditional vs. contemporary split, Ross found that recurring tensions over competing goods commonly played out within the same church. “Often large congregations have a worship minister who worries about the ahistorical, commercialized nature of worship music. But the



Source: David Ball - Wikimedia Commons.

minister knows there are limits about how much one might wisely fight against the tide of popular taste,” Kidd writes.

Ross analyzed Keith and Kristyn Getty’s prominent music ministry, which is a case study in the “evangelical mosaic’s impulse to offer music that seems affective and relevant, while also tapping into the treasures of the historic tradition...,” The Gettys are helping a new generation of worship leaders to lead churches in songs that have that enduring quality, both musically and theologically. ‘Enduring,’ in this way of thinking, is far preferable to ‘current.’” A recent source of tension has emerged over how much congregational singing is expected, particularly in the megachurches. For example, at the prominent megachurch North Point Church in Atlanta, the ministerial team puts no expectation on worshippers to sing, lest any visiting seekers feel uncomfortable. But worship staff at North Point are unhappy about this development, with one staffer complaining about how many attendees just stand silently during songs, staring blankly at the stage while holding a Starbucks cup. Kidd writes that “The conclusion one reaches in reading this profound analysis...is that ‘worship’ is bigger, more complex, and more important to a Christian’s identity than most evangelicals or scholars of evangelicals knew.”

Hindus veering toward the GOP?

The recent Republican upset in Virginia’s gubernatorial race suggests an emerging shift of political views and affiliations among Hindu Indian Americans, writes Maggie Phillips in *The Tablet* (December 15). She notes that the demographics of Loudoun County, which was important in the victory of Governor-elect Glenn Youngkin, were largely overlooked by reporters. Asians are the area’s second-largest racial/ethnic group after whites, and both incumbent Terry McAuliffe and Youngkin had reached out to Hindu community leaders as part of their campaigns to reach Asian American voters. While Hindu Americans may not have been the electoral tipping point for Youngkin, observers see a potential partisan shift toward the GOP among this predominantly immigrant group. While Indian Americans overall tend to identify as Democrats, breaking down political preferences by religion and immigration status changes the picture somewhat. Utsav Chakrabarti, director of the policy research group HinduPACT, sees Hindu Americans as a distinct group apart from other South Asians, such as Muslims. He notes that whereas 82 percent of Muslim respondents in the Carnegie Endowment’s recent Indian American Attitudes Survey said that they planned to vote for President Biden in the 2020 election, only 67 percent of Hindus did. The survey found that naturalized Indian Americans who had been in the U.S. more than a decade preferred Biden, whereas those who had arrived in the past decade showed stronger support for Trump.

Phillips reports that “While naturalized Indian Americans...were still less likely as a whole to vote and have weaker partisan affiliation compared to U.S.-born Indian Americans, Chakrabarti thinks this is changing, especially among Hindu Americans. Suhag Shukla, executive director of the Hindu American Foundation, said in an email that in her anecdotal experience, she has seen

an increase in the number of Indian Americans getting involved in electoral politics.” The number of Hindus in northern Virginia has grown in recent years, with a rough estimate of there being over 200,000 in Virginia and Maryland, many of them working in the tech fields. Phillips writes that the strong emphasis on education among Hindus contributed to the GOP’s inroads among them during the campaign, as they believed that merit was being sacrificed by Virginia schools in the name of diversity. “Many Indian American parents were activated,” said Shukla. “I only see this spreading to other states, especially given the importance placed on education in so many Hindu American households.” Last November, Republicans opened a community center in Dallas as part of their outreach to Indian and Asian Americans, with the opening ceremony including a Hindu priest, a Diwali candle-lighting, and speakers’ referencing the recent Virginia electoral upset. While a massive shift to the GOP among Hindus is unlikely in the short term, “the values and priorities of Hindu voters who did back the GOP candidate in Virginia could still prove to be something of a bellwether” for the 2022 midterm elections.

