

From Dobbs to Ukraine, 2022 religion dramatic and consequential

*Religion in 2022 saw the intensification of trends that were visible in the previous year, none more dramatic and traumatic than Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its impact on Eastern Orthodoxy. The following review of last year and preview of how these trends may play out in the year ahead is lengthier than previous annual reviews because we not only draw from past issues of **RW** but also incorporate other sources of information (citing them at the end of each item).*

1) Last year's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision reversing *Roe v. Wade* on abortion may have reinjected religion into the public sphere, even if prolife activists make their case in non-religious terms. Prolife protests, legal activism, and movement and organizational dynamics have all had a conservative religious underpinning since the *Roe* ruling, and this is likely to continue as abortion moves to the states as a legislative issue. Soon after the *Dobbs* decision, new divisions appeared on the prolife side between conservative Catholic and evangelical "abolitionists" pushing for the strictest anti-abortion laws and "reformists" urging a more gradual approach. But the results of the midterm elections, showing widespread indifference and even opposition to anti-abortion legislation (if not sympathy for prochoice initiatives) alerted the prolife movement that a change in strategy may be necessary to find further support. Already there are plans and proposals for conservative religious groups to focus more on education than protests and confrontation, with some leaders urging greater prolife concern for the lives and conditions of mothers and children. Meanwhile, observers saw an extreme tendency on the prochoice side after *Dobbs*, with some prochoice activists targeting churches and crisis pregnancy centers with vandalism and even destruction. Next year's lead-up to the 2024 elections will show whether the abolitionism and extremism on both sides will remain relevant. (see August *RW*)

2) The Russian invasion of Ukraine is likely to mean the loss by Moscow of a large number of Ukrainian Orthodox faithful who had until then remained in spiritual union with Patriarch Kirill. The leader of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) under the Moscow Patriarchate immediately denounced Russia's invasion and the church affirmed its independence at an



Source: Hello Georgetown.

assembly in May, while refraining from using the word “autocephaly.” But the UOC has refrained from joining forces with the rival Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which received its autocephaly from Constantinople’s Patriarch Bartholomew in 2019. Despite its moves, the UOC’s loyalty toward Ukraine is being questioned and its clergy and faithful are being pressured to join the OCU, at the same time that a number of UOC monasteries and churches have been raided by Ukrainian security services. There have also been discussions about a possible legal ban on religious organizations thought to be linked to the Russian Federation. The spiritual dimension is a component of the current war. **(May, June, July *RW*)**

3) The transition from the Covid pandemic to an endemic in 2022 allowed researchers and religious leaders to make solid assessments of the health crisis’s effect on participation in faith communities. It was obvious that a fairly significant number of members and attendees were not likely to return to their congregations any time soon, but the rates of loss often hinged on the length of congregational lockdowns and their investment in online alternatives to gathering. The diminishment could especially be seen in particular areas of congregational life, such as Sunday schools and youth groups, where these activities may even become extinct in some congregations, again, often related to their reliance on online resources. That is not to say that online dimensions of congregations cannot be avenues to growth and vitality. But we also saw how congregational shopping and even belonging to multiple congregations were facilitated to a greater extent during the sudden shift to online services, and this may be a lasting aftereffect of the pandemic. **(January, November *RW*)**

4) On several occasions in 2022, Pope Francis intervened with varied levels of intensity in the life of important Catholic organizations in order to reform them (and, in some cases, to solve internal crises). On July 22, the apostolic letter *Ad charisma tuendum* moved the Opus Dei from the Dicastery of Bishops to the Dicastery of Clergy and paved the way for an adjustment of its statutes. In a bold move, a decree issued on September 3 promulgated a new constitutional charter for the Order of Malta and dissolved its governing body while appointing a provisional sovereign council. In November, another decree removed the leadership of Caritas International and appointed a temporary administrator to encourage the renewal of the humanitarian organization and prepare its next general assembly. Pope Francis also wants to prepare the ground for a stronger control of new religious groups within the Catholic Church, with a decree published on June 15 requiring prior Vatican approval for bishops to establish new associations of the faithful (following a similar decree in 2020 regarding diocesan religious orders). (*Aleteia*, December 19)

