

Supreme Court's religion rulings accelerating or relieving culture wars?

That the recent Supreme Court decisions on church-state issues will have an impact on American religion in upcoming years seems to be taken for granted. But opinions vary as to just what these landmark rulings will mean for the role of religion in public life and the sharp polarization of American society, according to one's take on church-state separation and the culture wars. In the first case, *Carson v. Makin*, the court ruled that if a state (Maine) could provide taxpayer dollars to support education at non-public schools, it must also fund religious schools—even those that exclude students of minority religions. In the second case, *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, it ruled that a public high school football coach in Washington State could deliver a religious prayer on the field immediately after a game. As might be expected, strict church-state separationists have viewed these decisions in a negative light, seeing both as deleterious to religious freedom and government neutrality regarding religion. In *The Hill* newspaper (July 28), Steven Freeman of the Anti-Defamation League writes that both decisions mark an acceleration of a trend brought about by “years of efforts by those on the religious right to claim their religious views should take precedence... The common understanding and mutual respect for religious differences that have held



Source: BJC.

us together as a diverse and pluralistic society [are] falling apart and being replaced by an American version of ethnonationalism at a tremendous cost to the present and future health of our democracy.”

Even in the liberal Catholic *Commonweal* magazine (July 6) the *Kennedy* decision struck a raw nerve, with Fordham University theology professor Michael Peppard arguing it could allow teachers and other school officials to pressure students to participate in religious activities. He adds that it may also create an environment where each school principal is forced to establish “his or her own religion policies and surveillance” in order to avoid “an excessive entanglement” of government and religion. The conservative *National Catholic Register* (June 27) struck back with an unqualified endorsement of the *Kennedy* ruling, saying it protected the right to the free exercise of religion. Seton Hall University theologian John Grondelski argues that no coercion or social pressure figures into private religious expressions like the coach’s prayers on the football field. He agrees that the ruling is part of a movement reversing 75 years of Supreme Court decisions where, as he writes, “religion itself must be shunted off the public square, especially from public schools. According to this line of thinking, impressionable young minds incapable of critical thinking may be fooled into thinking the government endorses religion if it recognizes that religion is and has been part of our social fabric.”

The *Kennedy* and especially the *Carson* rulings are widely viewed as intensifying religious strife and polarization in the U.S. But in the *Deseret News* (June 26), George Mason University law professor, who represented the plaintiffs in the case, Ilya Somin argues that *Carson* will be more likely to reduce religious strife. While the establishment clause of the Constitution bars targeted government support of religion, “it has never been interpreted as requiring categorical exclusion of religious institutions,” he writes. Other critics say that the ruling may advance the desires of “Christian nationalists” who will use the power of the state to impose their views on others. But *Carson*’s “nondiscrimination rule bars discrimination in favor of Christian institutions (or religious institutions generally) no less than discrimination against them. By requiring inclusion of both religious and secular schools in state-funded voucher programs for private institutions, the court empowers parents to choose schools in accord with their values and minimizes the risk that anyone will be forced into an institution that is inimical to their beliefs,” Somin writes. He adds that “broadly inclusive school choice programs” can reduce the risk of discrimination that racial, ethnic, and religious minorities have historically faced from state public education systems.

Congregations put reparation programs in place ahead of government

“Weary of waiting for the federal government to take action on reparations for black Americans, a growing number of churches and other faith groups have started reparation programs of their own,” writes Julia Duin in *Newsweek* (July 31). The debate over granting reparations for slavery and discrimination against African Americans has been a longstanding one, though mostly



Source: Tyler Merbler | Flickr.

focused on government entities making payments. The Lutheran congregation, Salt House Church, located in the Seattle suburb of Kirkland, is one of the first churches to inaugurate a reparations program. “The program entails dedicating one percent of the church’s budget—roughly \$6,000—to reparations efforts as well as encouraging parishioners to donate for a reparations fund that distributes money through lotteries held twice a year—on Juneteenth and in December. Applicants can use the money for anything they need,” Duin writes. The church’s pastor, Ryan Marsh, preaches that “the white American church has always been complicit in the evils of white supremacy” and needs to engage in “both repentance and repair.” Marsh and Salt House have been influenced by author Jemar Tisby, who argues that Christian churches helped create slavery and thus in their histories and theology are complicit in racism.

Another prominent reparations church is Memorial Episcopal Church in Baltimore, which voted in 2021 to give five \$100,000 grants over a five-year period to a reparations fund. The money will go toward criminal justice reform, affordable housing, safe drinking water, more urban green

spaces, local schools, and more jobs for black youth. After the George Floyd protests in 2020, several religious groups gave grants to redress racial discrimination. The Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States announced it would raise \$100 million to benefit the descendants of slaves, while several Episcopal dioceses announced grants for millions of dollars. Duin finds that some organizations keep their reparations in-house. The Northwest Washington Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has set up a reparations fund for retired black ELCA clergy. Other reparations efforts, such as in Evanston, Illinois, are funneled through city programs where ecumenical groups contribute to a common fund. Most of the churches Duin profiles are from mainline Protestant and liberal denominations, although she finds that evangelicals are also beginning to take up the cause. She reports on the Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, which plans to send 1 percent of the church's budget, or about \$10,000, to organizations supporting better education, housing, and job opportunities for blacks.

