

## The rise and fall of “big-name spirituality” and its substitutes

The era of big-name spiritual leaders who packed stadiums in North American cities—figures like the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Eckhart Tolle, Deepak Chopra, Rhonda Byrne, and Desmond Tutu—is fast fading, writes Douglas Todd in the *Vancouver Sun* (March 31). “There is not nearly as much mass-culture focus on trend-setting spiritual figures as there was in the past,” the veteran religion journalist writes, “a decline confirmed by, among others things, Google analytics, which measures how often celebrities’ names are searched online.” Todd adds that this trend is not just because some of these admired figures, like Hanh and Tutu, have recently died and others, such as the Dalai Lama, are slowing down their travelling. He notes that only a decade ago Hanh, Tutu, Chopra and Tolle were regularly drawing thousands when they spoke in North American cities. Now Tolle draws only an eighth of the Google searches he registered in 2008, and similar declines in online interest have “befallen Indian-American mystic Chopra and



Source: International Campaign for Tibet.

Byrne, author of the phenomenon *The Secret*. There are no new spiritual stars taking their place. Even the name of Pope Francis, who hovers above in a different fame category than almost everyone except the global leader of Tibetan Buddhism, is not being searched nearly as often as it was from 2013 to 2016.”

Todd recently led a discussion on these topics at a salon organized by author Victor Chan, who had brought the Dalai Lama, Tutu, Tolle, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Buddhist Matthieu Ricard, author Karen Armstrong and many other spiritual figures to Vancouver more than a decade ago. The participants offered their own takes on the phenomenon. While acknowledging secularization, one young participant observed that Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter have been filled these days with people sharing “quotables” from such figures as the Dalai Lama, Hanh, Byrne, Tolle and others. “Their online presence,” she added, “is huge.” Another discussant cited the emergence of secular spirituality, in the form of mindfulness meditation and yoga, which has become common in North American society. Another explained the fall of big-name spirituality as due to the general move away from “mass culture,” a time when a single band or performer could captivate everyone’s attention. “Popular spirituality, in other words, might be fragmenting, like so much of Western society,” Todd writes. “Maybe that helps explain why figures in popular spirituality are no longer ascendant at a mass scale, but how non-household-name guides like Pema Chodron, Richard Rohr, Jack Kornfield and others still hold significant appeal for many.”

Given the changing scene, the salon group entertained the possibility that spirituality and religion were being replaced for some by identity politics and what many call (sometimes derogatorily) being “woke,” or more deeply sensitive to injustice in terms of race and gender. This trend has been noted by disparate observers and critics—from traditional believers to atheists. Last fall Archbishop José H. Gomez, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, criticized such “new social justice movements” as “pseudo-religions” that end up functioning as “dangerous substitutes for true religion.” Critics note that advocates for racial equality often solemnly “take the knee.” One salon member approvingly described how her fellow Royal Bank of Canada staff were being asked to take part in emotion-charged workshops on Indigenous suffering and reconciliation. Black linguist and atheist John McWhorter’s best-selling book, *Woke Racism*, describes wokeness as a well-meaning but fervently illiberal religion that includes the original sin of “white privilege” and the weaponization of cancel culture to ban “heretics.”

## **Judaism’s belated entry into online worship brings big dividends**

While many congregations have been struggling to manage the challenges of meeting in-person while retaining an online presence, the online Jewish magazine *Tablet* (April 6) reports that synagogues have been particularly adept at such a balancing act. Ron Wolfson and Steven



Source: Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey.

Windmueller write that there has been a revolution in synagogues since the Covid pandemic, more dramatic than in Christian churches, which had invested heavily in both television and online formats prior to it. Like other congregations, synagogues struggled to move their services online in 2020, with attendance being at first mainly restricted to local members. However, as “individuals became aware of the online programming of hundreds of congregations, the opportunity to ‘dip in’ to these offerings captured the imagination and participation of a multitude of those people already connected to a congregation and many who were not.” By the High Holidays of 2020, many synagogues online were surprised by the logins they saw of people



from around the world. Central Synagogue, a large Reform congregation in New York City, had 250,000 livestream viewers on all its platforms during Rosh Hashanah in 2021, while Temple B’nai Israel in Alabama, a small unaffiliated congregation of 40 households, reported 100 to 200 people watching every livestreamed service, including some from as far away as England and Mexico who had become members.