5) Last year also revealed how the Jesuits have “surged to the heights of command” in the Vatican and world Catholicism under the aging Pope Francis. Sandro Magister, a veteran Vaticanologist, writes that the leading Jesuit, besides the pope himself, is Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, archbishop of Luxembourg and also Francis’s candidate “in pectore” for his succession and a leading role in the current synod. Francis has also included on his team Canadian Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect for integral human development; Gianfranco Ghirlanda, a seasoned expert in canon law; Fr. Giacomo Costa, former editor of the magazine *Aggiornamenti Sociali* of the Milan Jesuits and vice-president of the Fondazione Carlo Maria Martini; Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica* and very close to Francis; the Spanish Jesuit Juan Antonio Guerrero Alves, who was prefect of the secretariat for the economy until stepping down in November; and Jesuits serving at St. Peter’s Basilica and as auxiliary bishops of the diocese of Rome, of which the pope is bishop. The new prominence of Jesuits, who have the reputation of being the most liberal Catholic order, is likely to add to conservative Catholics’ suspicions about the Francis papacy. The recent death of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who was championed and in some cases seen as an alternative spiritual authority by conservative and traditionalist Catholics, may well intensify the alienation and grievances against Francis among conservatives. (*The Moynihan Letter*, December 1)

6) The election of Archbishop Timothy Broglio as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops will likely continue to keep the American church on a more conservative course than that charted by Pope Francis and more liberal Catholics. American church observer Michael Sean Winters says that Broglio was relatively passive in the face of abuse scandals, such as that involving Legionaries of Christ founder Fr. Marcial Maciel when Broglio served as Cardinal Angelo Sodano’s right-hand man. Winters adds that Broglio’s “culture war” mindset will likely continue the polarization in the conference and the wider American church, as seen in the

conference's coolness toward the presidency of Joe Biden, reciprocated by the president's indifference to meeting with the bishops. (*National Catholic Reporter*, December 9–22)

7) The elimination of al-Qaeda's emir Ayman al-Zawahiri and Islamic State leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi in 2022 by will have some impact on jihadist terrorism, but much depends on their successors. Along with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, these events have moved international terrorism to a back burner of American foreign policy concerns. In the *CTC Sentinel*, the publication of the Combating Terrorism Center of West Point Military Academy, terrorism specialist Bruce Hoffman writes that although al-Zawahiri's elimination will "likely hinder al-Qaeda's core operations for the time being, its affiliates remain resilient and strong." The movement is thought to include some 7,000 to 12,000 fighters in Somalia's al-Shabaab jihadist group, a few thousand in its Syrian and Arabian wings, as well as a smaller al-Qaeda contingent in India. The affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in Mali is growing, and its achievement of a withdrawal of French forces from the country "is an ominous sign of the al-Qaeda movement's resiliency and strength." Likewise, forecasts of the Islamic State's demise have proven premature. Al-Qurayshi's assassination has not precipitated the movement's collapse; it has persisted in Iraq and Syria and is gaining traction in Mozambique, still fighting in the Philippines, and setting its eyes on targets in Israel and Jordan. The strategies of both jihadist movements are more regional and local than international, but the West will likely remain a target, whether in efforts to inspire "lone wolf" terrorism or to carry out more coordinated attacks. (*CTC Sentinel*, November/December)

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **Aside from using online technology to extend their reach, congregations' spiritual and religious leadership also cultivated more locally based practices during the pandemic that lessened their reliance on maintaining an online presence.** In contrast to the predominant narrative focusing on congregations' innovative use of online technology, Steve Taylor and Dustin D. Benac write in the *Review of Religious Research* (online in December) that what sustained religious leaders and changed the field of religious practice during the pandemic were more localized practices that met people where they were. In a study of 19 faith leaders in "post-Christian" contexts in the



Source: Hippopx.

Pacific Northwest and Aotearoa (New Zealand), the researchers found that the most popular localized practices included: giving blessings in the form of gifts and good deeds to congregants and neighbors; walking through neighborhoods as a form of contemplation and prayer; place-making that allowed leaders and congregations to re-root themselves in the neighborhood; “connecting,” which could mean starting a socially-distanced book club or happy hour; and, finally, localized care, which equipped lay people to minister and offer pastoral care to fellow members and neighbors. The authors conclude that while denominational bodies may provide resources to encourage such practices, such innovations more often emerge from local and prior relationship networks.

