Black church facing disaffection of young and innovating

The black church is facing the reality of spiritual alternatives and growing non-affiliation through more aggressive evangelism and greater use of technology, according to scholars. In a lecture at Princeton University attended by **RW** in late February (via Zoom), sociologist Jacqueline Rivers of the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies argued that many of the same de-Christianizing forces that have challenged white churches have arrived at the doors of the African American community. She cited figures from the Pew Research Center showing a rising rate of black non-affiliation, even though black Millennials remain more religious than other Millennials (64 percent versus 39 percent, respectively). It is largely issues of sexuality that have convinced many younger African American Christians to walk away from their churches, with 31

Source: Black Perspectives (AAIHS).

percent of these young adults saying that the churches' treatment of LGBT issues caused them to leave. Another objection that younger non-affiliated blacks have against the black church is that it is not relevant to the current situation, pointing to the lack of church leadership in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in recent years.

Rivers notes how the rise of non-affiliation has led to other trends that are also evident among white "nones," such as the emergence of "black witches" who adopt Neopagan Yoruban spirituality and practices. Such practitioners use crystals and burn sage, preferring to confine their activities to the Internet where they can escape the scrutiny of family and older members of the black church. Among young black male nones, the growth of "drill rap," where videos of violent and sometimes murderous confrontations accompany rap music, has taken on quasi-religious overtones. Such actual violent events are called "demon time," referring to a time of the night when evil is done. Some drill rappers refer to themselves as demons and embrace that identity, according to Rivers. She concludes that black churches will have to show that they are far removed from white supremacy, citing the ministry of Lisa Fields of Jude 3 Project, which teaches black young people theology and apologetics, seeks to bring together right and left, and addresses issues over which black nones have been leaving the church.

In her new book *Networking the Black Church* (NYU Press), Erika D. Gault argues that many younger African Americans have not so much left the church behind as sought out faith in unconventional places, not least through hip hop music, video-sharing, and social media. Gault, a professor at the University of Arizona who counts herself among these "digital black Christians," writes that in the last decade, the wall between hip hop culture with its online expressions and the black church has broken down. The author provides a fascinating "auto-ethnography" in the book's preface, telling how she made the transition from a strict Pentecostal-Holiness church where rap and hip hop were referred to as "the devil's music" to being an unchurched poet who felt that the church was irrelevant, and then back again to an active churchgoer and deacon in a black congregation that freely draws on hip hop culture. Based on interviews and participant observation in these spaces where hip hop and Christianity intersect, Gault provides an interesting account of how the young black church is related to the digital networks that include black Christian performers (often Twitter, YouTube and Instagram personalities) and laypeople.

These networks provide intimacy through such values as "relationships, identity, visibility, and valuation," which share in both contemporary ideas about blackness and evangelically oriented (often conservative) church practices and theology. This could be seen in how respondents both embraced and repudiated the black church tradition, making the tradition itself more fluid and less institutional (especially since the pandemic). The black church tradition provides a linguistic style and an "imagined community" for digital black Christians, even as they expand the repertoire to include current concerns with marginalization, racism, and black identity in general (while having a complicated relationship with the BLM movement). Gault criticizes the tendency, often by fellow black hip hop artists, to downplay or dismiss as retrogressive and

patriarchal the conservative views on gender and sexuality prevalent among these digital black Christians and expressed by performers such as Lecrae (who is featured in a biographical first chapter) and Jackie Hill Perry. She argues that such dismissive attitudes towards these views (such as, for instance, a complementarian rather than egalitarian view of marriage) fail to take seriously the lived experiences and faith of these digital black Christians. In fact, Gault pays special attention to the way many of these young performers and laypeople have embraced conservative Reformed Christian teachings and theology. As for actual affiliation and participation in the black church, the younger generation of black Christians has driven both its expansion, leading black church planting networks such as Blueprint Atlanta, for example, and its digitalization, which, for all churches and congregations post-Covid, carries an uncertain future for institutional religion.