Catholic schools enmeshed in gender, racial conflicts

Once seen as a refuge from political conflict and pandemic closures, Catholic schools are in the “midst of their own internal struggles of whether to wade into cultural touchstone debates or hold firm to religious teachings,” writes Jeremiah Poff in the conservative *Washington Examiner* (July 13). The controversies over “wokeness” that are shaking secular institutions are also being felt in Catholic schools. An example

of this could be seen in the actions of Bishop Robert McManus, the prelate of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Worcester, Massachusetts, who barred the Jesuit Nativity School in his diocese from identifying as a Catholic school because it persisted in flying the gay pride and Black Lives Matter flags on school grounds. Patrick Reilly, of the conservative Catholic education watchdog group the Cardinal Newman Society, said it is “rare for a Catholic bishop to publicly criticize a Catholic school, and it usually arises because the school first made the conflict public, not the



Source: Catholic Elementary Schools of Long Island.

bishop.” The case is an example of how the “surrounding culture finds its way into Catholic schools, through the students or through the teachers,” especially on the hot button issues of gender and race. Mary Miller, an activist with Parents Defending Education, noted that during the summer of 2020, following the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, “many Catholic schools reacted similarly to public schools” in apologizing for systemic racism and promising to “fully embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion... We’re hearing changing policies from boards of trustees, the curriculum is a lot more focused on identity...”

There is also more support for after-school clubs like the Gender Sexuality Alliance, where gatherings may be billed as community celebrations. At one of these celebrations at Carondelet High School in California, an all-girls Catholic school, students were given the opportunity to make pronoun buttons at a craft table and listen to a presentation on the various pride flags denoting different gender identities. Speaking of the cultural state of Catholic schools, Sister Dale McDonald, the vice president of public policy at the National Catholic Education Association, said that the nation’s Catholic schools have more effectively weathered the cultural controversies engulfing their public counterparts by “trying to be true to our mission [and] by promoting harmony among all in the school.” She acknowledged that there have been “a couple of schools where there’s been some controversy about [critical race theory],” but thought that most Catholic schools have been trying “to avoid the political jargon that polarizes people.” She added that Catholic schools experienced a bump in enrollment last year due to their push to offer in-person instruction while many public schools remained closed and were experiencing budding controversies over curriculums. “Parents who never knew what we were about, they came, they saw it, and they liked it,” McDonald said, “and I think that’s how we have weathered some of those controversies... we have a commitment to our mission.”

Evangelical colleges targeted by their own LGBTQ alumni groups

Alumni groups are playing a significant role in challenging evangelical colleges’ and universities’ stances on LGBTQ issues, writes Liam Knox in *Inside Higher Ed* (July 14). Some of the most prominent evangelical colleges have influential LGBTQ alumni groups aiming to reform their institutions according to their agendas, writes Knox. Among the most prominent is OneWheaton, whose main goal is to help LGBTQ students currently enrolled at the flagship evangelical Wheaton College by “advocating for more accepting policies at the college and supporting unofficial student groups and activists’ efforts on campus.” That agenda is seen as more pressing than ever as the number of out-of-the-closet LGBTQ students at Christian institutions is said to be growing. A survey conducted by the Religious Exemption Accountability Project and College Pulse last year found that 11 percent of students attending Christian colleges identified as non-heterosexual, 22 percent had experienced same-sex attraction, and 2 percent identified as gender nonconforming. Although they were an oddity at Christian colleges 15 years ago, since the late 2000s there has been a proliferation of LGBTQ alumni groups, ranging from



Source: Ms. Magazine.

loosely organized Facebook groups like Messiah University's Inclusive Alums to full-fledged nonprofits like Brigham Young University's the OUT Foundation. Sociologist Jonathan Coley says the growth of these groups is correlated with a rise in LGBTQ student activism at Christian colleges in the wake of the legalization of gay marriage on the state and national levels.

Coley himself founded an unofficial LGBTQ student group while attending Samford University, a Baptist institution, and is now on the Board of Directors of a newly formed LGBTQ alumni group, Safe Samford. In the past decade, several Christian institutions have adopted permissive policies toward LGBTQ students and even allowed official student groups on campus. Coley adds that more than 60 percent of Christian institutions include same-sex-attracted students in their nondiscrimination policies, and around 50 percent include gender-nonconforming students. But another 28 percent still have what Coley calls "clear discriminatory language" in their codes of conduct and have moved in more restrictive directions in contrast to societal trends. For instance, students expressing support for same-sex marriage can be expelled from their schools. Coley said student and alumni groups serve as a counterweight to the influence of anti-LGBTQ alumni, donors and even university officials, or can even serve as a go-between for LGBTQ students and administrators. Some LGBTQ alumni groups go beyond seeking to make their alma mater more accepting. The OUT Foundation, the nonprofit founded by alumni of Brigham Young University, focuses less on changing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints than on supporting LGBTQ students and their organizations on campus.