The majority of these congregations have continued holding online services as their in-person services have resumed, and a challenge has been figuring out how regular online participants can be connected to the synagogue. Some congregations have simply extended membership options to these worshippers, offering the standard dues for joining, while others have given online viewers membership privileges on a sliding scale for access to digital platforms. Central Synagogue calls its online viewers “The Neighborhood” to denote this new kind of membership and community. Some synagogues, such as the prominent B’nai Jeshurun, already had a special out-of-town category of membership before the pandemic (mainly for former members and snowbirds) that they applied to online participants. Donations increased in all the congregations Wolfson and Windmueller studied, and in all of them they found that both members and leaders had positive views of the online transition and were enthusiastic about continuing their virtual expressions post-pandemic. Online members consider a particular synagogue they regularly log on to as their community, saying that they feel the same or even a greater sense of intimacy compared to worshipping in-person. But one rabbi said he didn’t want his prominent synagogue becoming a Walmart-style congregation, detracting from the efforts of smaller synagogues.

(*Tablet*, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/rise-of-online-synagogue>)

## **Drawing lessons from Hillsong’s controversies and decline**

That Hillsong will be gone in a few years cannot be ruled out, says Sébastien Fath, a French historian and leading scholar on evangelicalism, in a long interview with Youna Rivallain published in the French Catholic weekly *La Vie* (April 27). The fate of the global megachurch based in Australia after recent leadership and sexual scandals [see March **RW**] is also of interest to French Catholics, since Hillsong and its music have inspired believers looking for a renewal of parish life in France. Fath points to multiple crises impacting megachurches in recent years: Jack Schaap and his First Baptist Church in Hammond, Indiana, in 2012; Jack Driscoll and Mars Hill in Seattle in 2014; Tullian Tchividjian (the grandson of Billy Graham) and his Presbyterian megachurch in Coral Ridge, Florida, in 2015; Bill Hybels’ withdrawal from the Willow Creek megachurch in 2018; and the firing of the pastor of the Harvest Bible Chapel, James MacDonald, in Illinois in 2019. Fath remarks that while megachurches look powerful, they in fact have clay feet, since they are recent and closely connected to their founders’ charisma. A major weakness is their lack of supervision, since they often tend to follow their own ways even if they belong to a denomination. In fact, as megachurches grow, they tend to get rid of denominational links.



Hillsong United band in 2009 (author: Camille King | Flickr).

There are also scandals in smaller churches, but the sheer size of megachurches means that the impact is much larger. However, some megachurches have implemented systems of checks and balances, which allowed Willow Creek to overcome its 2018 crisis. Another concern mentioned by Fath is the priority these churches give to corporate growth, since they tend to be managed as brands and to promote a specific image. There is a strong investment in communication, brand loyalty, and targeted advertising, which often leaves little time for the deepening of faith and creates stress for ministers, who often find themselves close to burnout, opening the door to deviant behavior in their personal lives. This does not mean that megachurches are on the decline. There were 1,250 megachurches in the U.S. in 2005, and 500 more 15 years later. Megachurches are well designed for answering the expectations of a consumerist society. For the past 10 years, the emphasis has been less on “gigachurches” (where weekly attendance exceeds 10,000) and more on multisite churches. In those cases, there are two options—either to have the preaching of the leading pastor broadcast across all sites, or to have one pastor per site, in which case a megachurch becomes the seed of a new denomination.

## Shaker values, if not rituals, find a following in the creative class

While Shakerism has dwindled to a handful of members (with the sole remaining Shaker colony in Maine having only two members, one 65 and the other in her 80s), at least the “spirit” of the American-born religion is inspiring a new breed of artists, designers and restaurateurs drawn by its simplicity and egalitarianism, reports the *New York Times* (April 24). Shaker furniture and other crafts have long been valued by secular admirers, but more recently a new group of devotees have been attracted by Shaker values and spirituality, writes Christopher Barnard. He cites a couple who opened a New York restaurant based on Shaker values of hospitality and simplicity, and interviews others who said they were attracted to the Shakers’ egalitarian practices regarding gender and race (adherents had rejected slavery early in their history and taught and practiced equality between the sexes). Artists and designers are being drawn to the Shaker principle of “beauty rests on utility,” the theme of a fashion show being put on by designer Tori Burch and other artists at Hancock Shaker Village in Massachusetts, a former Shaker community turned museum. One clothes designer draws on the Shaker principle of simplicity as she cuts down on waste by using material from deadstock, or unused fabric. The Shaker Museum in Chatham, NY, which is in the process of a vast expansion, has created a “Maker’s Circle” comprised of creative people inspired by Shakerism. Director Lacy Schutz said designers and “makers” are drawn to Shakerism right now because of a “desire to communicate a belief system and a level of integrity.”