(*The Tablet*, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/chasing-the-hindu-vote>)

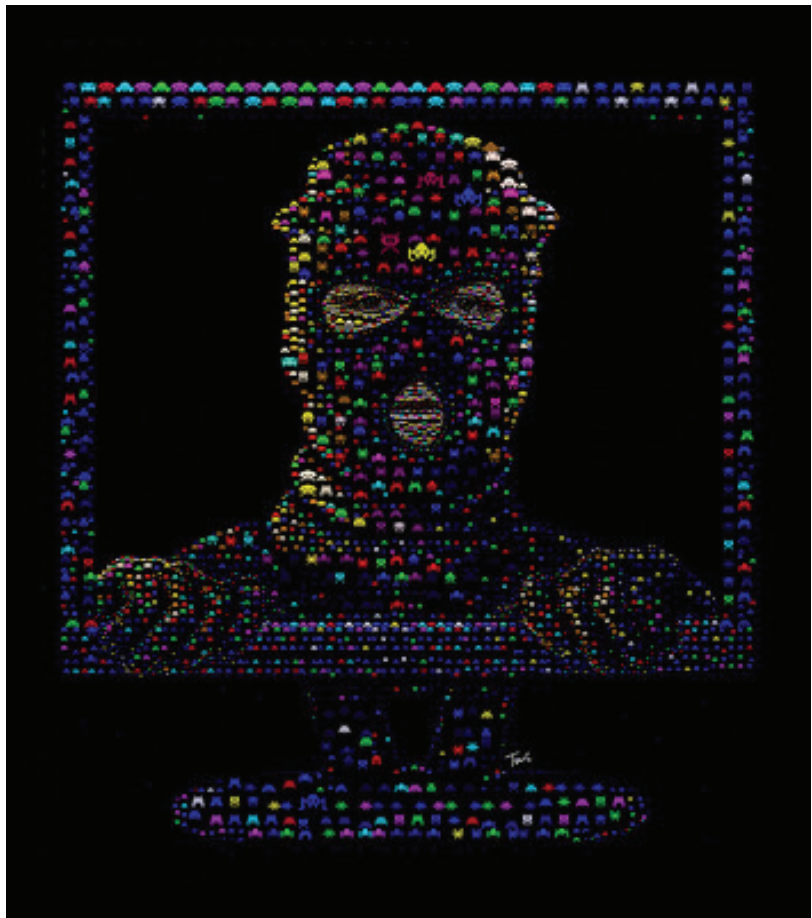


Source: DiyaTV.

Upcoming generation of jihadists taking notes from alt-right

Young jihadists “are piecing together a new online aesthetic inspired by the world’s most notorious trolls” to sustain their militancy, even as they keep a critical distance from self-appointed leaders and others in their religious community, writes Moustafa Ayad in *Wired* magazine (December 8). Ayad writes that this generation of young jihadists seems “outwardly conflicted, borrowing from those that hate what it represents but seemingly compelled by that very same hate. A generation as fluent in Hadith to support wanton violence as in the hatred of minorities and the latest DaBaby track.” Ayad sees parallels with the alt-right movement in the U.S., as both similarly reject modernity in favor of tradition. He argues that the same dynamics that led to the founding of the alt-right are now fueling a growing movement of “alt-jihadists” of all stripes. While they may be dismissed as a fringe movement (like the alt-right), the new version of jihadism stays “on brand with support for staple extremist groups such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hamas, the Taliban, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State.” Even while they applaud the September 11 attacks, “this demographic simultaneously views the events with skepticism as a result of ‘truther’ movements positing conspiracies that it was an ‘inside job’ and a secret plan by a cabal of Jews.” Ayad sees the alt-jihadists as representing contradictory sentiments, defending ethno-states even while attacking white supremacists who do the same.