Ukraine crisis's religious underpinnings and its impact on American churches

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has largely been interpreted by Western media and foreign policy experts within geopolitical as well as authoritarian frameworks, centered on its instigator Vladimir Putin. But Putin's ruthless military strategy and designs owe much to his vison of Russia's religious identity, writes Giles Fraser on the website *Unherd* (February 24). Fraser, a journalist and Church of England priest, writes that Putin's largely unexpected westward turn from the separatist campaign in eastern Ukraine to Kyiv can be explained by his veneration of that city as the birthplace of Russian Orthodoxy under his namesake Prince Vladimir, who led a mass baptism to the faith. Putin has long cast himself as a defender of Christians throughout the world and the leader of the Third Rome. This can be seen in everything from his relentless bombing of ISIS to protect what he sees as the historic homeland of Christianity to his recent attacks on Western countries for their decadence and immorality. Putin's defense of "Holy Russia" is "part religious project, part extension of Russian foreign policy. Speaking of Vladimir's mass baptism, Putin explained, 'His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization, and human values that unite the people of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.' He wants to do the same again. And to do this he needs Kyiv back."

The repercussions of Putin's invasion for Orthodox churches in Ukraine and Russia, as well as for the diaspora, will unfold in the months ahead, but already there are signs of new divisions in the already conflicted world of Eastern Orthodoxy. Writing in *Tablet* (February 18), a Jewish magazine, Maggie Phillips describes how Orthodox churches in the U.S. had already felt new divisions after a segment of Ukrainian Orthodox churches switched their allegiance from the Moscow Patriarchate to the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Focusing on the Pittsburgh area, where Orthodox churches under the different jurisdictions stand cheek by jowl, Phillips finds the Ukrainian-Russian rift having more serious effects than in the more monolithic Orthodox cultures of Russia or Greece. As Orthodox priest Thomas Soroka said, "So all of a sudden, we

Kiev: Church of the Nativity of the Virgin (Jorge Franganillo | Flickr).

priests find ourselves not being able necessarily to commune with one another and serve with one another." But the more recent division has been among the growing number of converts to Orthodoxy as they learn of their churches' divisions, Soroka added. Some of the more conservative converts have homed in on the Ukrainian-Russian split in online forums, taking sides with Russia because they say it is being antagonized for its role in revitalizing traditional social values and Christianity, according to Sarah Riccardi-Swartz of Arizona State University. [It should be noted that allegiance to the Moscow Patriarchate does not necessarily mean support for Putin and Russia in this conflict, at least in Ukraine. Metropolitan Onuphry, the leader of the Ukrainian church under Moscow, has issued a clear statement supporting Ukrainian armed forces against Russian aggression].

(*Unherd,* https://unherd.com/2022/02/putins-spiritual-destiny/; *Tablet*, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/orthodox-church-divided-russia-ukraine)

Critical race theory now a flashpoint at evangelical colleges

The debate concerning critical race theory (CRT) that has proven so divisive in secular society has landed on the campuses of evangelical colleges, sparking similar episodes of conflict, writes Julia Duin in *Newsweek* (February 14). CRT is a disputed concept, but it generally relates to the

idea that racism is endemic and systemic in most American institutions, with critics charging that it has a Marxist orientation. Duin writes that the concern over CRT among evangelicals has become so dire that the website gospelshapedfamily.com posted a list of "Christian Colleges Without Critical Race Theory." The Christian website classicaldifference.com has likewise posted a list of questions that include issues of race and diversity for parents to pose to the admissions departments of any Christian college their child is considering. Even a college as conservative as Grove City College, a conservative Presbyterian institution that refuses government aid, has come under fire for teaching CRT. "It's amazing how a school as conservative as we are can be a flashpoint, which reveals how troubled people are about critical race theory," Paul McNulty, president of the college, said. "I appreciate the concern, but we need to find a way to talk about race without appearing to promote critical race theory. Of course we don't promote a Marxist position on these things."