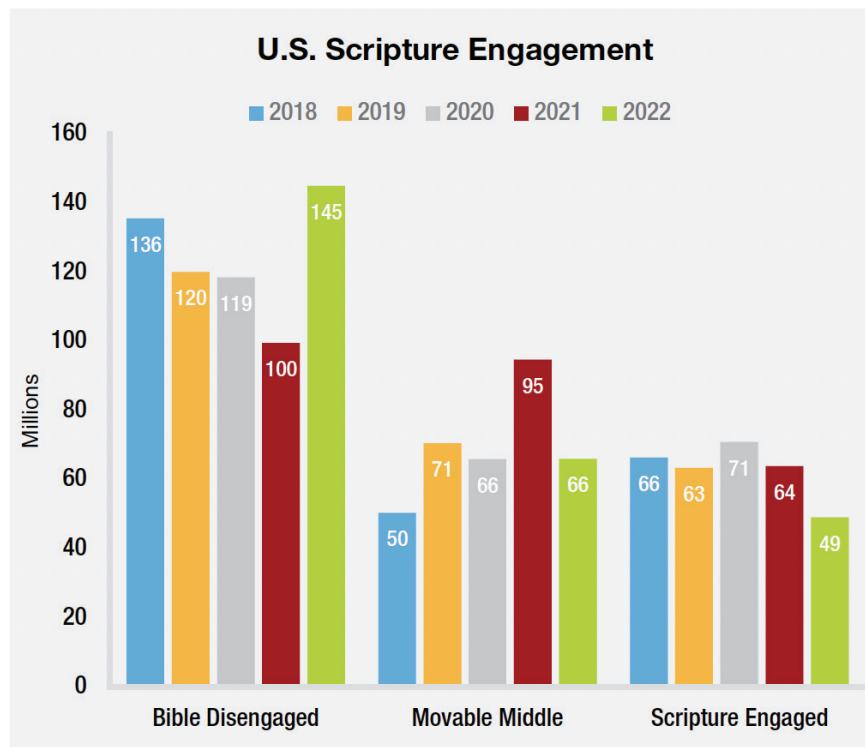


Source: Hancock Shaker Village.



## CURRENT RESEARCH

● The American Bible Society’s annual *State of the Bible* report finds that approximately 26 million people have mostly or completely stopped reading the Bible in the last year. *Christianity Today* magazine (April 20) reports on the survey, which in 2021 had found about 50 percent of Americans saying they read the Bible on their own at least three or four times per year, following a rate that had been more or less steady since 2011. In 2022, however, that rate has fallen by 11 points, with only 39 percent now saying they read the Bible multiple times per year. This is the sharpest decline on record—and it wasn’t only occasional Bible readers who didn’t pick up the scriptures as frequently in 2022. More than 13 million of the most engaged Bible readers—as shown by reading frequency, feelings of connection to God, and impact on day-to-day decisions—said they read the Bible less. Only about 10 percent of Americans report daily Bible reading, where that figure was at about 14 percent before Covid. Researcher John Plake says that the dramatic change shows how closely Bible reading—even independent Bible reading—is connected to church attendance. When regular services were interrupted by the pandemic and related health mandates, it impacted not just the corporate bodies of believers but also individuals at home.



In 2022, the trend toward Bible exploration came to an abrupt end. The Movable Middle has fallen by two in five and the Scripture Engaged category has shrunk by one in five.

Source: State of the Bible - American Bible Society.

(*Christianity Today*, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60165)

● QAnon, an amorphous movement based on conspiracy theories about the “deep state,” is likely to grow in “membership” in upcoming years and maybe even in violent tendencies,



Source: Mark Nozell | Flickr.

according to a study of the phenomenon in the social science magazine *Society* (online March 28). Conducting a comparative case analysis of groups and movements similar to QAnon, criminologists Omi Hodwitz, Steff King, and Jordan Thompson argue that it will remain on the scene for the foreseeable future. The researchers view QAnon as a decentralized movement and also a quasi-Christian one, in that it draws on evangelical-style terminology and invites participation from the conservative religious community. The article compares QAnon to a disparate set of movements and terrorist organizations—Christian Identity, the Lyndon LaRouche movement, Phineas Priesthood, and Atomwaffen Division—arguing that they are the



most similar to QAnon in their qualities of leadership, ideology, methods of recruitment, and membership.

The authors (who draw on theories from the anti-cult movement) write that in some ways QAnon shares characteristics with new religious movements, having a charismatic leadership (the mysterious “Q” and Donald Trump by proxy), strong membership devotion to an ideology, and suggestibility (even “brainwashing”). But QAnon also has similarities to terrorist groups, with a decentralized structure and a tendency to violence. Arguing that similarities or uniformities in the trajectories of the comparison groups suggest the probability that QAnon will follow the same trajectory, the researchers show that all four comparison groups have survived, show stability, and have growing memberships and geographical expansion. With the exception of the LaRouchites, the groups also all continue to engage in violence. Hodwitz, King, and Thompson predict that QAnon, still “in its fledgling years...is not likely to fade out at any point in the near future. QAnon may have years, if not decades, of active life ahead of it, championing political, social, and religious change...likely increasing in membership and regional expansion. In addition, continued violence is expected, one of many tactics employed by Anons, although the centrality of violence as a tool is open to debate.”