In a study of more than 5,000 memes and meme videos created and shared by alt-jihadists and the digital communities around them, Ayad and his associates found that about 20 percent of this material was supportive of militant groups, including Hamas, the Taliban, and jihadist organizations such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. They found similar dynamics with supporters of Iran-backed



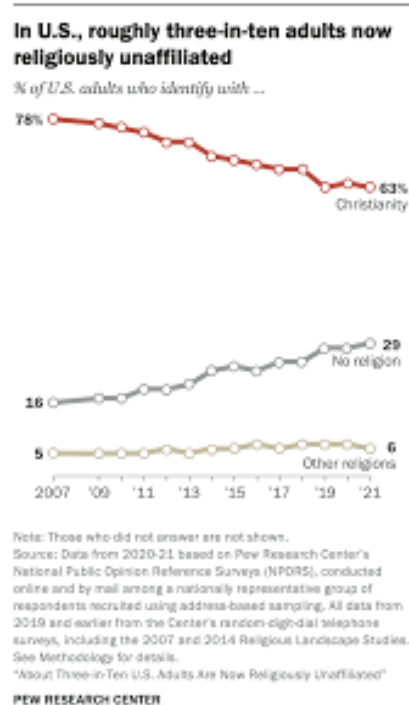
Source: Charis Tsevis | Flickr.

militias like Hezbollah and the Houthis. All of this online material used some form of alt-right trope or imagery—such as Pepe the Frog, GigaChads, Wojaks, and YesChads. These young jihadists have also adopted the alt-right’s organizational strategy. Buried across six Facebook pages and groups, representing some 20,000 followers, Ayad found accounts engaged in explicitly jihadist meme discussions and production, with memes that mimicked the alt-right style while being mostly in Arabic and supportive of the Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. This mixing of alt-right and jihadist aesthetics could be seen on the 20th anniversary of the September 11 attacks, when a coalition of alt-jihadist meme producers ran a competition to see who could create the best meme of the attacks. Ayad argues that the alt-jihadists represent “a turning point in both extremist support and our modern era. It is a harbinger of the future of extremism, in which the cultures of seemingly oppositional groups meld....Alt-jihadists are currently in the community-building and recruitment phase, networking across platforms, borders, and languages and using memes as clickbait. They’re employing the ‘sticky media’ by which they intend to form real-world fighting forces.”

(*Wired*, <https://www.wired.com/story/alt-jihad-rising-social-media/>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **Affiliation with Christianity and other forms of organized religion continues to decline in the U.S., according to a new poll from the Pew Research Center.** The survey found the religiously unaffiliated share of the public to be 6 percentage points higher than it was five years ago and 10 points higher than a decade ago. While Christians continue to make up a majority of Americans (63 percent), their share of the adult population was 12 points lower in 2021 than it was ten years ago. The survey found that three-in-ten U.S. adults are non-affiliated, including those who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular” when asked about their religious identity. Christians now outnumber religious “nones” by a ratio of a little more than two-to-one. The recent declines within Christianity are concentrated among Protestants, with this broad grouping declining by 4 percent over the past five years, and only 40 percent of the population identifying as Protestant. In contrast, the Catholic share of the population, which had ticked downward between 2007 and 2014, has held relatively steady in recent years.



(The Pew study can be downloaded from: <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>)

● **A study finds that Roma people living in Spain report greater perceived discrimination if they are evangelical rather than Catholic.** Evangelicalism has grown sharply among Roma people in Spain, with a majority now identifying as evangelical (62 percent). In the study published in the journal *Ethnicities* (21:6), Rosa Maria Aisa and Gemma Larramona of the University of Zaragoza analyzed data on the Spanish Roma from Spain's Economically Active Population Survey (SRPS), which asks about respondents' religious affiliation and perceptions of discrimination. They found that evangelical Roma (mostly Pentecostals) did perceive discrimination more than those Roma identifying with the country's majority religion, Catholicism, once other socio-economic and demographic factors were controlled for. The researchers write that this finding "corresponds with increased prejudice against minority religions considered to be sects....Catholic organizations maintain a de facto monopoly on religion, especially in education, and religious diversity has not been well accepted by mainstream public opinion."