(*Inside Higher Ed*, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/07/14/christian-college-alums-show-support-lgbtq-students>)

“Double-lifers” influencing ultra-Orthodox communities

On the margins of ultra-Orthodox Judaism, an underground community made up of exiters and “double-lifers,” those secretly distancing themselves from the religious community, is contributing to changes within ultra-Orthodoxy, writes Jessica Roda (Georgetown University) in an article in French published in the *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* (April–June). The author stresses that while there is a tendency in the media to portray people as being either inside or outside, field observations on this underground suggest a more complex approach in how people deal with religious norms. The expression “off the *derech*” (the Hebrew word *derech* meaning “path”) describes former Orthodox Jews who have embraced



Source: Jennifer Lisa | Flickr.

another way of life. But there is also an apparently significant population of double-lifers who transgress their religion’s norms more or less secretly and explore life in the outside world. Some of Roda’s informants completely rejected ultra-Orthodox religious practices while others kept some of them and rejected others. These double-lifers are “inside dissidents,” and some of them interact first online and then in person. This should be put into the context of internal diversity, increasing relations with the secular society, and changes within ultra-Orthodox communities.

The internet, especially social media, plays a major role for the underground community by offering a kind of public space protecting anonymity and allowing free expression. While internet access is needed by the ultra-Orthodox community for economic reasons, it also threatens the enclave. Thus, religious authorities have attempted to regulate and control its uses (with filters, etc.), which has led to the development of practices for bypassing control. It is not uncommon for young ultra-Orthodox Jews to have both a filtered smartphone and another unfiltered one. Moreover, some people are participants in the underground while also interacting with the religious mainstream, thus being able to influence behaviors or challenge religious authorities on specific issues. Roda shows how an underground figure was able to do so in Washington, DC, in discussions about how to cope with the pandemic in March 2020. She argues that the underground community should not be seen as strictly separate but rather as a part of the ultra-Orthodox community, with double-lifers navigating between two worlds and some rabbis showing a willingness to push limits and adjust some practices.

(*Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, <https://journals.openedition.org/assr/>)

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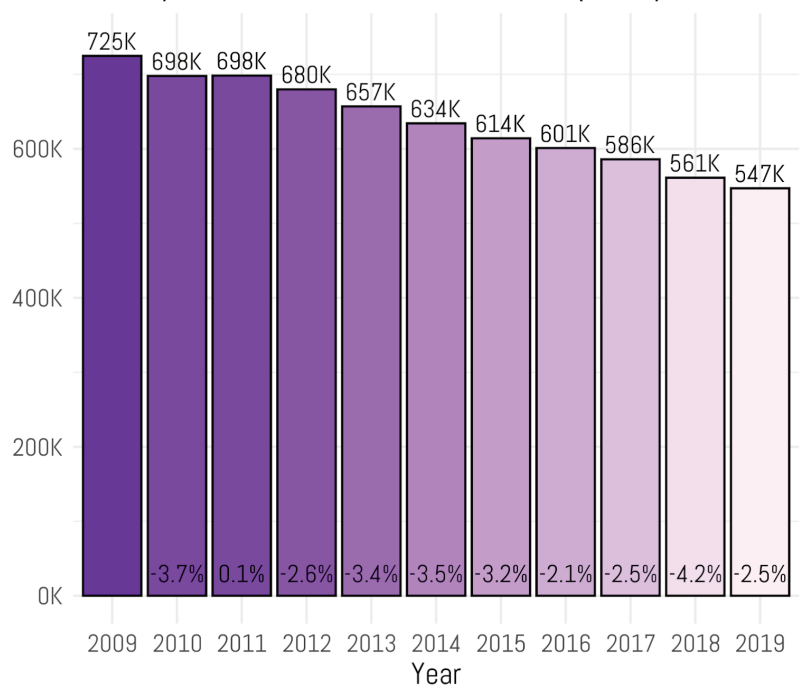
● **The pandemic and other factors have led to dire forecasts about churches, not the least being the Episcopal Church.** Writing in the blog *Religion in Public* (July 15), Ryan Burge notes that the Episcopal Church's long decline in attendance seemed to have leveled off at about 550,000 shortly before the pandemic. Since then, however, the church has been hit hard by a more intense wave of church dropouts, with average attendance dipping by about 60,000 between 2019 and 2020, a decrease of almost 12 percent in a single year. This means that the church has dropped by one-third between 2000 and 2020. Accompanying this drop in attendance,

there was a noticeable reduction in offerings and pledges between 2019 and 2020, indicating that donations are not keeping pace with inflation. Other indicators, including marriages, baptisms, burials, and confirmations, are also in serious free fall. While it could be argued that these declines were natural given the church shutdowns in 2020, Burge finds that right before the pandemic, in 2019, there were only 17,713 baptisms—a nearly 50 percent decline from 2013, when Episcopal dioceses had conducted 33,000 baptisms. Before the

pandemic, the church had already lost 30 percent of confirmations. More ominously, in 2019, there were more burials than baptisms and weddings. Burge cautions that the figures to be released for 2022 may well rebound to 2019 levels, and it will be important to find out which activities will come back the fastest or slowest.