(*Review of Religious Research*, <https://www.springer.com/journal/13644>)

● **The Catholic Church in the U.S. is undergoing a distinctive kind of internal secularization, according to researchers who found American Catholic priests becoming more conservative and disenchanted with the hierarchy, especially with the pope, even as their flocks are becoming more liberal (with increasing numbers departing from the faith).** Writing in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in December), sociologists Brad Vermurlen, Stephen Cranney, and Mark Regnerus report on survey research indicating that the conservative orientation of U.S. Catholic bishops (see our annual review for more on this) reflects the wider trend of an American clergy with values at odds with those of an increasingly liberal laity as well as the Vatican. Their study found that younger Catholic priests and priests ordained in more recent years in particular tended to be noticeably more conservative than older priests on issues of politics, theology and moral teaching. The survey found that since the 1980s, successive cohorts of clergy have grown more conservative. Clergy are also increasingly pessimistic about the church since 2002, often related to their views of Pope Francis and his governance of the church and how well bishops have dealt with sex abuse cases. The authors

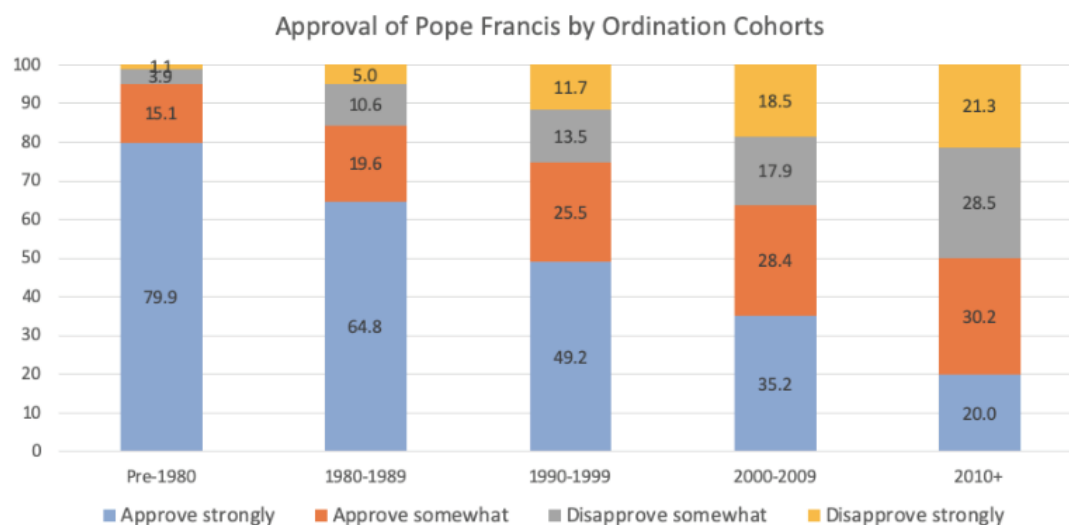


Figure 7. Approval of Pope Francis by Ordination Cohorts. Data: 2021 SACP [Weighted]

argue that while most cases of internal secularization have involved liberal clergy and more conservative laity contesting church authority, in the case of Catholicism in the U.S. the situation is reversed, with the seat of authority in the Catholic Church being questioned by conservative clergy.

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

● **Catholic schools in the U.S. either held the line on educational scores or lost significantly less ground than their public and charter-school counterparts, the latest federal educational assessment found.** *America* magazine (December) reports on the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a congressionally mandated report card on academic achievement. Years of progress in math and reading were reversed during the Covid-19 pandemic, as math scores saw their largest decreases ever and reading scores dropped to 1992 levels. In addition to their pattern of stability, Catholic schools managed to score a one-point improvement on math scores, while charter and public schools lost three points. Catholic schools did show a five-point decline in math scores between 2019 and 2022, but it was better than the eight- to nine-point drop in public and charter schools. The National Catholic Educational Association found that Catholic school students' average scores remained 15 points higher than the average scores of their eighth-grade public school peers in the assessment. Analysts say that Catholic schools were quicker to reopen and to modify in-class learning when they were permitted to reopen. In the 2020–21 school year, 92 percent of Catholic schools reopened, compared to 43 percent of public schools and 34 percent of charter schools. Catholic school



Source: NARA & DVIDS Public Domain Archive.

advocates see an opportunity for Catholic schools to stand out for their learning edge and their flexibility and creativity to families looking for an alternative to public schools.