Duin writes that George Floyd's murder put pressure on all institutions, including Christian ones, to respond in some way to the issue of racism. Early on, Azusa Pacific University assembled a lengthy anti-racism resources list. Last April, Wheaton held a first-ever "Racialized Minorities Recognition Ceremony." Wheaton philosophy professor Nathan Cartagena said teaching his class on critical race theory was "much harder" because some students were saying the theory "is of the devil." Duin notes that many Christian colleges seem to agree with some CRT tenets. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) met last week in Dallas, holding seminars such as "At the Table, but Not Equally Served: Thriving in Black and Latino Men at CCCU Institutions," and "Decentering Whiteness in Teacher Education Programs at Christian Universities." Scott Rae of Talbot School of Theology said evangelicals disagree on whether racism is purely individual or embedded in systems. He added that "There's a good deal more diversity of thought at Christian colleges than at state universities. Christian colleges actually *have* conservatives on campus, so the conversation is a bit different there."differences in technology options for gathering online, or the strength of relational connections," he said.

Shinto gaining global online practitioners

Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion, is going global, writes anthropologist Kaitlyn Ugoretz in the online magazine *The Conversation* (February 10). The small but growing community of Shinto practitioners scattered around the world has been created largely through online rituals and practices circulated by Shinto temples and groups (though not from Japan, where such online services are seen as taboo). While Shinto formally venerates the Japanese emperor's divine status as a descendent of the sun goddess Amaterasu and related spirits known as kami, the religion's ethical and spiritual practices are drawing many non-Japanese devotees. Scholars find that aside from veneration, the new followers of Shinto are drawn to its practical benefits of good health, prosperity, and safety. Global practitioners have stressed the "spiritual but not religious" nature of Shinto, which has no founder, doctrine, or sacred texts. Ugoretz adds that the digital Shinto communities have existed practically since the birth of the Internet, starting with a "Shinto Mailing List" in 2000 as a space where 1,000 likeminded people discussed the religion. By 2020, Shinto communities included approximately 6,000 to 10,000 members hosted across various social media platforms and even virtual worlds.

Non-Japanese people have received certification as Shinto priests, and Shinto shrines can be found around the world, including in the United States, Brazil, and the Netherlands. Shrines, such as Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America and Shinto Shrine of Shusse Inari in America, have started their own online communities. Many practitioners first encountered Shinto via an interest in Japan stimulated through anime, video games, martial arts, or tourism. Some Shinto priests

Source: Second Life Shinto Shrine Register.

teach their faith through popular culture, performing rituals and giving talks at cultural events and fan conventions. In their rituals, practitioners are supposed to offer the traditional staples of rice, water, and salt, but some Shinto devotees may offer similar, local substitutes, such as oats instead of rice. "They may also make creative additions to their altars, personalizing the space and their relationship with the kami. Others have difficulty sourcing the materials required to set up a Shinto altar, especially the sacred 'ofuda' talisman, which must be received from a shrine. They may build their own altars or pay their respects at a digital altar in an app," Ugoretz writes.

Taizé adapts to pandemic, takes activist stance on clerical abuse

Taizé, an ecumenical monastic community in France with a worldwide following of young Christians, has changed in recent years, addressing issues surrounding immigration in Europe, the pandemic, and clerical sex abuse, reports Stephanie Saldana in the Jesuit magazine *America* (February). Taizé was started during World War II by Protestants seeking the monastic life and church unity and reconciliation, and gradually attracted hundreds of thousands of young people

Church of Reconciliation - Brothers Community of Taizé (Emmanuel Cattier | Flickr).

who would flock to the French monastery for prayer and worship services. The community's songs, chants and prayers were adapted by churches around the world. Saldana writes that in recent years Taizé has also reached out to migrants in Europe, sheltered Muslim, Yazidi, and Christian refugees escaping war, engaged in dialogue with Muslims, and led workshops on the climate crisis. The pandemic has also affected much of the Taizé community's activities.