(*Ethnicities*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/etn>)



Source: Institute for Advanced Studies.

Hindu identity on the march in Nepal

Nepalis are eager to assert their own identity in relation to their large neighbor, but the influence of Hindu nationalism is increasingly felt in the Himalayan country, with calls for the restoration of a Hindu state also linked to local developments, writes Santosh Sharma Poudel (Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu) in an analysis published in *The Diplomat* (December 9). With a population that is more than 80 percent Hindu, Nepal was declared a secular republican country in 2007 by the parliament, which was anchored in a new constitution passed in 2015 with the support of all the main political parties. But a small segment of the population has remained dissatisfied with this choice. Initially, demands that Nepal be made a Hindu state again were associated with aspirations for a return to monarchy, but the idea is now being advocated beyond royalist circles.



Source: Keshar Bhandari | Pixabay.

Facing popular dissatisfaction with Nepal's long stretch of political instability, some leaders of secular parties have been playing the Hindu card. As noted by Kamal Dev Bhattarai in an earlier *Diplomat* article (September 1), one of the most striking examples is the chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal and former Prime Minister (2018 to 2021) K.P. Sharma Oli, who, eager to show his support for Hinduism, has worshipped at Hindu temples and donated government funds for Hindu places of worship. "Oli used Hindu nationalism instrumentally," Sharma comments. In addition to such domestic factors as political leaders seeking support, citizens longing for a return to monarchy after being disappointed with the conduct of political

parties, and people concerned about alleged conversions leading to the erosion of Hinduism, another factor in the rising calls for the restoration of a Hindu nation has been the influence of the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in neighboring India. BJP leaders have repeatedly stressed the Hindu identity of Nepal.

Significant changes yet uneven progress toward gender equity in Buddhism

Respected female monastics, lay persons and academics have blazed a path of progress in recent decades for Buddhist women, but they say more needs to be accomplished so women can have equal opportunities, writes Luis Andres Henao in *AP News* (December 9). The article is part of a series published in December by Associated Press on women in religion and how they have found leadership roles in male-led faiths, including reports on Catholicism, Islam, Black Churches, Hinduism, Southern Baptism, Orthodox Judaism and Mormonism. The status of women varies across countries and traditions. Henao summarizes: “Women can be ordained as the equivalent of monks in China, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, mostly dominated by the Mahayana school of Buddhism. Female ordination is not available in the Tibetan tradition nor in Cambodia, Laos or Myanmar.” In Thailand, women were banned from becoming monks and could only become white-cloaked nuns, but a number of them have travelled to Sri Lanka, where the ordination of women was restored in the late 20th century, although adequate education and places to meditate are not yet always available.



Source: kadesignvn | Pixabay.

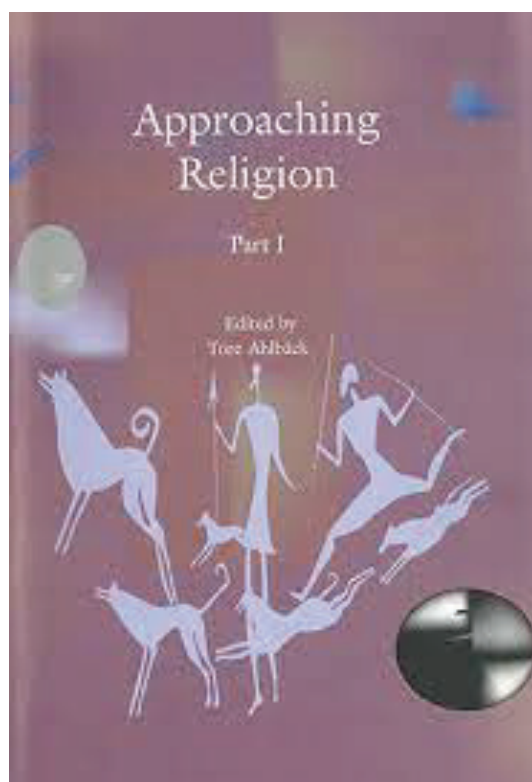
According to the article, in Thailand there are now 280 fully ordained women with a wide range of educational backgrounds, but their monasteries are not legally recognized and they receive no state funding. One of those ordained women remarks that people on the street are no longer as surprised when they come across a woman wearing a saffron robe as they were before. The growth of Buddhism in the West and the influence of feminism in Asian societies have contributed to a change in perceptions, says Judith Simmer-Brown (emeritus professor of contemplative and religious studies at Colorado's Naropa University). In Tibetan Buddhism, women can study for the highest degree in the Tibetan tradition, but not yet be fully ordained unless they travel to Mahayana monasteries, adds English-born Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, who founded the Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery for Tibetan Buddhist women in India. There is resistance to such change, but also efforts to challenge that resistance. Sravasti Abbey, based in Washington state, trains nuns and monks and practices Tibetan Buddhism in the tradition of the Dalai Lama, with its founder and abbess, Venerable Thubten Chodron, having received her full ordination in Taiwan.