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

Social media amplifies Buddhist scandals, lowering monks' status in Thailand

While financial and sexual scandals have taken place among Buddhist monks for decades in Thailand, the spread of news and criticism of this behavior through social media is having a detrimental effect on the reciprocal relationship between clergy and laity, write Brooke Schedneck and Steve Epstein in the online magazine *The Revealer* (December 8). The most recent and sensational scandal surrounded the popular Buddhist monk Phra Pongsakorn Chankaew (or “Phra Kato” as he was known to his followers), who was caught having a clandestine love affair with a model as well as embezzling from his temple to silence her. Kato was considered a charismatic monk who would reinvigorate Buddhism among the younger generations through his skilled use of social media. The affair, which violated the celibacy rules of Buddhist monasticism and effectively expelled him from the monastery, became a social media sensation, even as the ex-monk turned to his Facebook and YouTube pages to apologize to his fans. The story is one of many instances of Buddhist monks being caught in scandals in a particularly bad year; the most recent cases include religious leaders being caught drinking beer and feasting on roast pork, breaking rules against eating after noon, violating Covid protocols,



Source: *Chiang Rai Times*.

and, in the case of one abbot and his monks in late November, testing positive for methamphetamine. Schedneck and Epstein write that these scandals are increasingly the fodder of social media, which has amplified the misdeeds to fellow monks and laity throughout the country, causing serious public disenchantment with Buddhism similarly to the way the priestly sex abuse crisis has rocked the Catholic Church.

In the case of Thai Buddhism, the publicized scandals threaten the “compact that binds laity and sangha,” the authors write. “The laity offer food, material goods, and money to temples and their monks. In turn, the laity receive ‘merit,’ which in the Thai Buddhist view negates the effects of ‘bad karma’—or past unwholesome acts...When monks are perceived to neglect their part in this merit economy by disobeying their rules of renunciation, the merit system is compromised.” In interviewing monks about the effects of these scandals, Schedneck and Epstein found that many had been exposed to ridicule and derision from laypeople. Interaction with women laity was subject to new scrutiny and suspicion, making “monastic life...more complicated because of the laity’s judgmental gaze.” Although monastic misbehavior is widespread, the monks tended to focus on the “few bad apples” phenomenon. But they also pointed to monastic training not being consistent from temple to temple, with little means of maintaining behavioral rules among 300,000 monks in 33,000 active temples. The monks reported that fewer people were showing up at temples (also due to Covid over the past two years) for ceremonies to mark important events in their lives—from new car blessings to anniversaries of deaths. There were both fewer ordinations and fewer potential monks coming through the pipeline. A temple school reported a drop from an average of about 600 novices regularly studying for monastic orders per year (before the pandemic) to only 50 last year. Because female monks and nuns have been in far fewer scandals, their status has risen, though the former only number about 300 with approximately 30,000 nuns.

(*The Revealer*, <https://therevealer.org/sex-scandals-and-buddhist-monks-in-thailand/>)

Transgender exceptions making their way into Buddhist monasticism

Monastic Buddhism’s traditional norms regarding gender and sexuality are gradually shifting to include LGBTQ persons and identities, writes Jue Liang in the online magazine, *The Conversation* (December 8). Liang notes that Buddhism has been strongly based on traditional gender roles, especially in its monastic traditions where men and women are segregated in their roles and even spatially in temples and monasteries. To be accepted in Buddhist communities, candidates have to meet a list of requirements, including unambiguous genitalia, and non-heterosexuals and those challenging the gender binary have been viewed as carrying a negative karma. These strictures still hold true in the Theravada tradition, as reflected in the attempt of the Thai Sanga Council, the governing Buddhist body in Thailand, to ban ordinations of transgender people.

But according to Liang the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism have allowed exceptions to the rules. In the Tibetan Buddhist world, Tashi Choedup, a transgender Buddhist monk, was ordained after his teacher refrained from inquiring about his gender identity as prescribed by the Vinaya. Choedup attended an inclusive monastic institution that did not enforce gender distinctions and the monastic now works to build awareness and inclusion for the transgender Buddhist community. Another case of a transgender monastic in Tibetan Buddhism was Tenzin Mariko, a former monk and a 2015 Miss Tibet contestant who is now an LGBTQ rights activist. Even in the Theravada tradition of Thai Buddhism, the restrictions against kathoey monastics (a term describing gender-nonconforming people) have eased as they have received ordination in their sex as recorded at birth.



Source: Tashi Choedup, a transgender Buddhist monk (*SouthFirst*).