● **Although media and scholars increasingly refer to the U.S. as becoming a secularized country, recent surveys of the non-affiliated or “nones” reveal less rejection of religion and more nuance as to spiritual and even religious beliefs.** In a study published in the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* (18:7), Jeff Levin, Matt Bradshaw, Byron Johnson, and Rodney Stark point out that while there obviously have been a growing number of Americans claiming no religious affiliation in most surveys, it is not clear that this has meant

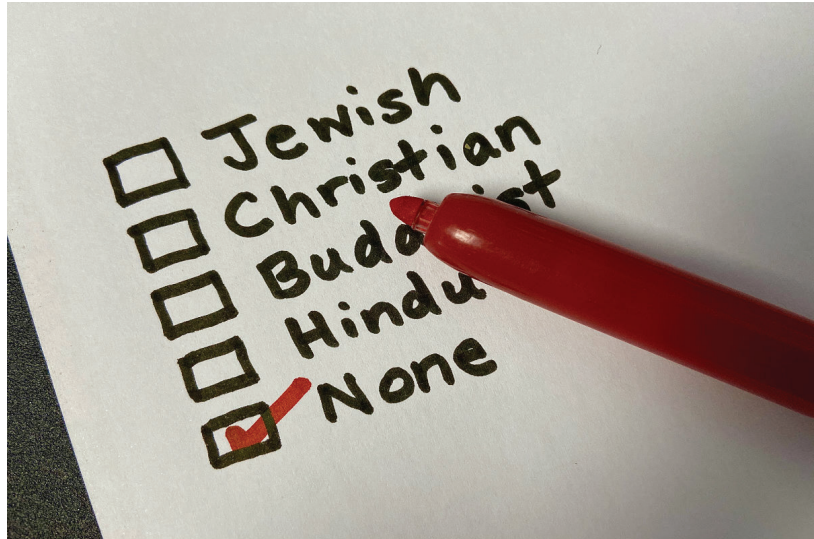
Sunday Church Attendance for the Episcopalians



@ryanburge

Data: <https://www.generalconvention.org/parochialreportresults>

rapidly growing non-belief. The researchers reviewed five recent population surveys: the 2018 General Social Survey (GSS), 2017 Values and Beliefs of the American Public survey, 2012 Portrait of American Life Study, 2020 World Values Survey, and the 2018 Chapman University Survey of American Fears. They highlight the GSS findings on atheists and agnostics, where significant percentages were found to have