During the lockdown in France, the Taizé brothers separated into pods, living and praying in small groups, and broadcast their prayers online to Christians isolated around the world. During a second lockdown, the brothers invited students studying online at home to come stay at the community to ward off isolation. Taizé has also become active on the clerical sexual abuse crisis, not least because of the community's own experience with alleged abusers among its brothers. The community had learned of five cases of alleged sexual assault by brothers occurring between 1950 and 1980; two of the brothers involved had died and one had left the group before the accusations came to light, while the other two were reported to authorities and left the community. The community took a strong position on transparency and ministry to survivors, not only those victimized by the brothers but by other clerics in churches around the world, especially during revelations of abuse in the Catholic Church in France. The brothers have continued to speak out to youth, leading them in prayer and discussion of abuse and topics such as clericalism and celibacy, as well as to each other and to the press. One brother said that the decision to speak openly on these issues had salvaged the trust of young people.

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

Trucker protests in Canada show American religious influence

Canada's trucker protests over vaccine mandates suggest a degree of religious influence, though it carries as much American as Canadian inspiration, reports the *National Review* magazine (February 14). Nate Hochman writes that "As more protesters flock to the Ottawa trucker convoy to protest Canada's pandemic restrictions, the movement has taken on an explicitly Christian tone. Signs, makeshift food stands, and truck doors throughout the event are

Source: Michael Swan | Flickr.

covered in Christian iconography and passages of Biblical scripture." The protest's daily "Jericho March," with protestors walking a lap around Parliament Hill carrying horns and trumpets as a symbolic tribute to the Biblical story of Jericho, was clearly borrowed from the 2020 Jericho March protesting President Joseph Biden's election. Hochman adds that religious faith colored the entire event he observed, which "kicked off with a series of short speeches, a prayer from a pastor, and a rendition of the Lord's Prayer and the Canadian national anthem. The influx of Christians from across Canada was a new development, and a sign that the Ottawa protest is expanding beyond the truckers who initiated it." While some of the truckers are Christians, the growing congregation of Christians at the convoy is a distinct group. Many of the protesters came from across the country, some embarking on multi-day trips just to get to the convoy.

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **A new study finds religious behavioral responses to the Covid pandemic, such as prayer, to be positively correlated with medically advised measures like mask-wearing and social distancing.** The study, conducted by West Virginia University researchers Katie E. Corcoran, Bernard DiGregorio, and Chris Scheitle, analyzed 2,000 responses from an AmeriSpeak panel

Source: *Religion Unplugged*.

survey of 50,000 individuals that asked a range of questions about how respondents dealt with the pandemic. The researchers found that the more religiously active respondents, measured by congregation attendance and belief that the Bible is the word of God, were willing to use both medical and religious strategies such as prayer, suggesting that religious responses are not replacing medically recommended responses.

But this was not the case for those defined as "Christian nationalists," who favored religious rather than medical responses, believing that the solution to the pandemic did not lie in taking medical precautions but increasing America's religious devotion and repenting of national sins. Republicans were significantly less likely to have undertaken either religious or medical responses to the pandemic compared to Democrats, since they were more likely to believe that Covid was a hoax or not more serious than the flu, suggesting that the politicized nature of the pandemic has shaped religious responses as well.

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

Playing religious card in the European Union

The commitment of Christian Democrat political figures had been central to Europe's reconstruction process after World War II, but religion has again become a topic for the European Union (EU) over the past 20 years, due to concerns about both radical Islam and the use of religious themes by populist political movements. These issues are likely to continue to occupy politicians, writes political scientist François Foret (Free University of Brussels) in the *Bulletin de l'Observatoire International du Religieux* (January). European governance provides limited opportunities to use religious references for political goals, since the regulation of religious affairs is left to member states. Moreover, an increasingly secular environment means that playing the religious card offers uncertain benefits, even more so for populist parties, whose supporters appear on average to be more secularized and distant from religious institutions than the rest of the European population.

