

End-times thinking flourishes despite evangelical political victories

Judging by the number of new books and social media posts, there has been a surge of belief and discourse concerning the “end-times,” writes Molly Olmstead in the online magazine *Slate* (October 6). She cites *Publishers Weekly* reports on the increasing reader demand for end-times topics, usually centered around interpreting current events like the pandemic, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and climate change. The rising interest in the end-times, mainly among evangelical and especially Pentecostal Christians, is odd, Olmstead adds, given the recent successes of evangelical activism as reflected in court decisions on abortion and the Republican Party platform’s friendliness to the Christian Right. The new books and “survival guides” to the end-times espouse premillennial and pretribulation teachings, stressing an imminent rapture—even as prominent Christian Right leaders are said to be “post-millennial,” teaching Christian dominion in the nation if not the world. Most of the books and the people interviewed in Olmstead’s article, such as Tommy Ice of the Pre-Trib Research Center, cite America’s decline as a Christian country and the growth of secularism as the main triggers of the end-times, with some also pointing to what they see as the stolen election of 2020. Belief in conspiracy theories such as those associated with QAnon, with their invocation of Satanic influences and hints of a prophetic figure sometimes identified with Donald Trump, has also led to apocalyptic thinking inside and outside of evangelical churches.

Observers cite the influence of Trump’s presidency, particularly the way his rhetoric about the “deep state” and the European Union (which many prophetic leaders regard as the launching ground for the antichrist) mapped onto longtime evangelical beliefs about the end-times. Olmstead writes that the dissonance between end-times thinking and what is called “Christian nationalism,” with its call for worldly activism to restore America’s Christian identity, may be reconciled in the belief among many evangelicals and charismatics that they are called to help delay judgment by engaging in evangelism and restoring morality in the country. But the most popular prophecy books display a pessimism about humanity, portraying a secularist and corrupt elite taking control of technology, governance, and public health (as was allegedly evident in the pandemic) to persecute believers and take control of the world. Political scientist Paul Djupe



Source: Heidi Levine, The GroundTruth Project.

says that he sees less crafting of complex theological interpretations tied to end-times thinking and more emphasis on apocalyptic beliefs present in society in general, such as that believers will be deprived of their religious freedom.

(*Slate*, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/10/rapture-apocalypse-books-christian-publishing-trump-qanon.html?>)

Generational change driving collaborative turn in Vineyard churches

As younger generations take charge, the Vineyard church, once known for its emphasis on “signs and wonders” and the entrepreneurial style of its pastors, is shifting to a worship and leadership style characterized by democratic participation and collaboration, writes Daniel Silliman in *Christianity Today* (October). Since the 1970s, Vineyard churches have been seen as the leading edge of the charismatic movement, known for their entrepreneurial and spontaneous style stressing miracles and healing. But with its baby boomers retiring, a new generation of more ethnically diverse and female clergy are taking over and stressing a more democratic style of leadership. “They’re more committed to collaboration, more interested in consensus, and more invested in team,” Silliman writes. “They go slow. They do a lot of listening. Compared to their predecessors, they’re less focused on making decisions and being decisive. They think being a



Source: Vineyard Church.

good leader means managing anxiety, holding it to create space for the Christian community to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit.”

Some of this change is related to a wave of clergy abuse cases and claims, which has pushed the younger generations away from the idea that the pastor should be the decider. But the change to a model focused on equipping lay people to share in congregational leadership is running up against an entrenched tradition of strong pastoral authority. “I regularly feel like people just want me to tell them what to do,” one young pastor complains. “We have churches full of people who are just keen to be told what to do. I’m more interested in people doing the work and wrestling with what Christlikeness looks like.” On the other hand, the new emphasis on deliberation and the challenge to traditional pastoral leadership have led some Vineyard church members to become frustrated with pastors being “overly cautious, risk averse, and not bold enough to lead a megachurch in the Vineyard tradition, where leaders just do stuff.” The collaborative turn is even changing Vineyard church architecture and design. Ted Kim, new pastor of the Vineyard church in Evanston, Illinois, is removing the stage from the front of the sanctuary and putting it in the middle of the space, with seats arranged in a circle around it to permit members to see each other and participate more in worship. The stage would also be lower, just a few inches above the ground, to reduce the elevation of the clergy that symbolizes its authority and power

(*Christianity Today*, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60187)

Anti-Catholicism a silent but growing problem in Canada

While the Catholic Church in Canada has experienced a sharp growth in hate crimes directed against it, Canadian politicians and the country’s media have been largely silent about this trend,



Catholic church in Nelson vandalized on Canada Day (source: *Cranbrook Daily Townsman*).

writes Douglas Todd in the *Vancouver Sun* (October 13). Citing a Statistics Canada finding that there has been a significant increase in hate crimes against Catholics, Todd adds that, “for puzzling reasons, neither politicians nor most media mentioned that, while hate crimes against Blacks went down by five per cent and up 16 per cent against Chinese and other East Asians, attacks on Catholics rose by far the most—by an astonishing 260 per cent.” The polling firm offered few reasons for the sharp increase, nor did it distinguish the severity of hate-crime incidents. Catholic media have speculated that the incidences of arson and vandalism are connected to announcements made in 2021 of the discovery of potential unmarked graves of indigenous residential-school students. Although much of the media storm over these alleged “mass graves” has been shown to be inaccurate, this coverage seemed to be the spark leading to the vandalizing and burning of numerous Catholic churches, many of which served First Nations or immigrant communities.