(*Society*, <https://www.springer.com/journal/12115>)

● **New worship and praise songs have had a far shorter shelf life in congregations in recent years, according to a study led by Mike Tapper of Southern Wesleyan University.** The study is based on an analysis of Christian Copyright Licensing International’s (CCLI) biannual reports,



Source: Church Relevance.

representing a listed sampling of the songs sung in various churches. The researchers retrieved and analyzed 64 biannual Top 100 CCLI lists dating back to their beginning in 1988. Writing on the *Worship Leader* website (April 20), they report that “higher numbers of churches, of presumably varying types and sizes, tend to introduce the same new and popular songs.” But the life-curves of the songs, averaged over five-year timespans, increasingly shorten over time—becoming three times shorter in songs emerging between 1995 and 2019.

The researchers write that, collectively, newer songs consist of “comparably steeper rises, diminished peaks, and more rapid falls than older songs. While some individual songs in each five-year timespan defy the start-rise-peak-fall pattern of its aggregated curve, many songs in the same span reinforce it.” Songs are declining three times faster than they did 25 years ago. Those emerging between 2000 and 2004 fell 23 percent more rapidly than those that emerged between 1995 and 1999. The authors ask whether “songs are falling and disappearing from the lists faster to make room for new songs (a ‘displacement’ theory) or because they oversaturate the culture (a ‘dissatisfaction’ theory).” In either case, their findings indicate that more churches are singing the same songs while they are doing so for shorter and shorter seasons.

(*Worship Leader*, <https://worshipleader.com/>)

● **When compared to young Catholics in other racial groups, young black Catholics report greater religious flourishing than their peers, according to a study by Springtide Research.**

Thirty-nine percent of younger black Catholics in the survey said they were “flourishing a lot” in their faith lives, compared to just 21 percent of young white Catholics. The former also reported greater flourishing in other areas of their lives compared to Catholic peers in other racial groups. Young black Catholics were also found to be more traditionally religious, showing greater trust in organized religion and higher rates of attending religious services and youth groups, praying daily, and studying scripture. They were more likely to apply their beliefs in their daily lives and to seek out the church in times of need and crisis.

Meanwhile, a new Pew study has found that most black Catholics worship in predominantly white churches and that they are increasingly immigrants. Only about 25 percent of black Catholics attend churches where the majority of congregants are black. Seeming to go against the above survey’s findings on religious flourishing, the Pew study reports that the main reason why black Catholics are such a small population is that they are the least likely of all Catholics to remain in the fold. While Catholics generally are prone to religious switching, black Catholics show the highest rates. The Catholic Church has 798 predominantly African American congregations across the country, according to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, most of which are on the East Coast and in the South. The study also found that 68 percent of black Catholics are U.S.-born, with a growing number coming from Africa (about 12 percent), the Caribbean (11 percent), or other parts of the Americas (5 percent).

(*Springtide Research study*: <https://www.springtideresearch.org/research/the-state-of-religion-2021>; *Pew study*: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/03/15/black-catholics-in-america/>)

## Black Catholics more likely than other Catholics to pray daily and to say they rely on prayer for guidance

% of \_\_\_\_ who say ...

	<b>Black Catholics</b>	<b>White Catholics</b>	<b>Hispanic Catholics</b>	<b>All U.S. Catholics</b>	<b>Black Protestants</b>
	%	%	%	%	%
They pray at least once a day	59	51	49	50	73
Religion is very important to them	49	42	48	43	73
They rely a lot on prayer when making decisions	48	32	37	35	67
They read scripture outside of services at least once a week	30	16	18	17	51
They believe Bible should be taken literally	28	12	28	18	56
They rely a lot on religious leaders when making decisions	12	7	13	9	23

Note: All respondents who identify as Black – including those who also identify as another race, or as Hispanic – are categorized as Black. Respondents in all other categories only include those who do not also identify as Black.