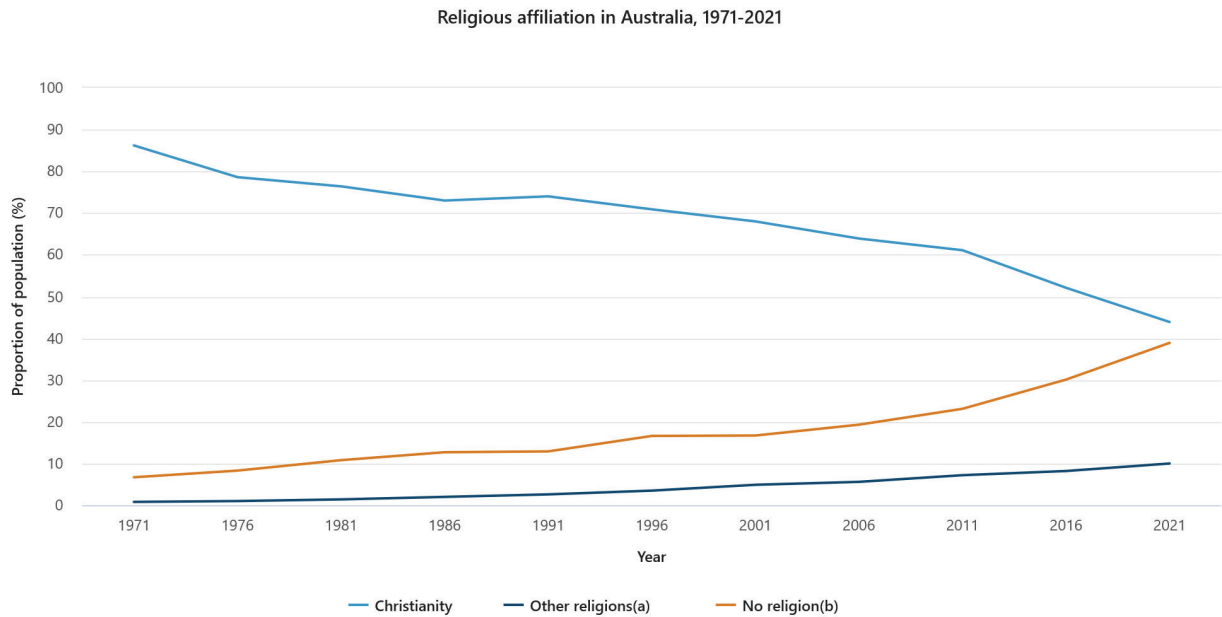


attended religious services at least once a month (6.42 percent of atheists and 27.4 percent of agnostics), prayed at least once a week (12.84 percent of atheists and 58.07 percent of agnostics), and believed in life after death (19.23 percent of atheists and 75 percent of agnostics).

The other surveys confirmed these findings to some degree, also showing that a segment of atheists and agnostics meditated, reported that religion and spirituality were important, and believed in miracles. If atheists and agnostics report some religious and spiritual beliefs and activities, then the broad group of “nones” includes even more diversity of beliefs. The researchers argue that media and intellectual elites have fastened on to the idea of religious decline because they tend to identify with mainline Protestantism and apply the long-term declines in this segment of American religion to religion in general. Levin, Bradshaw, Johnson, and Stark conclude that while it may indeed be the case that religiosity is declining, the jury is still out on whether the rise of the nones is a conclusive sign of such a decline.

(Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion, <https://www.religjournal.com/>)

● **While almost 10 million Australians reported having no religion in the census of 2021, and there were one million fewer Christians than in the 2016 census, a new analysis finds that Christianity remains the most common religion in the country (43.9 percent), with non-denominational Christians and Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Christians slightly on the rise.** The detailed analysis released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (July 4) finds that migration continues to contribute to shaping Australia’s religious profile: 29.1 percent of migrants who arrived since the previous census were Christian, while 39.9 percent were affiliated with other religions and 28.6 percent claimed no religious affiliation. Although a small group, a striking example of the role of migration in religious change is the religion with the highest proportional growth since the last census—Yezidis fleeing persecution in the Middle East, who



(a) Comprises Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Other Religions.
 (b) Secular Beliefs and Other Spiritual Beliefs and No Religious Affiliation.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Religious affiliation in Australia 4/07/2022

benefitted from Australia's Humanitarian Program focusing on that population. The number of Yezidis in Australia increased from 63 people in 2016 to 4,123 in 2021.

It is also thanks to immigration from Southeast Asia and South America that the decrease of Catholicism has been slowed (although the church still lost 215,000 people). On the other hand (as indicated in the June issue of **RW**), Anglicanism is declining at a fast pace. "From 2016 to 2021, Anglican affiliation had the largest drop in number of all religious denominations—from 3.1 million to 2.5 million people. This was a decrease of nearly one in five Anglicans, from 13.3 percent to 9.8 percent of the population." The Uniting Church, Presbyterian and Reformed, and Lutheran denominations have also been declining, as well as Pentecostals (although more modestly, with a loss of 4,700 people). As mentioned, Eastern Christian churches have all been increasing, with the Greek Orthodox being the largest of them and accounting for 1.5 percent of Australians in 2021. The decrease in Christian affiliation has been most marked among young adults (18–25 years). The bureau notes that most of the responses in the broad category, "Secular Beliefs and Other Spiritual Beliefs and No Religious Affiliation," were in the sub-category "No religion," with about 9.77 million responses. Only 37,800 people chose atheism, 31,680 selected agnosticism, and 2,190 opted for humanism, suggesting that the prospects for a growth of "organized non-religion" look rather low.

(Religious affiliation in Australia: Exploration of the changes in reported religion in the 2021 Census, <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia#understanding-religious-affiliation>)

● **More than 200 religious buildings have been damaged or completely destroyed in Ukraine since Russia invaded the country, according to a report in *Bitter Winter* (July 18).** This count was conducted as part of a project called “Religion on Fire,” launched by the Workshop for the Academic Study of Religions and supported by the Congress of National Communities of Ukraine. The project is aimed at recording and documenting war crimes committed by Russian troops that involve destroying or damaging religious buildings and kidnapping or killing religious leaders in Ukraine. Among the damaged buildings are Christian churches and prayer houses, synagogues and Holocaust memorials (in particular, the Babyn Yar memorial complex in Kyiv), mosques, and buildings of various religious minorities. Many religious buildings have come under fire several times. Ruslan Khalikov writes that most of the damaged or destroyed religious buildings belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) of the Moscow Patriarchate, with about 110 damaged buildings. “That is, even belonging to Russian Orthodoxy cannot guarantee the inviolability of either the church building or the community.”