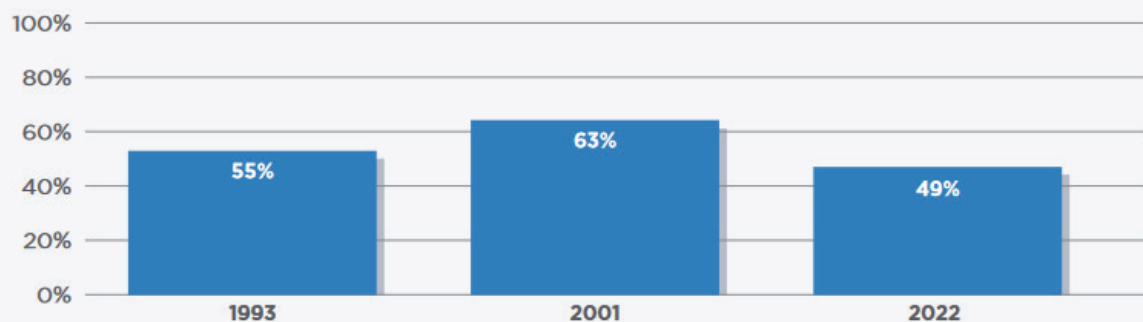
Todd adds that “arrests have been few. And the response from politicians has been, at best, muted. In some quarters, anti-colonial activists applauded the destruction, with people like Harsha Walia, head of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association before she resigned, tweeting, ‘Burn it all down.’” Some researchers are reporting that Catholics these days feel under more pressure than others to self-censor, including to protect their livelihoods. Todd cites sociologist Reginald Bibby, who has shown that 35 percent of all immigrants to Canada are Catholic and that “mega-

parishes” across Canada are often ethnic, led and attended by Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese, and Filipinos. Despite Catholicism’s ethnic diversity, the Angus Reid Institute found this year that Canadians were more likely to view the societal impact of Catholicism, as well as evangelical Christianity and Islam, as negative rather than positive. The survey found 31 percent of Canadians saying Catholicism has been damaging, while 26 percent said it has been a benefit to society (and another 32 percent said the faith has had “no real impact”). But for Sikhism, Buddhism, Protestantism, atheism, and especially Judaism, Canadians’ positive assessments outweighed their negative ones.

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **While priests and bishops in the United States overwhelmingly report that they are “flourishing” in ministry despite the pressures caused by two decades of clerical abuse scandals and church responses, a new survey also finds that priests’ relationships and attitudes to their bishops are problematic.** *The Pillar* (October 19), a Catholic newsletter, reports on the study, which found that while U.S. priests report high levels of personal well-being, “they also have a widespread lack of confidence and trust in their bishops...Priests reported that they are less likely to seek personal support from their bishop than they are from any other source, and said they believe bishops regard priests as ‘liabilities’ and ‘expendable.’” The survey, issued by The Catholic University of America’s department of sociology, in conjunction with The Catholic Project, a university institute founded to facilitate collaboration

Figure 2. Trust in diocesan bishops over time



Note: Graph shows percentages of diocesan priests who expressed a “a great deal” or “quite a lot” when asked “How much confidence do you, yourself, have in the decision-making and leadership of your diocesan bishop?” The question was replicated in the Survey of American Catholic Priests (1993), Survey of American Catholic Priests (2001), and National Survey of Catholic Priests (2022).

Diocesan priests report significantly lower levels of trust in their bishops than religious priests do in their major superiors. Trust in the US bishops as a whole is low among priests overall, with **only 24% expressing confidence in the leadership and decision-making of the bishops in general** (Figure 3).

between the Catholic Church's hierarchy and laity over the sex abuse crisis, compiled data from 3,500 priests across 191 U.S. dioceses, as well as surveying bishops.

The survey found that 77 percent of priests and 81 percent of bishops "can be categorized as 'flourishing.'" But it did also note high rates of stress among priests, with 45 percent reporting at least one symptom of burnout, and nearly 10 percent showing "severe" signs. Asked to rate their faith in their own diocesan bishop's leadership, fewer than half the priest respondents (49 percent) said they had "quite a lot" or "a great deal" of confidence in the bishop. As to whether they had high levels of trust in the bishops' leadership of the church as a whole, less than a quarter (24 percent) agreed. In interviews, priests described bishops as "imperious," "operating from hubris," and "consider[ing] themselves above the law."

(*The Pillar*, <https://www.pillarcatholic.com/us-priests-are-flourishing-but-dont-trust-their-bishops/>)

● **A new study finds that Canadian churches stricter in their beliefs and practices are more likely to embrace evangelistic behavior and attitudes, at the same time that such strict boundaries between insiders and outsiders in a congregation may limit members' evangelistic efforts.** The study, conducted by Joel Thiessen and Arch Chee Keen Wong and published in the journal *Studies in Religion* (online in October), is based on a survey of 9,100 Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant respondents from over 250 Canadian congregations, focusing on the levels of importance church members attach to evangelism as well as the frequency of their church attendance. Members of conservative Protestant churches