(*AP series on women in religion*: <https://apnews.com/hub/women-in-religion>; *website of Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery*: <https://tenzinpalmo.com>; *website of Sravasti Abbey*: <https://sravastiabbey.org>)

Findings & Footnotes

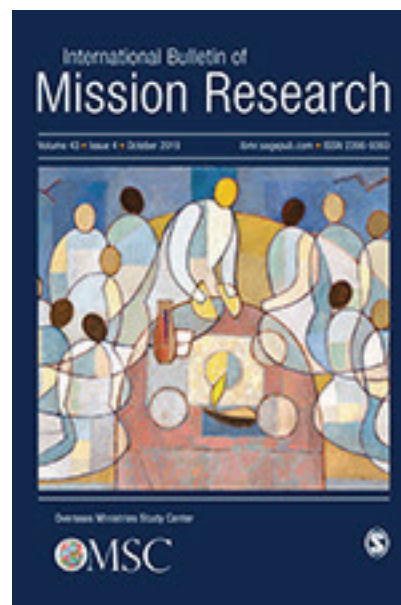
■ Readers are by now probably as exhausted in keeping up with articles on Covid and its impact on religious communities as with the virus itself—not only because of the vast accumulation of material on the subject but also because the pandemic is ongoing and changing, making its effects unpredictable. However, the Finnish journal *Approaching Religion* (November 22) has published a special issue on the subject that succinctly brings together reports and analyses of religious responses to Covid from a wide range of places and religions. Noteworthy articles include one on how while Hindu groups may have temporarily adapted to the virus in their rituals, such as by venerating a Covid deity, overall conservatism and continuity prevailed. Greater challenges were experienced by African Pentecostals, who had to adapt their lively and emotional worship to online services, according to another article.

An article by Benjamin Zeller presents several case studies of new religious movements (NRMs) that show



how difficult it has been to generalize about alternative religions' responses to the pandemic, with some complying with public health initiatives and others openly defying such measures. The conventional view that the degree to which an NRM is aligned with social norms will predict its stance towards public health protocols did not hold up during the pandemic: controversial and conflictual NRMs such as Scientology and the Hare Krishnas were very compliant with lockdown and masking measures while more mainstream conservative evangelical groups often opposed such measures. This may mean that today's society is too fragmented to uphold unified norms, leaving NRMs to compete for various subcultures. To download this issue, visit: <https://journal.fi/ar/issue/view/7925>

■ The third edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Edinburgh University Press) has been published —a monumental task of collecting demographic and country-level data and projections of global Christianity and its future. The January issue of the *International Bulletin of Mission Research* brings together contributions from the editors of the encyclopedia and other mission specialists that discuss some of the major trends reported in the massive volume. Editors Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo note the familiar themes of the continued growth of religious populations, especially Christians and Muslims, throughout the world, with these two groups projected to comprise 63 percent of the world's population by 2050. Yet, they find that both Christians and Muslims rarely have contact or communicate with each other (or with other world religions for that matter). They also find that religious diversity continues to increase, with Germany and the U.S. showing the highest increases in such diversity rates.