Although there are currently no official investigation results in most of the cases, Khalikov writes that “we can reasonably claim that some of the attacks on religious buildings were deliberate due to published testimonies of eyewitnesses who have seen that a specific religious building has been targeted with large-caliber machine guns or other weapons.” The fact that a church was shot at with a machine gun, especially at close range, also indicates that the church was the target. Khalikov concludes that Russia’s aggression against Ukraine aims, among other things, at establishing an “authoritarian, exclusivist approach to religious freedom, which is



Source: Ukrinform.

prevailing in the Russian Federation...This approach is completely different from the religious pluralism existing in Ukraine, which might be lost if Ukrainian territory finds itself, at least temporarily, under Russian occupation.”

(*Bitter Winter*, <https://bitterwinter.org/200-religious-buildings-destroyed-or-damaged-by-the-russians-in-ukraine/>)

Priests become prominent in Ukrainian Orthodox Church’s march towards independence

While most bishops have tended to be cautious regarding the issue of their connections with the Moscow Patriarchate, priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) have been the driving force behind the church’s recent move towards affirming independence from Russian supervision, writes Andriy Fert (National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy) in *Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West* (July). The author notes, however, that only a minority of clergy would be willing to unite at this point with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which received its autocephalous status from the Patriarch of Constantinople in 2019. The UOC had insisted for years that it wanted to stay away from politics, but the war made it more difficult to support the continuation of a “spiritual unity” with Moscow. Priests took the initiative in asking



Source: Orthodox Christianity.

to suspend the commemoration of Patriarch Kirill, and more than 400 of them—without consulting their bishops—went as far as signing a petition to leaders of Orthodox churches around the world asking them to accuse Patriarch Kirill of heresy. According to Fert, the war has opened the way to a new assertiveness by priests in relation to bishops. This has created alarm among hierarchs and may explain how swiftly the May assembly of the UOC moved toward an affirmation of its independence while refraining from using the word “autocephaly.”

Nevertheless, most priests remain reluctant to join ranks with the OCU for a variety of reasons. Due to years of conflict between their respective organizations, they feel that the OCU remains hostile to them and see any reunion as being a sheer capitulation of the UOC and victory for the OCU. Painful experiences of parishes being pressured to join the OCU also play a role. They also stress that loyalty to Ukraine does not permit them to ignore canonical order. While most bishops had opted to select clergy to be sent to the May assembly in order to keep control, the UOC leader, Metropolitan Onuphry, surprised many by choosing to open the assembly with a presentation of letters from priests asking for a break with Moscow. This finally led bishops to accept a statement about an independent and self-administered church. Since each community is directly facing the consequences of war, the role of priests in dealing with that situation is becoming more important. Meanwhile, the Catholic newsletter *The Pillar* (August 1) reports that UOC priests are also taking the lead in ecumenical efforts with the OCU. “In a hall at the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Kyiv, a symbolic place for all Ukrainian Christians, 21 Orthodox priests sat down July 5 to talk—11 of the OCU and 10 of the UOC-MP. That kind of dialogue among the Orthodox Churches of Ukraine is rare.” The priests discussed local pastoral issues, but also raised questions about the relationship between churches. While participants called on hierarchs of both churches “to begin an official dialogue,” the UOC-MP immediately distanced itself from its priests who took part.

(*Religion und Gesellschaft in Ost und West*, Institut G2W, Bederstrasse 76, 8002 Zürich, Switzerland - <https://g2w.eu>; *The Pillar*, <https://www.pillarcatholic.com/p/in-ukraine-local-priests-dialogue>)

Micro pilgrimages progress in post-Covid landscape

The growth in the numbers of people making pilgrimages, including both devout and unchurched seekers, shows no signs of letting up, but since Covid “micro pilgrimages” are becoming more popular, writes Anne Bailey in the open-access journal *Religions* (July 20). A micro or “mini” pilgrimage usually can be completed in one day or less and is particularly popular in the UK; in the spring of 2022, six micro pilgrimages took place in southern England. In the wake of Covid, even Pope Francis talked about undertaking micro pilgrimages. The idea was to avoid the outbreaks of mass gatherings while still maintaining some collective rituals and group activities. During the pandemic, many people also ceased long-distance travel and took walks in their own



Source: Ways to Grow in God.

natural habitats and surrounding areas, while others undertook virtual pilgrimages. Engaging in “mindfulness” while walking—a key concept in making pilgrimages—became both a therapeutic and spiritual practice for many during the pandemic. With the absence of tour groups, the pilgrimage and tourist industries have also been amenable to the idea of micro pilgrimages. Outside of the UK, the prominent Catholic pilgrimage site of Lourdes offered a paired down version of the practice called “Pilgrim for the Day.”

But Bailey writes that micro pilgrimages are not really a new phenomenon. While long and arduous pilgrimages became famous, even in the Middle Ages shorter trips to more local sites, often offering healing and veneration of relics, were popular and drew considerable devotion. Protestants and New Age proponents have tended to favor walking pilgrimages (rather than pilgrimages to a sacred site) and may be the forerunners of the micro walking pilgrimage. Bailey concludes that the pandemic has made micro pilgrimages a practice that will endure past the health crisis since it is seen as spiritually beneficial to pilgrims from both religious and non-religious backgrounds. Another article appearing in *Religions* (June 7) looks at a famously long pilgrimage, the Way of St. James in Spain, and finds that Covid has also brought changes to that centuries-old practice. Piotr Roszak and Tomasz Huzarek write that health regulations and the psychological effects of the pandemic changed both the hosts and pilgrims on the “Camino” (or

“way”) in ways that will have a long-term impact. The authors note that pandemics have occurred before on the Camino de Santiago, but Covid public health precautions have made the safety and health of pilgrims (such as in places of accommodation) more prominent. The concern over spreading the virus promoted greater isolation and individualism among pilgrims, who focused on private spiritual exercises over the longstanding communal aspects of the pilgrimage, including liturgical devotions (such as Masses) on the Camino. But Roszak and Huzarek conclude that the pandemic may have created a “new kind of asceticism,” with pilgrims making an effort to regain the sense of community and relationships that have been an historic part of the Camino.

(*Religions*, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/7/665>)

Radical environmental activists in France seek bridges with spirituality

Known for its use of civil disobedience to alert the public about climate change and other threats to the environment, the French section of Extinction Rebellion (abbreviated XR) launched a spiritual branch (XR Spi) three months ago, which in July met with some Christian groups sharing its concerns, reports Weilian Zhu in *La Vie* (July 28). Launched in 2018 in the UK, XR has become a prominent activist group on issues of climate change in Europe. Influenced by the ideas of deep ecology, one of its 10 principles encourages the building of “regenerative cultures to save ourselves from the insanity of a self-destructive civilization.” Supporting positive changes “can include ceremony and prayer (in ways that are not dogmatic) to find inspiration from things bigger than ourselves.” XR has also been interacting with faith-based groups and individuals in the UK.

A group called Christian Climate Action has been working closely with XR since



Source: *Le Monde*.

2018, and there are also XR Muslims. Attending XR gatherings in the UK a few years ago, Stefan Skrimshire (University of Leeds) had observed that “the presence of religious ‘affinity groups,’ organized talks by religious leaders, and rituals and ceremonies were more prominent in this movement than in any [he had] previously witnessed” (*Open Democracy*, May 12, 2019). In France, this kind of engagement is unusual in leading environmental activist organizations, and the July gathering was met with a flood of negative comments on the Twitter account of XR France, with suspicions that XR was turning into a “cult.” According to members of XR Spi who spoke to Zhu, more emphasis should be given to self-transformation as a way to balance activism and eco-anxiety and go beyond a materialist worldview. They emphasized that religious traditions offer a wide range of supportive resources that could address a spiritual emptiness among activists. The activists are looking for ways of proceeding that would take into account both the need for spirituality and the French secular framework.

(*La Vie*, <https://www.lavie.fr/actualite/ecologie/quand-extinction-rebellion-souvre-a-la-spiritualite-83587.php>; *XR Regenerative Cultures*, <https://xr-regenerativecultures.org/>; *Christian Climate Action*, <https://christianclimateaction.org/>)

Japan’s wedding churches seek religious legitimacy

The proliferation of “wedding churches” in Japan is leading to a unique form of Japanese Christianity that is long on ritual and short on belief, according to an article in the *Journal of Religion in Japan* (online in July). For decades there has been a large Japanese demand for Western-style church weddings, usually in hotels and other neutral settings and mainly as a commercial and secular enterprise. But, as Jesse LeFebvre writes, wedding promoters and participants are increasingly seeking religious legitimacy for these ceremonies and their settings. While little actual Christian belief may be found among the participants in these ceremonies, they are taking on increasing Christian content. Specifically designed wedding churches are now more popular than wedding venues in hotels. LeFebvre cites research on a rapidly growing number of freestanding wedding churches that have appeared in the last decade and how they often rival established churches in their architectural splendor. The majority of churches are built in the Western classical and gothic architectural styles. “The bridal industry is building gothic-style churches at scale and in numbers that Catholic and Protestant churches in Japan could probably never afford or justify, at the same time that churches are being deconsecrated, repurposed, sold, or torn down in other countries,” he writes. There are at least 1,285 locations for Christian weddings, many centrally located. Now wedding chapels are replacing Shinto shrines which were located on the top of department store buildings.

Without knowing much Christian doctrine or history, Japanese authorities have learned to verify the religious authenticity of these churches, requiring licenses for Christian ministers and issuing other requirements that often involve religious factors. One bridal corporation, known as Ai



Source: Hideyuki Kamon | Flickr.