(*The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/traditional-buddhist-teachings-exclude-lgbtq-people-from-monastic-life-but-change-is-coming-slowly>)

Indonesian Muslim organization seeks to reform Islamic jurisprudence

As part of efforts to reform Islamic jurisprudence as well as define the future path of global Islam, religious scholars, led by the Indonesia-based Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), are discussing the religious legitimacy of the United Nations and the nation-state, thus hoping to counter notions of a caliphate and a transnational Islamic state, writes journalist and scholar James M. Dorsey on his blog *The Turbulent World* (December 18). If adopted, such a legitimization would make the UN Charter and its references to human rights religiously binding for Muslim signatories. The NU had paved the way for such changes in 2019 by rejecting the relevance of the concept of “infidel” (*kafir*) as a legal category within modern nation-states.

The move would not only counter the views of transnational jihadist groups, Dorsey stresses, but would also challenge “a key pillar of autocratic strategies in the Muslim world designed to ensure the survival of repressive regimes.” The scholars will gather in February in Surabaya, Indonesia, under the auspices of the recently constituted Religion Forum 20. Representatives of Muslim organizations associated with autocratic regimes, such as the Saudi-supported Muslim World League, are expected to hold the view that Islamic jurisprudence needs no reform, and the



At an international summit convened by Nahdlatul Ulama in 2016 (source: Bayt ar-Rahmah).

debate about the proposals by NU-led scholars cannot be expected to be resolved any time soon. Even the NU itself may not yet have drawn all the implications of its proposals, as shown by its absence of criticism toward restrictive religious and moral aspects of the newly adopted Indonesian criminal code. Still Dorsey sees the NU's "effort to anchor the United Nations and the concept of the nation-state in Islamic jurisprudence" as a move that could prove revolutionary in the long term.

(Formerly known as *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, James M. Dorsey's blog has been renamed *The Turbulent World* in 2023: <https://jamesmdorsey.substack.com>)

Burundi sees increasing sacralization of political discourse

According to its constitution, the Eastern African nation of Burundi is a secular state, but the discourse of the country's political leadership is permeated with religious references, reports the French *Observatoire Pharos* (November 22), based on information from local media. Religion is being turned into a public and political issue. An evangelical vocabulary is being used in calling for peace, development and political stability. Religion is a resource used by political leaders—starting with President Evariste Ndayishimiye—for attempting to moralize public life. Religious moral values are supposed to instill a work ethic and bring economic and social growth. There



Source: Flickr.

are also hopes that it might help to reduce ethnic cleavages. This is a continuation and intensification of processes already observed during the previous decade. The late previous president, Pierre Nkurunziza (d. 2020), was an evangelical believer who relied on a network of evangelical churches for support, and his widow still is the pastor of a church in the capital, Bujumbura.

The vibrant religious life involves competition between different political figures to gain the support of influential churches, reports *Africa Intelligence* (September 22). Competition between churches can also be a source of tensions, and some cultivate special relations with specific political figures. While evangelical churches in Burundi tend to be very political, the Protestant share of the population is estimated at about 25 percent, while Roman Catholics represent about 60 percent of Burundians. In search of new alliances, Ndayishimiye is continuing his rapprochement with the Catholic Church, after more difficult relations between his predecessor and Catholic clergy. Cultivating the right connections with churches, keeping them under control, and using a religious vocabulary as a tool for transformation are thus important political issues in Burundi.

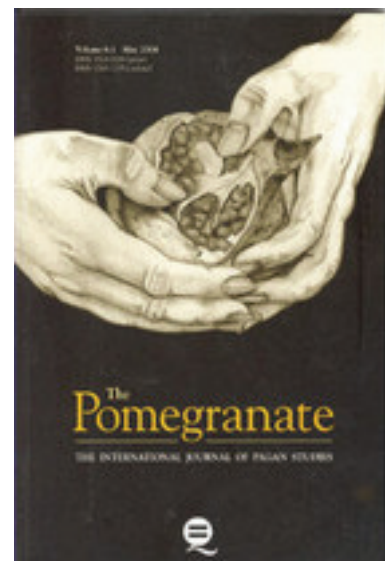
(*Observatoire Pharos*, <https://www.observatoirepharos.com/>; *Africa Intelligence*, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ The current issue of the *Journal of Church and State* (64:4) focuses on **legal issues relating to Covid-19**, specifically the free exercise of religion. The guest editor Adelaide Madera notes that, as might be expected, the curtailments of religious freedom took place in the early phase of the pandemic, but the conflict between the compelling interests of public health and other human rights, including freedom of religion, is a serious one for many legal systems. Noteworthy articles include an analysis suggesting how the U.S. Supreme Court has eroded the religious freedom parameters established in the controversial Smith decision. In contrast, Geoffrey Upton cites the case of the Orthodox Jewish community and argues that an over-expansion of religious accommodation has occurred, without regard to the burdens on civic society. An analysis of the Canadian situation shows that all religious challenges to Covid restrictions were rejected there, while courts and executive boards in Europe and Africa took similarly broad interpretations of public interest over religious freedoms. Madera concludes that the often “alarming judicial responses” taken in response to Covid pose questions as to “whether the pandemic standards of review might influence judicial reading in the near future, and whether courts have signaled a serious intent to revisit traditional standards of review on a lasting basis.” For more information on this issue, visit: <https://academic.oup.com/jcs>