Source: Estimates for prayer frequency and religion's important among White Catholics, Hispanic Catholics, and all U.S. Catholics are from a survey conducted Aug. 3-16, 2020. All other estimates from a survey conducted Nov. 19, 2019-June 3, 2020, among U.S. adults. "Black Catholics in America"

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**



● **A new study finds that younger Catholics in the UK show greater commitment to the church than older ones.** The study, conducted by Stephen Bullivant and Ben Clements and based on an online survey of 1,823 Catholics, is published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in April). The researchers find younger cohorts showing greater involvement in some aspects of Catholic commitment, such as frequency of Mass attendance, prayer, and communion. Gender differences were not found to be significant. Socialization into the faith by family played a prominent role in the strength of commitment, with Catholic schooling showing a relatively weak impact. To explain this pattern, Bullivant and Clements draw on the “creative minority” effect, which they see as a byproduct of secularization. The “dissipation of an overarching Catholic subculture,” they write, “and the normalization of ‘no religion,’ means that younger adults who nevertheless (still) identify as Catholic have increasingly to ‘own’ it. To be a 20- or 30-something British Catholic, especially a practicing and believing one, is to swim against the prevailing cultural currents.”

But the authors add that the trend is more than just a byproduct of secularization. “It means that the other such Catholics they meet—perhaps at a university Catholic Society, or by gravitating to a particular church or movement, and/or by falling in with a certain crowd on social media—are also, necessarily, among the more committed themselves. This in turn produces a subcultural dynamic...of mutual validation and reinforcement, encouraging members to go increasingly all in with their Catholicism, not merely by the standards of the wider culture, but by those of other (predominantly older) practicing Catholics too.”



Source: Society of African Missions.

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

## **Evangelicals in Ukraine drift from pacifist ways in the face of Russian aggression**

The war in Ukraine has challenged the unique pacifistic stance held by many Ukrainian evangelicals, writes Jayson Casper in *Christianity Today* (April 20). Because of the history of oppression in the Soviet Union, a mixture of state compliance and pacifism marked much of the evangelical revival in Ukraine and Russia during the past few decades. Baptists in Ukraine and



Saint Catherine Evangelical Lutheran Church in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine (author: Leonid Dzhepko | Wikimedia Commons).

Russia, making up the world's second largest Baptist community, took the pacifist route, unlike their North American counterparts, often influenced by Mennonites and other Anabaptist groups that had emigrated to the region from Germany. While other evangelicals were not formally pacifist in their beliefs, they followed a policy of non-participation in their relationship to the communist government in the former Soviet Union that extended to military involvement. But Casper writes that there has been an evangelical shift, at least in Ukraine, on matters of war and peace in the face of Russian aggression, most clearly seen during the recent invasion.

With the national call in Ukraine to restrict men between the ages of 18 and 60 from evacuating the country, sources estimate that the great majority of evangelicals are contributing to the war through humanitarian help rather than through fighting. But while Anabaptist teachings relating to non-resistance and pacifism still have influence among the older generations of evangelicals in Ukraine and Russia, younger seminarians and church leaders in the former country have shown increasing misgivings about the refusal to take up arms. Often chafing under the influence of fellow believers in their "big brother" country to the north, Ukraine's evangelicals are both more socially involved—as first seen in their participation in the 2004 Orange Revolution—and

cooperative toward the military (if not actively fighting) than previous generations, even among the once strictly pacifist Mennonites. Known as the “Bible belt” of Eastern Europe, Ukraine’s evangelical influence in the military can be seen in the fact that there are now more Protestant chaplains than Orthodox ones. One Mennonite Brethren leader says that “Most people in our churches will not pick up a gun, but we will not condemn a soldier.” There have indeed been Mennonite Brethren soldiers and the church now counts many soldiers and veterans among its members, Casper adds. But more pacifistic Mennonites, such as those in the pan-denominational relief and development organization Mennonite Central Committee, have held their ground, advocating for social service and ministry to refugees and others suffering the ravages of the war, and creating a space for peacemaking in the war-torn country.

### **Despite improvements, Egypt faces continuing church-building conflicts**

Cases of violence against the Christian community in Upper Egypt are often rooted in hostility over the construction or renovation of Christian places of worship, reports *La Croix International* (April 26). There have been improvements under the government of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, with a new kind of discourse and a law, ratified by the Egyptian parliament in 2016, relaxing previous restrictions on the construction and management of places of worship. In



Source: PIME | Asia News.



March, the Egyptian president declared that all newly built cities in Muslim-majority Egypt must include the construction of a church, even in places where Christians are few. “Where there is a mosque there must also be a church,” said el-Sisi. “And if the church to be built will be attended by even only 100 people, it must be built anyway. So no one will have to meet in an apartment and present that private house as a church” (*La Croix International*, March 8). Nevertheless, the issue remains a sensitive one for the large Christian minority, which makes up to 10 percent of Egypt’s population, with the Coptic Church being the largest denomination.