But references to an old religious heritage have been used by such parties against outsiders allegedly threatening their idealized national communities—such as Muslims, liberals, and cosmopolitan elites, with these targets varying

Source: Max Pixel.

somewhat across countries. This has allowed the populist right to build political support through the use of religious themes, something that has become hardly possible today for Christian Democrats. The Christian Democrats of the past lived at a time when Christian culture still exercised a significant influence on the continent, and they had really imbibed it, while today's populist leaders are late converts to religious references that are largely foreign or indifferent to their supporters. Suspicious of pluralist ideals, populist political leaders primarily see religion as a way of affirming the cultural homogeneity of their respective nations, and the way they use it and other mobilizing tools at the EU level only reflects in a weaker mode what they do at the national level.

(François Foret, "Union européenne, populisme et religion: trio ou triangle d'incompatibilité?" *Bulletin de l'Observatoire International du Religieux*, No. 35, January 2022, https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/bulletin/union-europeenne-populisme-et-religion-trio-ou-triangle-dincompatibilite/)

Armenian church retains core role while adjusting to new realities

Throughout Armenian history, even when many Armenians were dispersed and no longer had their own state, the Armenian Apostolic Church has played a key role as a national church. However, according to Matthieu Barlet of the Observatoire Pharos, a French think tank monitoring religious and cultural trends around the world, the linkage between Armenian identity and faith seems to be transforming for a variety of reasons (observatoirepharos.com, January 19). In addition to territory and language, religion is crucial to the existence of the Armenian nation, with Armenians proud to have established the first Christian state in the world. A huge majority of Armenians belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, although some have joined other denominations. Even if the first government in post-Soviet, newly independent Armenia envisioned a rather secular model, it was natural to have the special place of the church recognized in the constitution and parliament blessed by the Armenian Catholicos. The conflict with Azerbaijan over control of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory saw the church actively supporting Armenian national claims, as a protector of cultural, territorial, and national integrity.

Under the nationalist government of Robert Kotcharian (1998–2008), the alliance between the government and the church became stronger, with a growing place for the church in public life, mandatory teaching since 2002 of Armenian church history in primary schools, and mounting suspicions against newly established faith groups. But this took place at the same time that the society was becoming more pluralist, partly due to the influence of some diaspora Armenians who had assimilated the values of the countries where they were living. Since the mid-2010s, the church has not been immune to backlash against corrupt politicians with whom it has been seen to be associated. While the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (2020), with Azerbaijan victorious, gave the church an opportunity to assert its role again, Barlet writes that a number of Armenians

Armenia: The Monastery of Geghard (armennano | Pixabay)

expect it to balance its undisputed position as protector of Armenian culture and identity with the realities of pluralism and the globalized aspirations of Armenian youth.

(https://www.observatoirepharos.com/pays/armenie/leglise-apostolique-armenienne-un-pilier-de-l-armenite-en-question/)

Islamism waning or waxing?

With much of the West's attention fixated on Russia and Ukraine, the political influence of Islam shows signs of both decline and resurgence. In the scholarly newsletter *Quillette* (January 21), Imran Said reports that Islamist governments, "once seen as an unstoppable force throughout most of the Muslim world," are now seen as being incapable of delivering on their promises, "incompetent and out-of-touch (as has been the case in the Arab world) and at worst, economically disastrous (as has been the case in Turkey and Sudan). In the more consolidated democracies of Malaysia and Indonesia, Islamist movements are fractious, riven by internal

Wikimedia Commons

divisions and overly ambitious leaders. The Taliban may be back, but it would be a mistake to overstate the power of Islamist movements around the world." Said points to the fall of the Ennahda party in Tunisia in 2021. The moderate Islamist party had ceased its proselytizing activities and focused on politics by 2016, but it alienated its conservative base while failing to appeal to new voters. In both Morocco and Turkey, other moderate Islamist parties have lost popular support. Morocco's Justice and Development Party angered both secular and religious voters when it went along with policies that contradicted its conservative principles, including economic liberalization, the legalization of cannabis, and the normalization of relations with Israel. Turkey's Justice and Development Party has meanwhile presided over a depressed economy and a currency crisis.