Group, is affiliated with World Wide Fellowship, which includes such prominent churches as St. Paul's Cathedral in London, Westminster Abbey, and St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. Denominational affiliation is less important than claims of legitimization through famous church leaders, such as one church claiming that it was blessed by the pope. The use of relics is also included in this quest for Christian authenticity, with some churches claiming to have relics from St. Valentine and the seventh century's Saint Hubert. Other churches have full-time ministers and conduct other services besides weddings, such as lectures on the Bible, marriage seminars, and Christmas Masses. LeFebvre writes that this further Christianization confirms that the wedding church phenomenon concerns more than commercial replicas and props. He concludes that in "postwar Japan, wedding ceremonies have arguably become more and not less religious as the Shinto ceremony, and now the Christian ceremony have come to replace older communal celebrations...New Christian organizations have emerged to supply the ritual specialists essential to the performance of this Christian rite...In nonreligious Japan, religion not only retains its value; in fact, the demand for it ensures that it will continue to create lucrative opportunities for those who have been able to meet people's religious needs in ways that are perceived as acceptable and can be experienced as authentic, regardless of the legal categorization of venue."

(*Journal of Religion in Japan*, <https://brill.com/view/journals/jrj/jrj-overview.xml>)

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

1) The **Catholic Land Movement** is being revived after almost a century as some Catholics work to reclaim traditional European farming methods and ways of life. During a time of food crises and shortages, the effort is motivated by a desire for more autonomy in the way participants feed and provide for their families, physically as well as spiritually. Unlike the early-20th-century Catholic Land Associations, which arose in interwar Britain to combat what its adherents saw as the growing social isolation of industrial Europe, today's movement is "distinctly 21st century, with methods and interests that align in surprising ways with more progressive causes." Michael Guidice, known online as Michael Thomas of Sharon, tweets about homesteading in upstate New York, conservative politics, and the benefits of a return to the land, and is planning a Catholic Land Conference in August in Sharon Springs, New York.



Source: *Catholic Rural Life*.

The village is described as "an emerging traditional Catholic community" located "25 miles from a TLM" (traditional Latin Mass church). Guidice said he sees an increasing interest among Catholics in family farming, self-sufficiency, and raising animals, even if they are not aware of the Catholic Land Movement. Echoing Guidice, religion scholar William Dinges sees a groundswell of interest in ecology from Catholics across the ideological spectrum. "Whatever's going on with the new Catholic Land Movement," he said, "I could assure you that there are many Catholics who are strong advocates for ecology, environment, strong supporters of [the encyclical] *Laudato Si'*, who would be more progressive, if you will. This is not a right-wing phenomenon at all." (Source: *Tablet*, July 12)

2) **Apolloism** is the latest turn that the far right is taking in religion, in this strain pressing for a masculine spirituality shaped by Greco-Roman Neopaganism. The phenomenon is largely growing online and appeals to the anxieties of young males, often gamers, although it can take political expressions. Proponents of Greco-Roman religion tend to see religion as a myth for affirming masculine energies and white and Nordic racial identity. The unofficial leader, known by the pseudonym "Brahmin," sees Apolloism as succeeding the alt-right and other far right movements of the twentieth century, although he is closely associated with Richard Spencer, founder of the alt-right. Although Apolloism shares the

same followers, they gravitate to different groups and leaders. Another influential figure for Apolloism is “B.A.P.” (“Bronze Age Pervert”), who has been admired and featured in more mainstream conservative circles, such as the Trumpian Claremont Institute. That may be because B.A.P. has not eschewed Christianity as has Brahmin, even saying that he is a “disciple of Muscular Christianity.” Brahmin and other alt-right and neo-Pagan proponents often castigate Christianity for its universalist and ethnic inclusiveness. Apolloism is more than a digital religion, as Brahmin physically gathers followers in a “Broderbund” or brotherhoods, where they practice Greco-Roman rituals, engage in initiations, and create masculine solidarity. Apolloism has a small but growing following, but it may have its most influence through its political ideas, such as hostility to immigrants and opposition to liberal democratic and interventionist policies. Although Brahmin and others have sought to join ranks with other Neopagans, these overtures have been rebuffed. (Source: *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, Spring)



3) **Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin**, the chairman of the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia, has become a prominent spokesman and apologist for Vladimir Putin and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, using extremist rhetoric about the West and Ukraine similar to that found in some quarters of Russian Orthodoxy. On the occasion of the Eid al-Adha holiday, he prayed for the Muslim and non-Muslim soldiers involved in the “special military operation” in Ukraine, saying, “We are proud of our vast Motherland and worthy national leader, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.” The Mufti added that the Western nations are “minions of the Antichrist and the Dajjal” (the Islamic equivalent of the Antichrist) as proved by their “arrogance, extremism and terrorism.” He spoke of Ukrainians as carriers of the “brown plague,” Nazism, who should be stopped before they spread it to Russia. Tadzhuiddin is part of a network of “state Muftis” loyal to Putin that share the rhetoric of extremist Orthodox leaders. Speaking of gay pride parades, Tadzhuiddin said that, “representatives of sexual minorities can do whatever they want, only at home or somewhere in a secluded place in the dark. If they still go out into the street, then they should only be flogged. All normal people would do it...gay people have no rights... To be gay is a crime against God. The Prophet Muhammad ordered the killing of homosexuals.” (Source: *Bitter Winter*, July 21)