In late January, nine Coptic Christians were arrested and jailed for protesting over delays in the reconstruction of their destroyed church and distributing a video on the Internet criticizing the authorities. Following protests by Amnesty International and other organizations, the nine have been released just in time for Coptic Easter. Their case shows how local authorities can slow down the requests for building or rebuilding churches, leaving local Christian communities without a place of worship in some villages of Upper Egypt. The problem is especially sensitive in less affluent, rural areas, or informal urban settlements. A number of the churches in such places had been built without required permits, since previous restrictive rules made it extremely difficult if not impossible to build them. In recent years, the government has approved retroactive building permits in some cases. The illegal buildings had made them an easy target for Islamists. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), an independent Egyptian human rights group, reports that there have been at least 36 cases of violence against Coptic Christian communities between 2016 and 2019.

### **Muslim social media influencers intensifying religious individualism in Islamic societies?**

The influence of social media in the Islamic world is producing a new kind of Muslim social influencer who is encouraging greater religious individualism among young Muslims, according to an article in the open-access journal *Religions* (April 8). Social media platforms have become popular among Muslim millennials in the Gulf countries, the Arab world, and beyond. Hybrid forms combining religious teaching with entertainment are nothing new in the Islamic world, as seen in the Muslim televangelism of Amr Khaled, for example. But the new generation of social media influencers—largely urban and Western-educated, specializing in non-religious subjects such as management or business, and tending to be “spiritual but not religious”—is far less engaged in teaching Islamic dogma. Rather, these influencers are “storytellers” who focus on human relationships and civil life. In the article, Bouziane Zaid of the University of Sharjah and his colleagues profile the prominent social media influencers Salama Mohamed and Khalid Al Ameri from the United Arab Emirates, Ahmad Al Shugairi from Saudi Arabia, and Omar Farooq from Bahrain, finding that they all “abide by the social marketing principles of soft sales and values-based selling. They do not pitch their religious message too early. They first entertain



Source: <https://emirateswoman.com/khalid-al-ameri-and-salama-mohamed-have-just-given-the-ultimate-wedding-gift/>

their followers with a well-articulated story that the followers can relate to, and then they pitch their message, which is usually a form of moral lesson.”

For instance, Farooq, a young Bahraini filmmaker and content creator, uses stories where he showcases various social experiences, professions, and situations. His popular videos include a series with episodes like “I am pregnant” (13 million views) and “I am disabled” (9 million views), and another series where he visits Muslim societies, such as Iraq, that are seen as off-limits to others. Mohamed and Al Ameri portray their life as a couple as that of a modern family living an Islamic life that is enjoyable and fulfilling. They also address social ills, such as obesity and excessive use of technology, while also stressing peace and diversity, also themes advocated in the UAE. The researchers conclude that these social media influencers challenge well-established notions of institutional religious authority, promoting a shift from “orthodoxy to orthopraxy,” especially as they give young believers access to religious content while the pandemic removes millions of Muslims from institutional religious life. “The emergence of the orthopraxy is likely to enhance individuality, authentic selfhood, and personal expressions, rather than a collective tradition.”

(*Religions*, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/4/335>)

## **Pentecostalism in Southeast Asia: growing and adjusting to local environments**

Economic development in Southeast Asia over the last three decades has been accompanied by a growth of Christianity, with Pentecostalism proving uniquely successful, write Terence Chong (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute) and Daniel Goh (National University of Singapore) in the *Newsletter of the International Institute for Asian Studies* (Spring). Based on research conducted since 2017 in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore, the researchers find that independent megachurches building upon previous waves of Protestant growth and “fueled by Christian growth among urban youth became Christian success stories.” This started at the turn of the millennium, as churches no longer looked to the West for inspiration but preferred to learn from each other, leading the authors to describe this phase as an “inter-Asian wave.” By the 2010s, Pentecostals met with backlash, especially when dealing—not always in a sensitive way—with Muslim populations that they were eager to convert in Malaysia and Indonesia at the very time Islamization made its influence felt.



Source: Pentecostal World Fellowship.