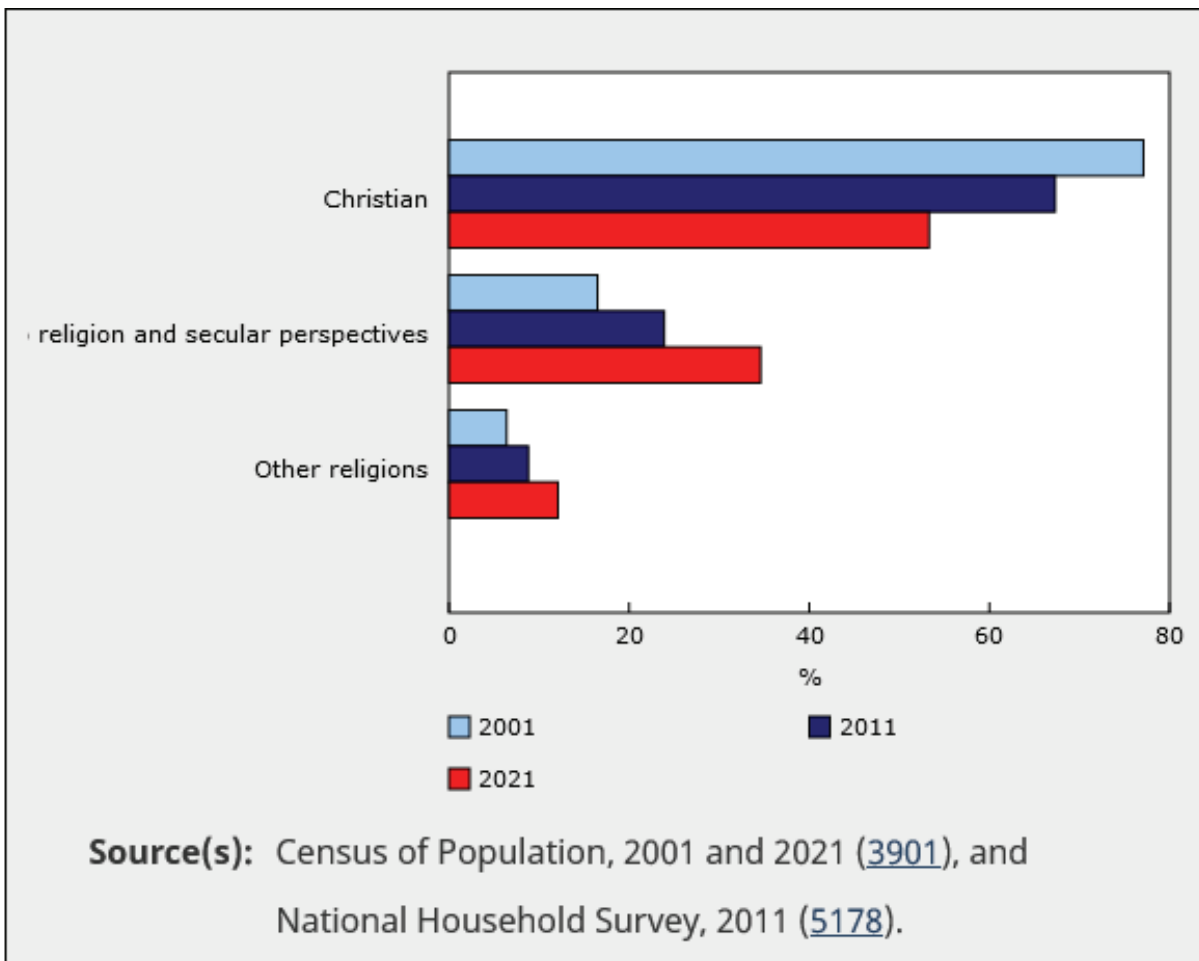
Source: The Gospel Coalition, 2018.

maintaining strict beliefs and practices were found to embrace evangelism to a greater degree than members of the other churches, as well as to be more regular attenders of church services. In one way, the findings confirm theories that strictness in beliefs and practices leads to greater efforts to evangelize.

Yet the conservative Protestant respondents more frequently reported their evangelistic efforts in terms of passive witnessing to the faith than active forms of evangelism (such as inviting people to attend church with them). Thiessen and Wong note that the conservative congregants were more likely to report “too few non-believers as friends,” and to view Canadian society as hostile to Christian values, admitting that their fear of rejection was a barrier to evangelism. Previous research has shown that evangelism is most effective when Christians introduce members of their social networks to the faith, so that the strictness and resulting lack of secular contacts could be a barrier to effective evangelism.

(*Studies in Religion*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sir>)

● **While rates of non-affiliation and non-Christian affiliation increased notably, Christian affiliation continued its downturn in Canada, according to the nation’s recent**



census. *Statistics Canada* (October 26) reports that in 2021, over 19.3 million people reported affiliation with a Christian religion, representing just over half (53.3 percent) of the Canadian population—a decrease from 67.3 percent in 2011 and 77.1 percent in 2001. With the exception of Orthodox Christians and those claiming just a “Christian” identity, the rate of affiliation for every Christian denomination decreased between 2011 and 2021. More than one-third of Canadians reported having no religious affiliation, a rate that has more than doubled in two decades, going from 16.5 percent in 2001 to 34.6 percent in 2021. The proportions of Canada’s Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh populations have more than doubled since 2001, increasing from 2 percent to 4.9 percent for Muslims, 1 percent to 2.3 percent for Hindus, and 0.9 percent to 2.1 percent for Sikhs.