Outside of the Middle East and North Africa, Sudan saw the most dramatic "fall from grace of any Islamization project across the Muslim world," with 30 years of authoritarian rule by the Islamist National Congress Party coming to an end in 2019. Even in Indonesia, where Islamists have made some gains in society and its institutions, a pre-election study of the campaign platforms of 72,486 candidates at all levels of government found that only 5.7 percent of them explicitly referred to religious themes. In the journal *Foreign Affairs* (January/February), Vali Nasr argues that even as the Biden administration has de-emphasized engagement with the Middle East, the "struggle for geopolitical primacy between Iran's Shiite theocracy and the
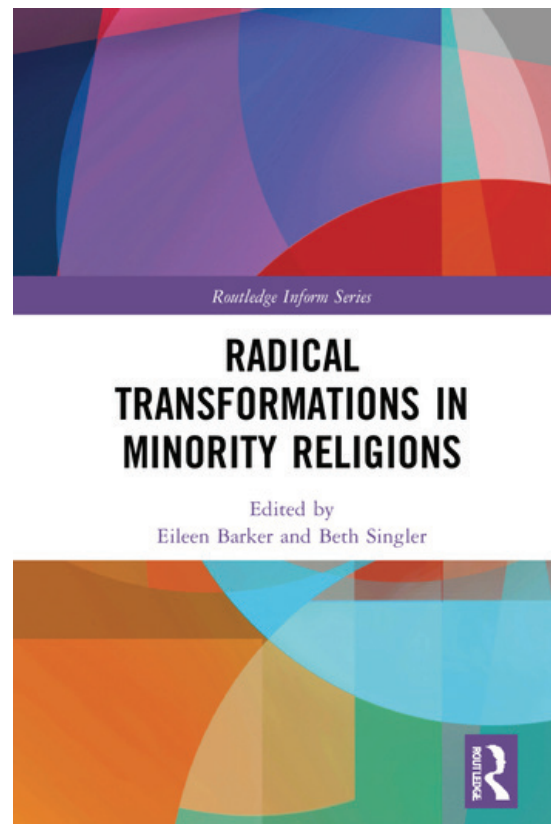
countries led by Sunni Arabs and, more recently, Sunni Turkey, is stoking conflict across the region—eroding social compacts, worsening state dysfunction, and catalyzing extremist movements." The conflict between Sunni and Shiite Islam "has ebbed and flowed over the past two decades," but "sectarianism's salience to the region's politics has not waned," Nasr writes. While Iran's Shiite Islam has been able to remain on top in regional conflicts, the withdrawal of the U.S from Middle Eastern affairs has enabled Sunni groups to try to fight such influence. The specter of Sunni extremism worries Iran, especially after the Taliban returned to power and other Sunni states are mending ties with Turkey, which under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sees itself as a "defender of Sunni prerogatives."

(*Quillette*, https://quillette.com/2022/01/21/in-the-muslim-world-islamism-is-going-out-of-vogue/)

Findings & Footnotes

■ Less anchored in their ways than traditional religions, new religious movements (NRMs) offer a rich field for research on radical transformations. This topic is the focus of a new volume edited by Beth Singler and Eileen Barker, *Radical Transformations in Minority Religions* (Routledge, $160). Its 17 chapters cover a varied landscape, from themes such as reactions to child sexual abuse in three new religions to various Pagan movements, the Plymouth Brethren, the Church Universal and Triumphant, and Samael Aun Weor's Gnostic Movement, to name but a few. There is even a chapter attempting to apply the NRM framework to consider LGBT Muslim groups. Faced with such a variety of cases, initial reflections by Beth Singler offer a general perspective. From one movement to another, sources of changes may be diverse, ranging from more obvious ones, such as societal pressure, to new revelations or generational changes. But one should also pay attention to other factors, such as transnational diaspora and transcultural appropriation in the case of Brazilian Santo Daime, examined by Andrew Dawson. When changes are brought about in part by external pressure, or the criticism of former members, questions are raised as to whether those changes express "genuine revisionism" or rebranding as part of a quest for legitimacy.

These questions are at the core of the chapter by Bernard Doherty and Laura Dyason on the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church in Australia under Bruce D. Hales (2002–2016). The Brethren in Australia comprise a

Routledge Inform Series

RADICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN MINORITY RELIGIONS

Edited by
Eileen Barker and Beth Singler

sizable religious minority of around 15,000 members. This chapter is followed by an appendix of three pages with a response provided by the Brethren themselves in order to show that, "whilst responding to the challenges and changing conditions of the modern day," the Brethren actually "seek to remain true to their core beliefs and Christian values as maintained since J. N. Darby's time." This illustrates well how the issue of change in itself may be a sensitive one. In cases of movements formed around the experiences of their founders, it may happen that the entire community will experience successive changes following the evolving understanding of the spiritual master. Such has been the case with revisions in the Enlighten Next movement formed around Andrew Cohen, as explained by André van der Braak: "From his initial experience-based emphasis on personal enlightenment, Cohen went to an ethics-based emphasis on living one's life based on impersonal enlightenment and ended up envisioning the future of mankind through evolutionary enlightenment. These three teachings of enlightenment came with three models of community." Braak comments on how various reasons may explain such changes, from psychological ones to a quest for originality or an attempt to shield oneself from criticism.

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

1) **The Global Flourishing Study (GFS)** is a new project conducted jointly by Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion and Program on Pro-Social Behavior and Harvard University's Human Flourishing Project, that will look at the factors shaping human betterment, including its religious dimensions. The project will involve data collection from some 240,000 participants from

22 countries, with annual data collection from the same individuals for five years. The survey includes questions on well-being, along with demographic, social, economic, political, religious, personality, childhood, community, health, and character-based questions. The GFS will expand knowledge on the extent to which many of the world's largest nations are or are not flourishing. The study will be of special interest to religious communities, since it will survey respondents not only on religious affiliation and congregational attendance but also a wide range of variables on religion and spirituality, such as rituals, religious experiences, and views of good and evil. (**Source**: *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, online in February)

2) J.C. is the first virtual, artificial intelligence (AI) gospel artist. The AI was created by Marquis Boone Enterprises last November, using software algorithms to recognize voice patterns and replicate them, eventually creating new ones. Boone and colleagues plan to feature J.C. as an entertainer in the so-called

"metaverse," an enhanced version of social media where virtual reality creates an "embodied Internet." Since the pandemic, churches have been experimenting with virtual reality, where real social actors inhabit an artificial computer-generated reality. Boone said he got the idea of creating a virtual-reality AI gospel music artist after hearing about AI artists in the pop music genre. Critics say that an AI gospel artist misses the point that Christian music should be about human connection rather than programming and marketing that mimics secular entertainment trends. Boone answers that such criticism has followed every new trend in Christian music, though he acknowledges that it may be difficult to overcome what is called the "uncanny valley" in any AI form. This is when the AI is so close to humans that it causes revulsion among its users. (**Source**: *Christianity Today*, March)
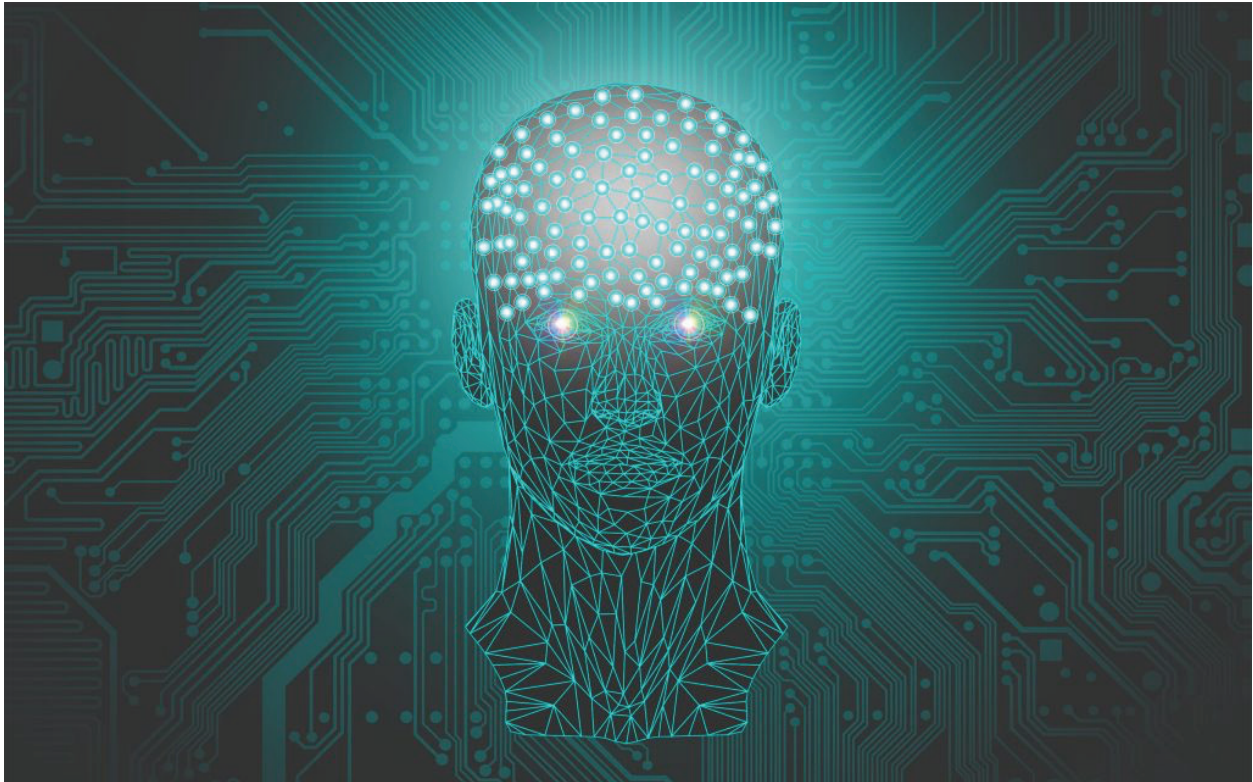
3) The ReAwaken America tour is the clearest example of how Christian nationalism or populism, however vague and contested these terms, can be seen as a movement active in a segment of evangelical and charismatic churches. Launched during the Biden administration by former General Michael Flynn, the tour features conferences combining "elements of a tent revival, a trade fair and a sci-fi convention." Most news accounts have noted the "extremist" nature of these events, which have included more than one person calling for the hanging of his political opponents. What is most striking is Flynn's use of Christian channels and venues to spread an apocalyptic message of election corruption and national decline. The tour is sponsored by Charisma News, a charismatic Christian outlet that was strongly supportive of the Trump presidency. The list of upcoming venues on Flynn's website consists largely of evangelical and especially charismatic churches. The tour is concentrated in smaller churches, most removed from elite American culture, including from elite evangelicalism and larger megachurches. The tour has yet to receive much critical treatment by conservative Christian leaders or Christian media.

Critics charge that such leaders feel that, however extreme Flynn and his message may be, it is less dangerous than "wokeism" or the worst of the left: "desperate for the unity that is perceived as necessary to confront existential risks, the last thing they want to do is to divide the right." (**Source**: David French, *The Dispatch*, February 13)

Source: Green Pass News.