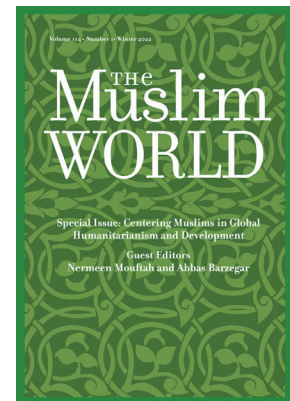


Some churches have persevered with intensified missionary efforts in their own countries, targeting specific groups or young Christians dissatisfied with their old churches in cities. Other churches focus on international expansion (and Singapore is a convenient place where they can find many regional migrant workers) while often aspiring to promote an inter-Asian rather than national approach. In a section in Indonesia, Chong and Goh nuance the assessment that what they call the “mall Christianity” increasingly found there is a mere expression of affinity with the prosperity gospel and consumer capitalism. There are religious reasons for spiritualizing the shopping malls as well as practical reasons related to the Indonesian environment, where Muslim-majority neighborhoods do not welcome new church buildings and impose a strenuous bureaucratic process for getting a building permit. Moreover, some churches choose shopping malls as strategic locations for reaching young people who are familiar with such environments since childhood. In those areas where there is less hostility, there are also megachurches building their own large centers. In Indonesia, some younger evangelical pastors have been invited to become the local board members of political parties that want to present a pluralistic image. In order to cultivate goodwill, a number of churches provide aid to local Muslim communities. Looking across the countries under examination in their research, Chong and Goh remark that while evangelicals prefer to focus on church growth, they will engage in associational or political activism to the extent that they perceive a potential threat, the nature of which will vary from one country to another.

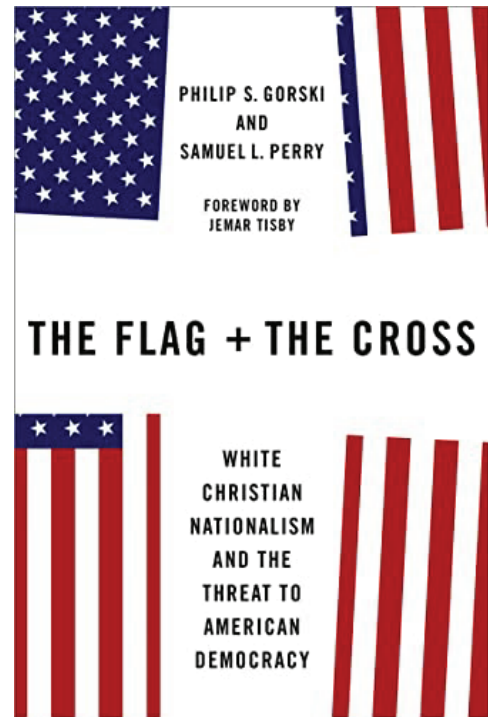
(IIAS Newsletter, <https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter>)

## Findings & Footnotes

■ *The Muslim World* devotes its current (Winter) issue to social welfare efforts among Muslim individuals, organizations, and countries, often comparing them to their Western counterparts. That there are different forms of charity and giving in Islam, some more obligatory and “religious” than others, complicates the issue. Some organizations chafe at the “Islamic” title applied to their job missions and descriptions, while others highlight their religious identity, acknowledging that they are part of a global order directed by Western institutions and arguing that Islam provides a blueprint for progress, peace, and prosperity. An interesting case of the former position can be found in an article that discusses a relief organization in Syria that insists that it is not Islamic even though it is made up of Muslims and uses Islamic practices in several ways. Other articles in this issue include an examination of how the concepts of Islamic charity (or zakat) are embedded in the market economy even as there are attempts to provide alternatives centered on community and neighborliness, and a study of how nationalism and the state mobilize religious and financial resources to promote their own causes in the cases of Pakistan and Iran. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14781913>



■ *The Flag and the Cross* (Oxford University Press, \$21.95), by Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry, represents a succinct and impassioned liberal critique of “white Christian nationalism,” even though that much-used term will still be contested by some critics even by the end of the book. The book is a blend of history, sociology, and political philosophy, with some theology added in, explaining how white Christian nationalism has been an ever-present force in America’s past and present. They locate this movement in the different guises of Puritanism, the social Darwinism of Protestant liberalism, the Confederacy, the fundamentalism of the mid-twentieth century, and later the religious right, “Christian libertarianism” and the Tea Party, all leading up to the MAGA devotees gathered around Donald Trump. In fact, Trump’s “MAGA narrative can be understood as a semi-secularized version of white Christian nationalism’s deep story.” All these expressions share the tendency of extolling America as a Christian nation guided and maintained by white Christians (mainly men), often to the exclusion of “others,” whether they be blacks, Native Americans, immigrants, or socialists. Rather than 1776 or even 1619, the sociologists argue that it was around 1690 when “racism, apocalypticism, and nationalism first fused into a deep story.” This is where the “white” in white Christian nationalism comes to dominate the nationalist and religious parts of the equation.