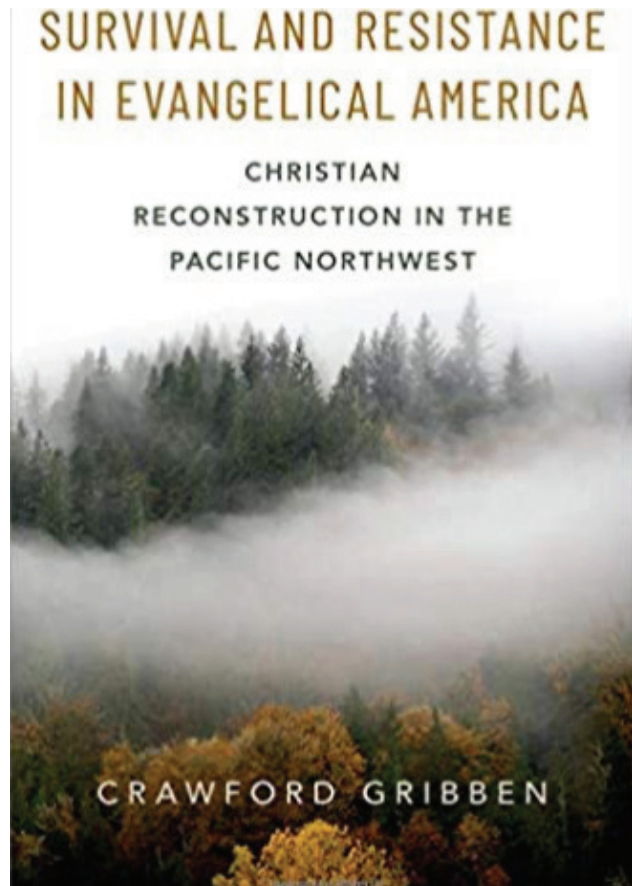
The other articles respond to the encyclopedia's findings specific to issues, regions, and faiths, such as religious freedom, the Middle East, and world Catholicism. On the latter, J.J. Carney of Creighton University writes that Catholicism receives less attention in the encyclopedia than the other Christian traditions, even though it is "holding steady," neither seeing drastic decline, such as Eastern Orthodoxy, nor sharp growth, such as Pentecostalism. Yet there is a secularizing trend that is most evident in the West, especially in churches in Ireland, Chile, the U.S., and Australia, where the clerical sex abuse crisis has been the most pronounced. The countries of Catholic growth either have strong charismatic movements, such as Brazil, Colombia and the Philippines, or high rates of Catholic immigration, including Norway, Bahrain, the UAE, and Qatar. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ibm>

■ The way in which the seemingly marginal Christian Reconstructionist movement has influenced broader conservative currents in the U.S., particularly the migration of conservative evangelicals to the American Northwest, is portrayed in Crawford Gribben's intriguing new book *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America* (Oxford University Press, \$29.95). Gribben, a historian at Queens University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, combines fieldwork with a historical account of conservative Protestant approaches to culture and politics to show that Reconstructionism, which seeks to build a theocracy, has

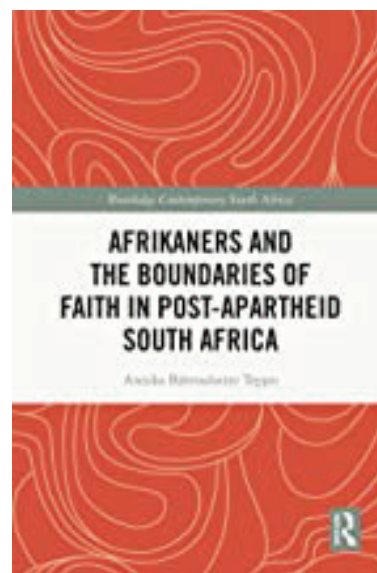
not so much died with the passing of its original founders (such as R.J. Rushdoony) but rather reinvented itself through marketing and appealing to the evangelical need for resistance and survival in a divided and pluralistic society. It is through the modest but growing migration of evangelicals and other religious conservatives to such states and regions as northern Idaho, Montana, Wyoming and eastern Washington and Oregon that Reconstructionism is having a second life, Gribben argues. Long a magnet for conservatives and the radical right, including survivalists and violent white supremacist groups, the region has been repurposed by Reconstructionists for a new phase of evangelical politics and culture, particularly in the city of Moscow, Idaho.

Moscow and its environs are seeing the formation of a flourishing conservative Reformed enclave, most evident in the church and schools established by Douglas Wilson in the 1990s, especially New Saint Andrews College. Although the book lacks the thick description that could give the reader a feel for this Reformed counterculture, Gribben makes up for it with a sharp analysis and understanding of these communities that goes beyond the stereotypes of “Christian nationalism” and even “fascism” that are common today in the media. While he finds it difficult to estimate the number of conservative Christian migrants to what is called the “American Redoubt” of the Northwest, the region has been viewed as a promised land among a wide range of conservative groups in recent years [see *RW*, Vol. 36, No. 3]. Gribben does not find the threat of political violence or racism to be significant in these communities, as they have their own theological resources for dealing with extremism. It is through education and the media that Wilson and other Reconstructionists have succeeded where the older movement failed. Through Canon Press, Wilson and such novelists as James Wesley Rawls have produced books and electronic media that have reached a wide audience, even attracting mainstream acceptance, while New Saint Andrews College has popularized classical education for evangelicals, gaining academic prestige in the process. Gribben concludes that the Christian politics of the Reconstructionists is less important than the way they offer the possibility of resistance and survival to evangelicals in a fragmented society, as they revive the vision of being a “city on a hill.”

■ The new book *Afrikaners and the Boundaries of Faith in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Routledge, \$128) looks at a white minority that still has significant influence but, as author Annika Björnsdotter Teppo documents, has undergone a rapid transformation in religious faith since the fall of apartheid. Based on



an ethnographic study of the Western Cape region and Stellenbosch, Teppo, an anthropologist at Uppsala University in Sweden, had the advantage of being on the scene right as apartheid was being dismantled and then watching the resulting changes in religious institutions and South African society in general. While white South Africans and their religious lives have not been a popular area of academic study beyond the topic of their religious complicity with or activism against racism, the degree of their religious change following apartheid has been significant: one in every three Afrikaners left the traditional Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), often for a new faith, whether it was Pentecostalism or new religious movements such as Wicca. The NGK has also been divided by more contemporary issues such as gay rights and ecumenism, while being open to alternative spiritual currents.



Other Western currents are finding their way to South Africa, with the rise in the rate of religious disaffiliation, although only a small number of South Africans say they are atheist (4 percent, according to one survey). With a strong orientation toward post-colonial and “white studies” theories and jargon, the book focuses on how Afrikaners’ moral boundaries from others and their idea of “ordentlikheid” (or white middle-class respectability) have persisted after the apartheid era and its official racial hierarchy, although they have been mediated and sometimes challenged by a new religious and cultural pluralism. Teppo lived with an Afrikaner family during her research and provides a finely gained look at how Afrikaners, especially poorer classes, have maintained syncretized folk traditions and spiritual practices (called the “little tradition”) alongside conventional Christianity, even if they were “whitewashed” and suppressed during apartheid.

But it is mainly in the growing multiracial charismatic churches that Teppo finds the old racial boundaries loosening, churches that have found greater social acceptance by Afrikaners, who first viewed them as a threat. “While in 2005,” she writes, “people were upset and horrified when they talked of these new churches, by 2012 they had been grudgingly accepted, and by 2019, they had become the new normal.” Teppo then turns her attention to New Age and Neopagan groups and practices, especially prevalent in Cape Town, finding that they distance themselves from both African and Afrikaner traditions (with some fear toward the former). Wiccans especially face attacks from both the strong white evangelical community and black Christians in South Africa because of the stigmatized associations with witchcraft there. In recent years, a more racist form of Neopaganism also arrived in South Africa. Teppo finds that driving much of the alternative religious scene and charismatic Christianity is a concern for prosperity and a fear of poverty and crime, as whites find that security is no longer assured by the state in post-apartheid South Africa—as well as an interest in maintaining a form of ordentlikheid. She seems to hold out the most hope for South African religion in newly created rituals that invert old social hierarchies, involve bodily movement, and bring together Afrikaner and Neopagan traditions.

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

1) The Skull Mask is a far-right religio-political network that has migrated from online to offline activism and acts of violence. The network's ideology is a hybrid based on the work of the philosopher Julius Evola, who combined fascism with "Traditionalism," a syncretic 20th century religious movement mixing occultism with the Hindu doctrine of cyclical time and a belief in a now-lost primordial European paganism. Adherents believe that a caste-based, racially pure "organic" society will be restored after what they believe to be an ongoing age of corruption is swept away in an apocalyptic war, and that it is their role to hasten the end by engaging in violence. The network emerged from the far-right Iron March online forum that existed from 2011 to 2017 and served as the incubator for several prominent far-right groups to emerge, such as Feuerkrieg Division and The Base.

The members of the diffuse network come mainly from Europe and the U.S. They have introduced rituals involving violence and initiation that borrow from paganism and other traditions to socialize members into violence and create a shared sense of commitment to militancy. "Together with constant communication among members, these factors allowed the network to survive the loss of Iron March as an organizing platform and the subsequent transition to a more diffuse mode of organizing.... The local groups have proved transient, but the skull mask network's collective identity persists, allowing the



Source: CTC.

network to evolve in response to external pressure from law enforcement.” The disparate groups in the network have planned terror attacks and, in one case, have attempted to create cross-ideological coordination with jihadis. Ethan Melzer, a former private in the U.S. Army affiliated with the skull mask group Rapewaffen, was arrested in Italy in the summer of 2020 for his alleged involvement in a plot to attack an overseas U.S. military base, and was in contact with Al Qaeda. (Source: *CTC Sentinel*, December).

2) The formation of the Exarchate of Africa by the Russian Orthodox Church is the latest episode in the reverberations of the Ukrainian crisis for world Orthodoxy. At its meeting held on December 29, 2021, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church decided to form a Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa with two dioceses (North Africa and South Africa), and to receive into the Russian Orthodox Church 102 clergy of the Patriarchate of Alexandria who had applied for such a transfer, along with their parishes from eight countries in Africa. This unprecedented move is a reaction to the decision made in late 2019 by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate



Source: Russkiy Mir Foundation.

of Alexandria to recognize the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (in competition with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate) that had been formally recognized the same year by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and his Synod. The Moscow Patriarchate already broke with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2018 over the latter’s approval of the church’s independence.

The latest move by the Moscow Patriarchate is significant insofar as (in contrast with other parts of the world where multiple Orthodox jurisdictions coexist) no other mainstream Orthodox church has created any diocese on the African continent since it was recognized as a canonical territory under the Patriarchate of Alexandria. Metropolitan Leonid Gorbachev of Klin, who will head the new exarchate, expects more clergy to apply and transfer their parishes out of the Patriarchate of Alexandria in the future. He does not rule out the possibility that additional dioceses will be formed under the Exarchate of Africa if there is such a need. According to Peter Anderson, a long-time observer of developments within the Russian Orthodox Church, the Moscow Patriarchate may be trying to show how far it is willing to go in case other Orthodox churches might be tempted to recognize the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The move may also be used as a bargaining chip in relation to the situation in Ukraine. (Source: *RIA Novosti*, December 30; analysis by Peter Anderson, December 29: <https://www.unifr.ch/orthodoxia/de/dokumentation/anderson/>)