(The Canadian census report from Statistics Canada can be downloaded from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm>)

● **The ties between believers and mainstream churches in Switzerland are becoming ever more fragile, making it easier for members to leave, with many Roman Catholics citing disagreements on various church positions as their first reason for departing,** In an article published in both German and French on the website of the *Swiss Pastoral Institute* (October 28), a Roman Catholic research center, psychologist and theologian Urs Winter-Pfändler reports that by late 2021, there were 2.96 million Roman Catholics and 1.96 million members of the Reformed Church in Switzerland. More than 34,000 people reportedly left the Catholic Church and more than 28,000 left the Reformed Church that same year, although the numbers are actually higher, since there is no formal procedure for leaving one’s church in several cantons, and thus no statistics. Detailed analyses show that 1.5 percent of Roman Catholics in Switzerland left the church in 2021, following a pattern observed in previous years, with the yearly percentage drop on the increase. The level of people joining the church without being born into it, on the other hand, is low, with a ratio of 1 to 37 in comparison with people leaving. There are also other indicators of concern. Among newly married people who are both registered as Catholics, only 25 percent care to have a church wedding, compared to 44



percent 10 years earlier. A significant percentage of children born from Catholic parents are no longer baptized.

According to data gathered by Switzerland's Federal Statistical Office, 36.8 percent of former Roman Catholics and 19.7 percent of former Reformed Church members cited disagreements with the positions of their religious body as their main reason for leaving. Additionally, 14.7 percent of former Roman Catholics and 21 percent of former Reformed Church members stated that they had merely been born into the church, but had never been believers. Around 15 percent in both religious traditions stated that they had lost their faiths. Interestingly, only 6.3 percent of former Roman Catholics and 11.3 percent of former Reformed Church members stated that they were no longer willing to pay the church taxes the government collects on behalf of the established churches. Church exit figures remain high and Winter-Pfändler concludes that there is no sign of a trend reversal. Reasons mentioned for leaving remain more or less the same over recent years.

(The original article in German can be found here: <https://kirchenstatistik.spi-sg.ch/kirchenaustritte-und-die-frage-nach-dem-warum/>; for the French translation, see: <https://kirchenstatistik.spi-sg.ch/fr/les-sorties-deglise-et-la-question-du-pourquoi/>)

● **Seventh Day Adventism's center of gravity has shifted to Africa and is likely to remain there for the foreseeable future, writes church historian Gabriel Masfa in the *International Bulletin of Mission Research* (October).** Using data from the General Conference, the organizational body of the SDA, Masfa reports that Adventists in Africa represented 44.57 percent of the global membership as of 2020. African Adventism has also set itself the goal of becoming the “greatest missionary-sending continent for spreading the Adventist faith around the



Source: First Ghana SDA Church.

globe.” The experience of African Adventism is spreading through “silent missionaries” who are emigrating to Europe, Australia, and America, Masfa adds. The growth of Adventism in such countries as Tanzania, Nigeria, and Ghana may also give them evangelistic access to many Muslims as well as Christians. But Masfa notes that Adventism has had low receptivity in such Muslim nations as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya. Even the more receptive countries of Egypt and Sudan have seen only a little over 1,000 Adventists in a population of 145 million. Masfa concludes that the Adventist tradition of worshipping on Saturdays and its apocalyptic teachings complement the ethos of traditional African practices in Ghana, Ethiopia, and Nigeria to a greater extent than other churches.

(*International Bulletin of Mission Research*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ibm>)

Refugees turning European churches to hospitality, multicultural outreach

The massive influx of refugees and other migrants into Europe over the past several years has had a significant impact on evangelical and mainline churches, as they have rethought and retooled their ministries to meet the needs of such newcomers. Ken Chitwood reports in *Christianity Today* (October 3) that many churches have played important roles in helping to integrate these migrants, ranging from providing practical necessities to helping them learn a new language and navigate their way through bureaucratic social services and other institutions. A 2018 study by the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) found that, aside from hospitality services, such involvement with immigrants has provided them with “symbolic resources for positive self-identification and opportunities for interaction.” Chitwood writes that

such a process has also led to a “transformation of European churches.” A subsequent CCME survey of 74 churches of mainline and evangelical background found that migrants had started attending half of these congregations by 2020. About a quarter reported that they had become a notable minority in their congregations and another 20 percent reported that they had become the majority. This demographic change has led churches to develop a European theology and Christian social ethics based around migration issues and the mission of the church at large, Chitwood writes.

Part of this rethinking of mission has led to a growth in church planting and the building of new institutions. Chitwood points to the founding of a new seminary in Rome to meet the pastoral needs of the Chinese churches that are burgeoning in Italy and Europe and train new Chinese missionaries to the region. Eventually, the seminary sees itself becoming a “hub of multicultural mission work on the continent.” In the East German suburb of Gotha, the Mustard Seed District Mission, which was started to minister to migrant families from Ukraine, Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Syria, has been “experimenting with new forms of community,” member Ute Paul said. The mission focuses less on events, she said, and “more on relationships, ‘accidental’ encounters, and natural life in the district...[creating] a vibrant network of relationships between people of



Source: Lutheran World Federation.

different backgrounds and origins from around the world.” She added that this shift has meant leaving behind the paternalistic methods of missions and discovering an alternative style of “walking alongside people, giving priority to newcomers’ experiences and strengths.” Missiologist Detlef Blöcher, chair of the Working Group for Migration and Integration of the Evangelical Alliance in Germany, said initiatives like Mustard Seed are a “blood transfusion to the church in Europe... We need their contribution to be a witness to our post-Christian society.”

Yezidis canonizing sacred writings to preserve and modernize the faith

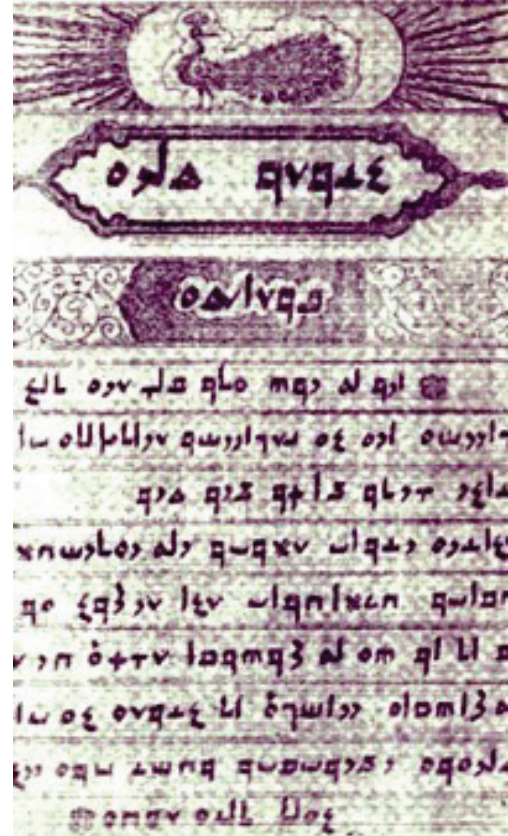
The publication of some Yezidi sacred texts for various purposes over the past 50 years, as well as the experiences of a growing Yezidi diaspora, are giving rise to a process of canonization of Yezidi holy scriptures, reports Thorsten Wettich (University of Bremen) in the *Zeitschrift für Religion und Weltanschauung* (5/2022). Persecutions against Yezidis by the so-called Islamic State have made the name of this independent monotheistic religion more widely known. One does not convert to Yezidism but needs to be born into it from two Yezidi parents, although there have been some signs of relaxation of that rule in recent years. Until eight years ago, a large part of the worldwide Yezidi population (which is around 800,000) resided in northern Iraq, but the jihadist offensive against them and the destruction it brought forced many to flee abroad. The

largest Yezidi diaspora of around 200,000 people is now found in Germany, while more than 100,000 Yezidis live in the Caucasus and Russia. Wettich notes that Yezidi beliefs have drawn much attention from Western scholars, with one of the main questions of interest being whether Yezidis have a sacred book of their own. Repeatedly, since the nineteenth century, scholars claimed to have discovered the Yezidi's holy scriptures, although Yezidi doctrines are actually not found in a single scriptural canon but a variety of documents.

Until only a few decades ago, only a minority of Yezidis were able to read and write. Trained religious experts from a specific caste within the community would recite prayers or hymns and read holy texts for the faithful, and those experts were also familiar with the interpretation of the texts. While much material is passed on as oral tradition, some families of the priestly caste keep written collections of the texts in their homes. And for the past 50 years, some collections have been published and have made access to the texts easier for ordinary faithful and outsiders. The first publications of Yezidi sacred texts by Yezidis themselves in the 1970s were meant for the use of religious education at Iraqi schools. This paved the way for a process of selection and prioritization of various materials, although there is no unanimous agreement about that selection. In Germany, too, some texts have been published, although those have been edited by Yezidis with an academic training rather than by Yezidi clerics.

The publication of these texts creates an unprecedented situation for Yezidis. Variations across different versions raise issues of authenticity and authority. Recent publications reveal a trend toward a systematic theology. Yezidi spiritual leaders are also engaging in a process of canonization of their sacred texts. Most of them no longer see the publication of these documents as a threat, but rather as an opportunity to preserve and modernize their tradition, although not everybody in the caste of religious experts is pleased to see lay people also dealing with these issues. Living in diaspora, for instance in Germany, has also contributed to changes, with Yezidis engaging in interreligious dialogue and having to present their beliefs in a way that is understandable to outsiders, which may overemphasize an intellectual approach. Wettich concludes that the process of canonization of Yezidi scriptures is far from completed.

(*Zeitschrift für Religion und Weltanschauung*, <http://www.ezw-berlin.de/publikationen/zeitschrift-fuer-religion-und-weltanschauung/>)



Yezidi Book of Revelation (source: Wikipedia).

Hindu nationalism coming to Bollywood films?

Hindu nationalist themes and plots are finding their way into an increasing number of Indian film productions, reports the *New Yorker* (October 10). Known as “Bollywood,” the global Indian film industry has long featured more traditional themes in its standard and ornate song and dance productions compared to Hollywood, but lately films critical of Hinduism and its political expressions have come under strong censure, reports Samanth Subramanian. Bollywood has previously been a place in India “where caste and religion don’t matter. The most piously presented proof of this is the fact that, in a Hindu-majority country, a Muslim man named Shah Rukh Khan has been the supreme box office star for decades.” The change can be most vividly seen in the controversy surrounding the Indian political drama *Tandav*, which is produced by Amazon Prime. The series has come under increasing pressure in India for some of its depictions and dialog, accused of profaning the Hindu god Shiva as well as being “anti-BJP,” referring to the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party headed by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The show has seen bitter legal battles and eventual suspension of its second season, leading Amazon Prime to put edgy film and TV projects into cold storage and to self-censure, such as by discouraging the creation of characters who share their names with Hindu deities. Other filmmakers try to cater to BJP tastes, such as with historical epics that “glorify bygone



A scene from the Bollywood movie "Dabangg 2 » (ARBAAZ KHAN PRODUCTIONS / Album, NTB scanpix. (<https://ndla.no/article/15868>). CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

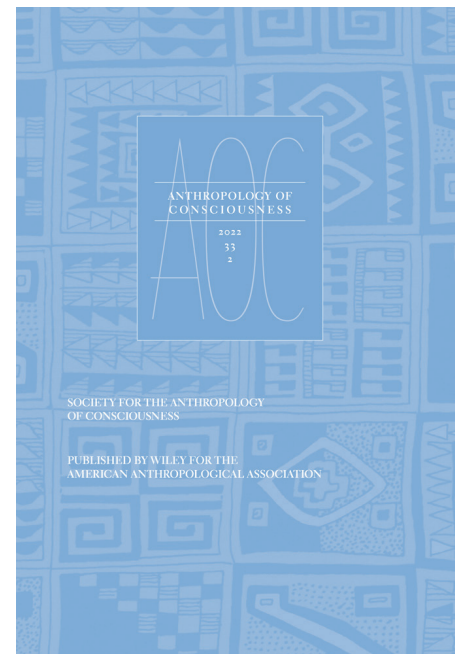
Hindu kings [or] action films about the Indian Army... These productions all draw from the BJP's roster of stock villains: medieval Muslim rulers, Pakistan, Islamist terrorists, leftists, opposition parties like the Indian National Congress," Subramanian writes.

The BJP censors began with small moves, such as refusing to certify films containing profanity and references to sex. Such government censorship was nothing new to directors over the years, but they could always appeal to a tribunal to make their case against such restrictions. Last year, however, the government abolished the tribunal and now the only recourse available to censored filmmakers is the lengthy and expensive process of litigation. Subramanian adds that the BJP also relies on and encourages a base of "its Internet bruisers, rank-and-file cadre, and ideological allies" to agitate and protest against offensive productions. For instance, rumors that a film depicting the legend of the Hindu queen Padmavati's attempted abduction by a Muslim sultan contained a love scene between them were enough for a BJP politician to call for the beheading of the lead actress and an angry mob to attack the director and burn down part of the set. While the BJP often describes such events as the acts of fringe element of Hindu "patriots," there have been more high-level cases of government and police pressure against well-known actors and their families. All this has convinced filmmakers not to risk offending the government and their increasingly Hindu nationalist audiences. Subramanian adds that, along with the actions of the BJP, the overtly Hindu nationalist RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) has established a media liaison to "nudge filmmakers toward subjects close to the RSS's heart."

Findings & Footnotes

■ The current issue of the journal *Anthropology of Consciousness* (33:2) is devoted to the revolution in thinking about "sacred plant"-based psychedelics happening in the West and how it has impacted indigenous communities. The so-called "psychedelic renaissance" involves the increasing use of what are considered sacred plants, such as Ayahuasca, for treating mental disorders. At the same time, the use of sacred plants has been revived in indigenous communities, such as in Latin America, and among Western seekers for mystical purposes. Especially interesting is how the resurgence of psychedelics has created new alliances and associations between indigenous and non-indigenous people, both for commercial and non-commercial reasons. Several contributors focus on the ways in which these substances are being manufactured and marketed by pharmaceutical companies, challenging the sacred and local nature of these plants for indigenous practitioners.

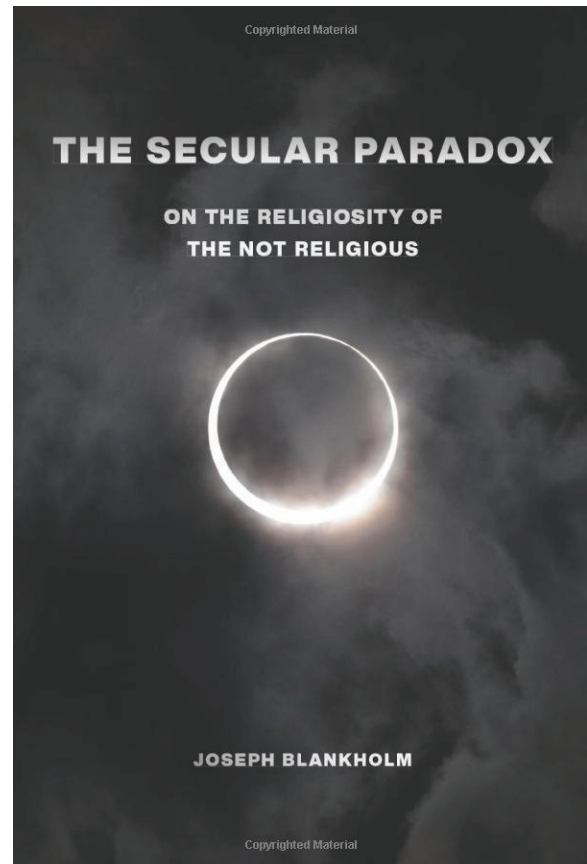
Yet other contributors argue that these plants change individuals, even as consumers are changing the nature and function of these substances. A noteworthy



article by Christian Frenopoulo compares modern day “shamans” in Peru and Denmark who see their vocation as selling and administering Ayahuasca. While the Peruvian shamans find greater acceptance of their work, even if they may be stigmatized as indigenous healers, the Danish shamans feel stronger ostracism since the substance is illegal in Denmark. Yet even in secular Denmark, the use and promotion of Ayahuasca is considered a “spiritual practice,” with practitioners hoping that they will comprise a new church in society. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/15563537/2022/33/2>

■ Joseph Blankholm’s new book *The Secular Paradox* (NYU Press, \$32) is the latest in a series of works that provide nuance and complexity to studies of the growth of organized “non-religion” in the last decade. Blankholm, a religious studies professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, studied both old time secularist groups, such as Ethical Culture, and more recent non-belief expressions, such as the Sunday Assembly, specifically looking at how such non-believers negotiate rituals and a secular spirituality in a still-religious America. It is the ambiguity of embracing non-belief while often being part of a group that selectively adapts religion and religion-like practices that concerns Blankholm, as he looks at everything from a secular Day of the Dead celebration, to secular marriage and funeral rituals, to “blasphemy days.” He finds uncertainty in these groups and gatherings about where to draw the line between religion and non-religion, as reflected in such practical matters as whether to take up offerings as congregations do or charge dues and whether to be inclusive and welcome those with spiritual-like views and inclinations or insist on a hardline atheism and anti-religion. He also highlights how “conversions” to atheism resemble more religious forms of conversion.

The book opens with an account of how such ambiguity split the New York Sunday Assembly, a new group seeking a secular spirituality, into opposing camps, with a more strictly atheist group claiming that the fledgling movement was catering too much to religious and spiritual sensibilities. (Both groups disbanded a few months afterward.) Blankholm finds that there are certain strategies and adaptations that secularists can use regarding this ambivalence, including avoidance, blasphemy (taking over the power of religion by making light of it), abstraction, and translation (giving seemingly religious functions a secular spin, such as stressing only the psychological benefits of meditation). He sees minorities within secularism (such as women, blacks, Latinos, and ex-Muslims) as those most affected by such paradoxes, providing interesting accounts of how aspects of religion remain important to these secularists, even including their attending religious functions and celebrating religious holidays. Such minorities may value

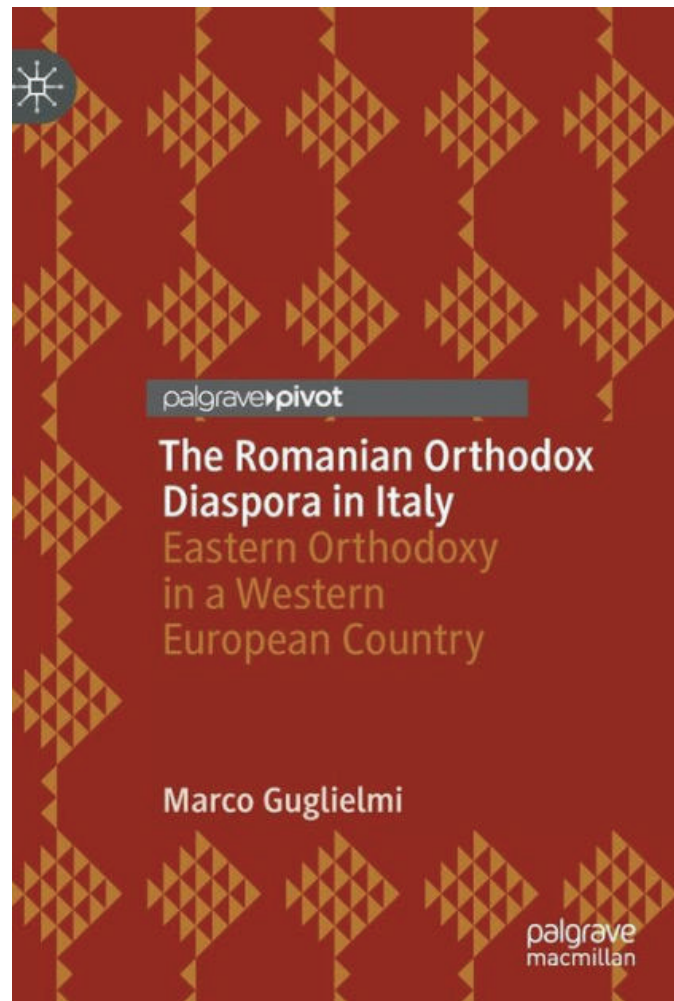


secularism's relationship to identity politics and "anti-racism" more than mainstream white secularists—typified by the New Atheists—who see atheism as limited to disproving the existence of God and battling the influence of religion in society.

■ Italy is today the most important destination for Romanian immigrants in Europe, with more than 1.1 million such newcomers. The first Romanian Orthodox parish in Italy was established in 1975, and by 2004 there were already 34 parishes in the country. But the entry of Romania into the European Union marked the beginning of a very strong and rapid growth, with 284 Romanian Orthodox parishes in Italy by 2021, making Romanians by far the largest Orthodox group there. In a new volume in the series on *Religion and Global Migrations*, Marco Guglielmi (University of Padua) provides an overview of this immigrant church in his new book, ***The Romanian Orthodox Diaspora in Italy: Eastern Orthodoxy in a Western European Country*** (Palgrave Macmillan, \$49.99). Obviously, like other diasporic communities in various religious traditions, the Romanian parishes in Italy also serve as community centers for Romanians and fulfill cultural purposes, such as transmitting Romanian heritage to younger people. Since 2010, the Romanian church has consciously worked to strengthen its transnational presence, with support from the Romanian state.

A large majority of the places of worship are Catholic churches on loan (permanently or for a few hours a week) to Romanian communities, thus providing "spaces for nuanced hybridization." This may for instance mean having pews in the church, something that is not common in Romania. Guglielmi remarks that minds are divided about pews, but that some priests see them not as a departure from tradition but as a necessary adaptation to the modern world. In places where no Romanian Orthodox worship is available, a few immigrants may even choose to attend Catholic masses, sometimes reciting Orthodox prayers in a low voice.

Due to the precarious situation of many parishes, the priests have to deal with many practical tasks they wouldn't need to fulfill in the more institutionalized settings of parishes in their home country. "The ministry of Romanian Orthodox clerics seems to be largely reshaped by the diasporic condition, because its prime reference is the diocese in the diaspora and the new context rather than the church in the homeland," Guglielmi writes. Currently, a majority of those serving as Romanian clerics in Italy had already been



living in Western Europe before being ordained, implying their openness to this environment. Guglielmi reports that “the Romanian Orthodox Church has planned to establish an educational center in Western Europe in order to provide the new clerics in the diaspora with training more targeted on their sociocultural contexts.”

The development of social welfare activities for the benefit of the local Romanian population has led Romanian Orthodox clerics in Italy to develop partnerships with Roman Catholic institutions. Experiences gained in the diaspora, including interactions with Roman Catholics, have also led some Romanian priests to reshape aspects of their ministry once they return home—reflected, for instance, in attempts to celebrate shorter liturgies or develop social work activities rooted in the parish. But not all clerics favor influences brought through such diasporic experiences. Some spiritual fathers in Romania warn against such influences, and a minority of emigrants are afraid of being contaminated by Western European societies. The Romanian Orthodox Church in Italy remains primarily a diaspora religion maintaining its identity while also—to a lesser extent— showing some signs of developing a hybrid identity blending aspects of the homeland and of the host country. “Beyond the defensive identity shaped by Holy Tradition, Orthodox communities constantly refashion themselves with respect to material situations and social contexts,” writes Guglielmi. While arguing that “Orthodox diasporas seem today to have little voice compared to that of the mother churches in the homeland,” he nevertheless concludes that their long-term, silent impact should not be underestimated.

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

1) Charismatic Christian leaders, critical of fellow charismatics in the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) and their support of former President Donald Trump and the events of January 6, have intensified their opposition with a new statement and website, www.narandchristiannationalism.com. The 1,544-word statement condemns Christian nationalism, which is the belief that America is a Christian nation and that its government must support Christianity as the nation’s defining and original religion. The statement seeks to disassociate what it claims to be the majority of the nation’s roughly 73 million Pentecostals and charismatics from what these leaders say is a fringe element that espouses “a dangerous and unhealthy form of ‘Christian nationalism.’” The statement disavows any association with a movement “that speaks of a potential Christian uprising against the government or hints at the use of force to advance God’s kingdom...[and]...rejects all ideologies and movements claiming ethnic or racial superiority.” It follows public criticism of leaders in the NAR who prophesied that Trump would successfully overturn the election results and be declared president again.

The statement also asserts that “radicalism in the movement had strong connections with the Capitol riot,” mainly because some participants bore signs containing prophetic messages and were blowing a shofar (a prominent practice among prophetic charismatics). The statement has garnered 64 signatures so far, although few from leaders of the NAR, such as Cindy Jacobs, Ché Ahn, and Texas evangelists Lance Wallnau and Dutch Sheets. Organizers of the effort worry that as 2024 approaches, and if Trump runs for president again, such prophetic voices might again make themselves heard. Critics Holly Pivec and Biola University professor Douglas Geivett, authors of a new book on the NAR, say the new website and



Source: Getty / Newsweek.

statement amount to “damage control efforts” to keep the apostolic movement afloat. Some have accused the drafters of the new statement of being conspiracy theorists who have exaggerated the size and dangers of the NAR linked to Christian nationalism. Meanwhile, the signers don’t deny that they still believe in prophecy and the continuation of New Testament apostolic offices and authority, even if they reject the NAR label. (Source: Newsweek, October 20)

2) The Grand Mufti of Oman, **Ahmed Al-Khalili** (b. 1942), has become a key figure for conservative forces in the sultanate, writes independent scholar Pierre Bernin in *Orient XXI* (Oct. 6). Located on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman is the only country where Ibadi Islam (the faith of less than 1 percent of Muslims around the world) plays a dominant role, although Sunnis may actually

have become a numerical majority in the country (even though religious statistics are a sensitive topic and are not published). Al-Khalili had previously kept a low profile on some issues during the rule of Sultan Qaboos, who relaxed Ibadi social rigorism in exchange for granting Ibadi religious elites privileged access to positions of power. Qaboos also opened a new chapter of reform on social and economic



Source: Orient XXI (Wikimedia Commons).

issues in the country. But after his death, Al-Khalili was given greater freedom to speak his mind about issues at home and abroad, and since 2020, a conservative discourse on public issues has emerged around Al-Khalili, not only in Oman but internationally. The mufti has tried to assume the role of protector of Muslims, even if his marginal status on the global Muslim scene as an Ibadi cleric hardly allows him to strike that pose.

Al-Khalili supports Palestinian armed resistance, criticizes Islamophobic policies in India, expresses concern about the fate of Muslims in Europe, and praises the Taliban victory in Afghanistan as a model for Muslims. In Oman, he linked the Covid-19 pandemic to homosexuality and called earlier this year for prohibiting a gathering around a visiting Hindu yogi. Clerics close to him have called for the closing of all places selling alcoholic beverages and claimed that the introduction of new taxes without popular assent was not Islamically acceptable, thereby undermining the government's fiscal strategy. Al-Khalili and his associates probably satisfy the expectations of a part of the population that is less progressive than the country's political elites and leaders. In contrast with neighboring states, both conservative and progressive sectors of Omani society currently have the opportunity to make their voices heard. (**Source:** *Orient XXI*, October 6)