Even though this smooth historical narrative of a chameleon-like movement may be criticized by historians, on the empirical level, the book makes a less controversial case that there does exist something like Christian nationalism today. Gorski and Perry make little attempt to understand the movement and its proponents through qualitative research, but they marshal enough survey data to show that there is a sizable population of Americans who fit into their framework, sharing beliefs in a Christian America supported by federal laws, the importance of religious freedom, and the principle that religious symbols should be displayed in public. But given that in their survey data, black conservative Protestants score closer to white evangelicals on the Christian nationalism score than to black liberal Protestants, why do Gorski and Perry put so much emphasis on the white component of this movement? The authors explain this by arguing that whites identifying with Christian nationalism are more likely than those blacks identifying with it to link to a host of other cultural issues, such as gun rights, anti-immigration, feelings of religious discrimination, and free-market capitalism.

Throughout the book, white Christian nationalists are often portrayed as powerful and united protagonists who are pushing their agenda of a (culturally rather than theologically) white Christian America. Even the rise of the closely associated Christian right is seen as originating in the attempt to retain white hegemony. They assign little significance to the role of the culture wars and how they have been fought aggressively on both sides of the political spectrum (at least since the 1960s), as progressives and conservatives interact with and react to each other in complex and sometimes

unpredictable ways. For instance, if support for “partisan gerrymandering” is “highly correlated” with white Christian nationalism, how do they interpret cases of progressive gerrymandering? Gorski and Perry don’t say. They conclude their book in dire terms, viewing white Christian nationalists post-Trump as growing increasingly messianic (in view of how some supporters view a return of a Trump presidency in 2024 in religious terms), violent (as previewed by the rioting on January 6), and anti-democratic or even authoritarian. As a democratic remedy, they call for a “popular front stretching from democratic socialists such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders not only to classical liberals such as Bill Kristol and David French but also to cosmopolitan #NeverTrump evangelicals like Russell Moore, Beth Moore, or Tim Keller,” though they add that for any such coalition to work, progressives would have to discard much of their animus to religion.

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

1) **The Interfaith, Spiritual, Religious, and Secular Campus Climate Index**, or INSPIRES, created by researchers at Ohio State University and North Carolina State University, measures higher-ed institutions on their levels of religious diversity and inclusion. The index is based on extensive surveys of officials at 185 public, private and religiously affiliated institutions, covering questions relating to faith-related resources on campus, religious accommodation policies and more. The institutions are scored according to seven criteria, including religious accommodations, efforts to reduce bias, and extracurricular and academic engagement. Campus leaders will receive reports of the results and personalized recommendations from researchers starting in May. The institutions can then choose whether to make the information public as a resource for students and parents, in which case it will appear on the index’s website, or to keep the scores private and use them as an opportunity for reflection and learning. Index researchers say the “core issues of civil rights” related to students’ religious identities too often go unaddressed, and the index enables institutions to hold themselves accountable. (Source: *Inside Higher Ed*, April 13)



**INSPIRES**  
Campus Climate  
Index



2) **Matan Kahana** represents a new breed of Israeli politician who is trying to straddle the line between Orthodox, Zionist and labor movements. Kahana, the 49-year-old minister of religious services in Israel, and a circle of like-minded friends rose through the ranks of the military and civil service and have taken their place at the center of Israeli society to the consternation of both the religious right and the secular left. Kahana is part of a privatized generation in the religious Zionist world “who vote for different political parties and don’t listen to the same rabbis, or listen to rabbis at all,” writes journalist Yair Ettinger. The liberal fear that religionist



Matan Kahana (author: Arielinson, 2019 | Wikimedia Commons).

Zionists would “theocratize” the military hasn’t come to pass, while Kahana and his colleagues have actually put liberals back in power for the first time in years. Kahana, a former officer, and his generation did bring a more Orthodox Jewish orientation into the elite military force known as Sayeret Matkal, which was traditionally dominated by secular kibbutzniks. He is part of the new political alliance Yamina (meaning “Rightward”), which is part of a coalition that includes the left-wing parties Meretz and Labor but also a party of conservative Muslims that had pushed out ultra-Orthodox parties.

Kahana is working to end the ultra-Orthodox monopoly on the country’s religious establishment, successfully ending the rabbinate’s hold on kosher food regulation, and appointing record numbers of women as heads of local religious councils. More of a challenge will be his attempt to move Jewish conversion from the control of the ultra-Orthodox to city rabbis, who are at least potentially more flexible and Zionist and would be sympathetic to his idea that conversion play more of a role in national cohesion. This would make it easier for Israelis who are not Jews (such as many residents from the former Soviet Union), according to Jewish law, to opt into Judaism. But Kahana disavows the “liberal” label Westerners want to place on him; he wants to keep Israel Orthodox, even if more diverse and less coercive in pressing the demands of Jewish law on Israelis. Kahana is far from alone; the new “hyphenated” Orthodox-labor-Zionists include the new prime minister, Naftali Bennett, Yoaz Hendel, the communications minister, and Elazar Stern, the intelligence minister. (Source: *Tablet*, April 10)