■ A double issue of *The Pomegranate* (23:1-2, 2021), the journal of Pagan studies, is devoted to the **relationship of Paganism to museums and other forms of historic preservation**. As repositories and showcases of pre-Christian historical artifacts, museums and other heritage sites have become places of Pagan veneration and devotion. The articles in the issue are mainly case studies, including one on how Pagans in Lithuania have contested the Catholic Church’s claims of the Christian nature of the site of the cathedral in Vilnius. Another article focuses on Old Uppsala, Sweden, where “Heathens” conduct rituals on burial mounds said to be the ancient site of sacrificial ceremonies and feasts. Such cases of “heritage politics and contestation” are becoming more common, especially in Europe and the United Kingdom, where churches were built over pagan historic sites. Other articles look at the witchcraft museum in Salem, Massachusetts, and at British Druids and their campaign to have “ancestral bones” and other corporeal relics in museums and heritage sites reburied. Museum directors’ scholarly and objective approach often is in conflict with Pagan practitioners’ claims and uses of objects and sites for rituals, as well as some of their



connections to nationalistic movements. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://journal.equinoxpub.com/POM>

■ The last three decades saw churches in China emerging as a missionary force, both internally and in other parts of the world. The last few years under the tightening grip of Xi Jinping, however, have witnessed new restrictions on the churches and mission groups—a trend explored in the current issue of the evangelical *China Source Quarterly* (Winter). The issue looks at the **state of Christianity in contemporary China**, covering a wide range of topics—from the contours of the new restrictions to how expatriate Christians are changing their evangelism strategy to remote means after the pandemic and the ongoing crackdown on missions. The Chinese church was poised for a key role in missionizing China and other parts of the world until Xi changed the rules of the game. An article by Xinglu Lin updates these developments in light of the new environment of religious restrictions. He writes that Xi’s strategy of grid management, which imposes surveillance and tight public security on the population, brings special challenges and serious threats to the familiar practices of mission. He writes, “Our conception of the church in the past was as a center for gathering. Today, churches are beginning to share the gospel, worship, and fellowship through more flexible and creative small groups and networks. Originally centered on a certain region or location, today’s missions are being implemented in a decentralized or polycentric and localized way. Today people often use the acronym ‘VUCA’ to describe today’s world: volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.” To download this issue, visit: <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinasource-quarterlies/chinese-christians-in-the-new-era/>



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

The **Engaged Spirituality Project** encourages journalists covering religion to adopt ethnographic methods to convey a more in-depth and fine-grained account of religion for their readers. The project, run by the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, brings together social scientists—including a core of ethnographers—and journalists to identify, interview, contextualize, and profile 100 “spiritual exemplars” across the globe. The project encourages a kind of “ethnographic journalism” that seeks to correct for reporters’ tendency to favor hard news over an in-depth treatment of subjects, which may require them to be “embedded” in the field in the ways that sociologists and



Source: Engaged Spirituality.

anthropologists regularly are. The project also attempts to bridge journalism and ethnography in terms of ethics as well as techniques.

For instance, rather than remaining distant observers, the project encourages journalists to be more “reflective” participant-observers who recognize the dilemmas of responsibility and engagement that emerge between researchers and their “subjects.” This is especially helpful in covering minority faiths and new religious movements that are in vulnerable populations or may have experienced biased journalistic coverage. At the same time, journalist ethnographers try to help scholarly ethnographers improve their communication of findings and ideas to a wider audience. The project is one among several other attempts to cultivate partnerships between ethnographers and journalists, such as the Society for Environmental Journalism’s new Religion & Environment Story Project, and the Sacred Writes program at Northwestern University. (**Source:** Paper presented by Ken Chitwood at the November meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion)