

Catholic divisions intensify as the Synod of Bishops approaches

In our annual review last month, **RW** speculated that the death of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI might spur conservative Catholics on to greater dissatisfaction and protests against the papacy of Francis, who is seen as having a freer hand to implement his progressive reforms. Judging by recent events, this scenario seems to be happening in spades. Benedict's private secretary, Archbishop Georg Gänswein, released a tell-all book in early January alleging that the deceased emeritus pope had misgivings about Francis's teachings. Then, after longtime conservative stalwart Cardinal George Pell died suddenly it was revealed that the former Archbishop of Sydney authored an anonymous and blistering critique of Francis's papacy. Next, Cardinal Gerhard Müller, the former Prefect for the Doctrine of the Faith, released a book recounting what he saw as the theological weakness of Francis and his inner circle and the pope's tepid response to the clerical sex abuse crisis. The reason all these attacks against Pope Francis are occurring now, according to Austen Ivereigh in *Commonweal* magazine (January), is that over the past year the "tight-knit opposition groups in Rome became convinced there would soon be a conclave, and they are ambitious to shape it. They foresaw Benedict's death as imminent and expected Francis's resignation to follow soon thereafter—next month, if he chose to follow Benedict's own timetable. Hence the rush to get the books out now." Whatever the reasons for the recent onslaught of criticisms, observers are bracing themselves for more conflict and controversy over the Synod of Bishops meetings that will take place this year and in 2024.

The synod, which will culminate in bishops' meetings in October of 2023 and 2024, was designed by Francis and his advisors to give an airing to laypeople's views and criticisms of the authority of the church in hopes of increasing lay involvement. So far, the synod meetings have consisted of "listening and discernment" sessions in order to gauge the "sense of the faithful" on key issues in the church. This is about where conservatives and liberals part ways, with the former charging that the synod is Francis's attempt to further modernize and democratize the church while diluting important Catholic teachings on marriage, sexuality, liturgy, and a host of other issues. For their part, liberals argue that the church and its leaders are called to listen to the voices of the laity to discover what "new thing" the Holy Spirit is saying, even if the bishops in



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league with the pope will have the final say on any such reforms, according to Ivereigh (who has been on the drafting committee of synod documents). Even the style and methodology of the synod have come under fire. The late Cardinal Pell's critique of the synod focused on its documents' language calling for a hearing of the concerns of the "voiceless" and the "marginalized" and for "radical inclusion" in the church, saying they were adopting "neo-Marxist" jargon. The language of the synod documents is closely associated with groups that are working with the synod. In the U.S., community organizing groups, such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) which was started by radical organizer Saul Alinsky, have helped run the synod's listening and discerning sessions, according to the *National Catholic Reporter* (January 20–February 2). The IAF has worked with bishops in organizing listening sessions for parishioners, and even those outside the church, to identify their needs and seek social change when it is possible (while matters of theology are generally left off the table).

Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, who worked with an interfaith group close to the IAF in organizing a synod hearing session, said the fact that some of the organizers were not Catholic aligned with the pope's vision. "We understand that we're being asked to reach beyond the walls of the church, beyond religious affiliation. We can learn a lot from people not in the church." In an article on the *Public Discourse* website (January 8), sociologist Mark Regnerus writes that the

synod's listening and discernment sessions have used participatory action research, a method which seeks to foster social change along with "self-reflective inquiry." In studying the Vatican document that seeks to synthesize and interpret the findings of the synod's listening and discernment sessions, called the Document for the Continental Stage (DCS), Regnerus sees a "great deal of woundedness and suffering" in its language, reading like a "wish list of frustrated reformists who have shifted the preferential option away from the poor and toward the 'young and culturally alienated.'" He questions how the Vatican can "synthesize" such a huge and unwieldy amount of data without imposing its own views on such material. "Making sense of interview and focus group data from a solitary parish is not a simple task. Add another 10,000 like it from across the globe and you have an impossible challenge." Regnerus concludes that the DCS represents a "very expensive, time consuming set of interpreters' personal opinions, with little accountability (and no public access) to the original data."

(*Commonweal*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org>; *National Catholic Reporter*, <https://www.ncronline.org>; *Public Discourse*, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2023/01/86704/>)

Classical religious colleges show resilience, growth in a field of dropping enrollments

While national college enrollment has decreased by 13 percent over the last decade, a new breed of "classical" religious colleges have defied the crises of Covid, economic recession, and a smaller national pool of applicants with significant increases in enrollment, writes Jeremy Tate in *First Things* magazine (January 3). These colleges, some of which were started or repurposed in the 2000s, have embraced a curriculum that stresses the Western classical tradition and Christian faith, and have found appeal among the younger generation. Thomas Aquinas College was started in California a half-century ago based on a novel curriculum that discarded textbooks and lectures in favor of student-led discussions of classical works. Recently, Thomas Aquinas celebrated its first graduating class at a brand new campus in Massachusetts, which has helped double the school's capacity without jeopardizing its low student-to-teacher ratio. Benedictine College in Kansas likewise offers a "Great Books" program, reflecting the administration's attempt to return to the basics, and its enrollment doubled between 2004 and 2022. Graduation rates at the college have jumped by 28 percent.

Michigan's conservative standard-bearer Hillsdale College skirted a statewide decline in undergraduate enrollment—among the worst in the nation—with applications growing by 53 percent, making the classical school more flexible and selective in admissions. The University of Dallas has welcomed the second-largest incoming class in its 66-year history, while Florida's conservative Catholic Ave Maria University reported enrollment that was up by half. Tate adds that "Full enrollment combined with donations from enthusiastic alumni and donors have allowed classically minded institutions to keep tuition at modest levels—at least, compared to their conventional peers. Affordability only enhances their attractiveness. By contrast,



Source: University of Dallas.

conventional colleges have been hiking tuition fees so much that students naturally wonder whether the diploma they receive is worth the six-figure debt.”

(*First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2023/01/return-to-the-classics>)

“Lutherpalians” become a reality after years of ecumenical engagement

More than two decades after the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Episcopal Church became full communion partners, congregations from both denominations are joining forces in arrangements that many see as the wave of the future for mainline churches, according to *Living Lutheran* magazine (January 19). Since the ELCA and the Episcopal Church opened the door to sharing clergy across church bodies with their full communion agreement in 2001, an increasing number of congregations and ministries have been moving toward that option. The pastor of Church of the Nativity and Holy Comforter in Baltimore says that the reason for these partnerships often comes down to simple math: “too many buildings and not enough clergy.” While these efforts are not mergers and the respective churches’ ministries retain their own ecclesial structure, such cooperation frees up resources and allows the partners to focus more on their mission goals. After seven years of having a shared congregation, members of



The Episcopal-Lutheran congregation at St. Paul's – Shepherd of the Desert Church, Barstow, comes together for worship (source: The Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles).

Church of the Nativity and Holy Comforter say that their combined congregation is stronger and more effective. The examples of Lutheran-Episcopal shared congregations and ministries are now numerous.

In Big Sky, MT, Lutheran and Episcopalian members of All Saints in Big Sky share a worship space with two other faith traditions, with neither the Lutheran nor the Episcopal churches owning the space. The “Lutherpalian” worshipers say that not needing to maintain a building gives them more opportunities to focus on outreach to a nearby resort area filled with newcomers and seasonal residents. In Winston-Salem, NC, an aging and shrinking congregation renewed itself after launching a bilingual outreach to the neighborhood’s growing Latino community, assisted by Lutheran and Episcopal bishops. Also notable is how ELCA and Episcopal campus ministries have joined forces; on 33 college campuses across the country, Lutheran and Episcopalian students have created joint ministries, often supported by nearby congregations and with ordained leaders coming from either denomination. While Lutheran and Episcopal traditions share common liturgical and theological orientations, these joint ventures also reflect the sharply decreasing denominational loyalty among Americans, especially evident on college campuses, where religious affiliation is in the minority among young people. Richard Mammana, associate for ecumenical and interreligious relations in the Episcopal Church, argues that

Lutherans and Episcopalians find themselves in ministry together more for efficiency than necessity. Struggling to keep a church building open when there's no one inside, he said, "just doesn't make sense."

(*Living Lutheran*, <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2023/01/lutherpalians/>)

“Manifesting”: spiritual practice or virtual positive thinking?

The practice of “manifestation,” based on the idea that one can will their ideal reality into existence, is making the rounds on the internet, specifically TikTok, but observers are divided on whether it is an alternative spiritual self-help strategy or just a technological version of positive thinking. In *The Tablet* magazine (January 25), Katherine Dee writes that “manifestation” often looks like a kind of “willful delusion...It’s not a form of manipulation exactly, because the point is not to change the other person’s mind but to overpower the effect of their actions. That’s closer to witchcraft than it is to persuasion.” Dee adds that, contrary to the view of its more moderate defenders, manifestation is not just about changing your mindset to be more confident but about trying to “reshape your reality.” Manifestation is not new, dating back to the 19th century, and it has “ebbed in and out of popularity in American culture since then,” Dee writes. It arrives in different guises. The popular book, *Law of Attraction*, which states that “positive thoughts bring positive results,” is more than a century old, but the concept got nationwide exposure in 2006 when Oprah Winfrey popularized Rhonda Byrne’s book, *The Secret*.



Source: Medium - Thrive Global.

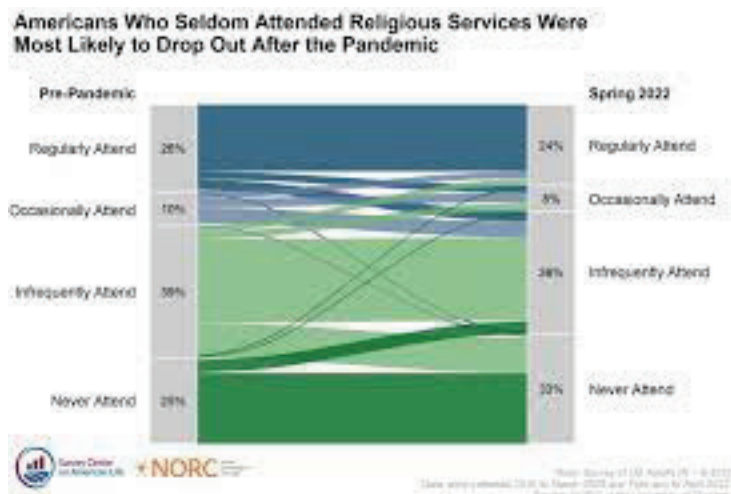
Every time manifestation reappears in the national psyche it is greeted with the same criticisms—as “toxic positivity,” a New Age hustle, or “Ayn Randian libertarianism for the spiritual set,” Dee writes. But she argues that manifestation is not an alternative expression of religion: “watching the TikTokers preaching manifestation, it is clear that few who’ve newly discovered this dressed-up prosperity gospel have even a passing thought about a Higher Power. The most modest proponents of manifestation want answers; the more ambitious want to ‘rebrand their lives.’ It is as transactional as it comes.” It is less about self-help than about reaffirming that the “world is defined by you and you alone, that you speak reality into existence,” she writes. The internet is the medium where such rebranding and manifesting of one’s own reality can be best expressed. Dee does observe, however, that manifesters often conflate the “emotional truth” they find in their practice with some sense of spirituality, even if notions of truth and transcendence are often absent.

(*The Tablet*, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/among-the-spiritual-psychotics>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

● **While religious identity has remained stable in post-pandemic America, a new study finds that there have been significant losses in religious attendance.** The 2022 American Religious Benchmark Survey, conducted by the American Enterprise Institute and the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center, compared religious affiliation and attendance data before the pandemic (from 2018 to March 2020) and in the spring of 2022. Interviews were conducted with the same people in 2022 in order to measure actual changes. The results show that religious identity remained stable through the pandemic. White mainline Christians and white evangelical Christians were the two largest religious groups both pre-pandemic and in spring 2022. Unaffiliated adults also made up a quarter of adults in both periods. However, religious attendance was significantly lower in spring 2022 than it was pre-pandemic. In spring 2022, 33 percent of Americans reported that they never attended religious services, compared to one in four who reported this before the pandemic. There was less change among highly religiously engaged Americans. Before the pandemic, 26 percent of Americans reported attending religious services at least once a week, similar to the 24 percent who did so in spring 2022.

The survey also shows who remained in, returned to, and left the pews. Conservatives, adults aged 50 and older, women, married adults, and those with a college degree were



more likely to attend congregations in both periods than were other groups. Most adults kept their attendance at the same rate as pre-pandemic, including those 65 and older, adults with a college degree or higher, Mormon adults, white evangelical Christians, and white Catholics. Adults aged 30 to 49, adults with less than a college degree, and black Protestants saw the largest increases in attendance between these two periods. Twice as many adults decreased attendance as increased attendance, however. Hispanic Catholics and white mainline Protestants saw the largest declines in attendance. The study concludes that at least in terms of religious attendance, the pandemic convinced those who had the weakest commitments to regular attendance to exit their congregations for good. The decline of religious attendance and the stability of religious identity over the past two years suggest a decoupling of religious identity and experience.

(The report can be downloaded from: <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Faith-After-the-Pandemic.pdf?x91208>)

- **New figures from the Catholic Church in Poland indicate that there has been a “dramatic fall” in Mass attendance in what is still one of Europe’s most Catholic countries.** Compared with around 37 percent in 2019, roughly 28 percent of Poland’s Catholics attended Mass in 2021, according to the statistics from the Institute for Catholic Church Statistics (ISKK). Since 1980, the institute has reported the percentages present on a given Sunday each year of Sunday Mass-goers, or “*dominicanos*,” and recipients of Holy Communion, or “*comunicantes*,” out of the total number of baptized Catholics who are able to fulfill the obligation to attend weekly Mass. The ISKK does not give the actual numbers of *dominicanos* and *comunicantes* per year, only these proportions. Its latest report said that 28.3 percent were present at Sunday Mass when a headcount was taken on September 26, 2021, while 12.9 percent received Communion. This is a noticeable drop from 2019 (no Sunday Mass figures were issued for the pandemic year of 2020), when the figure for *dominicanos* was 36.9 percent and for *comunicantes* was 16.7 percent; thus, the proportion of *dominicanos* fell by 8.6 percentage points between 2019 and 2021, while the proportion of *comunicantes* fell by 3.8 points. The diocese with the highest percentage of *dominicanos* and *comunicantes* in 2021 was Tarnów, in southeastern Poland, with 59.1 percent and 21.9 percent respectively, while Szczecin-Kamień archdiocese, in northwestern Poland, recorded just 16.9 percent and 8.1 percent respectively. While controversies over abortion and the

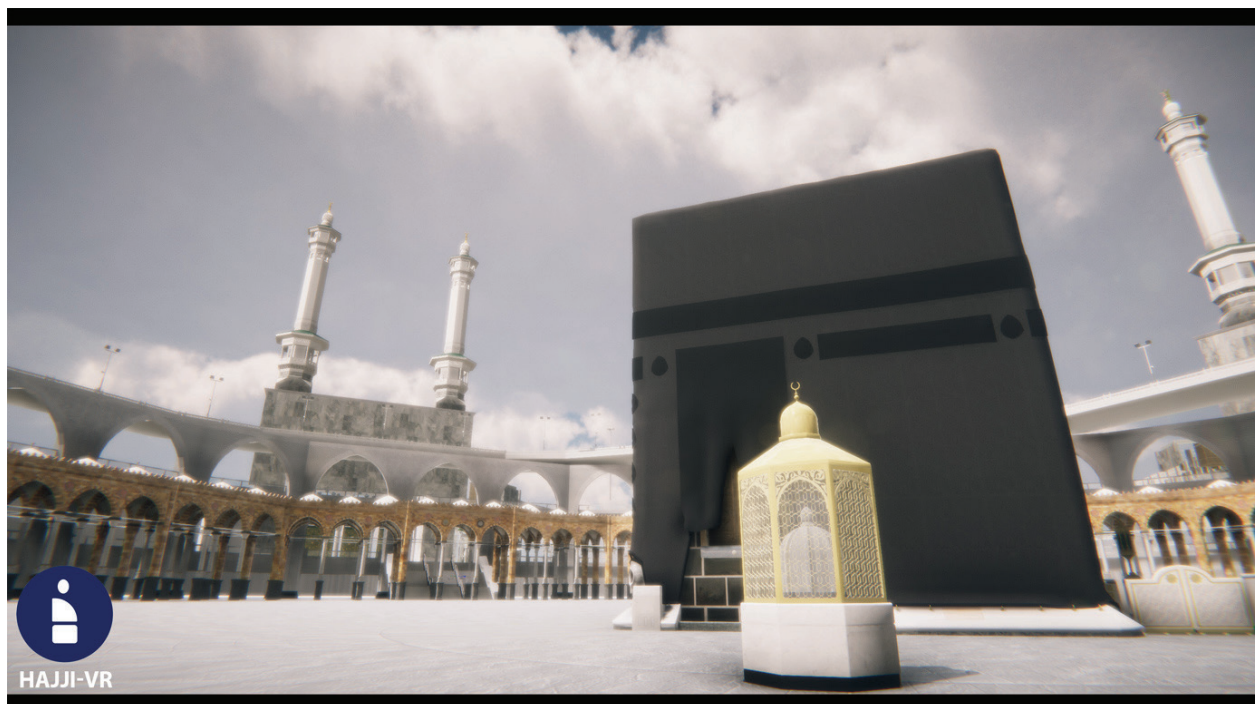


Source: Expats Poland.

clerical sex abuse crisis are cited as factors in the declines, the coronavirus pandemic is seen as the most significant factor. The new report notes that on the day the statistics were collected, Poland's Covid-19 restrictions were in place. Social distancing measures meant that Mass-goers were permitted to occupy only half of all seats in churches (a limitation that did not apply to people fully vaccinated) and they were also obliged to wear masks. In remarks quoted by the Polish Press Agency, ISKK's deputy director Marcin Jewdokimow said: "In previous years, the declines in the *dominantes* index were constant. This time we're dealing with a collapse. Therefore, I believe that next year we will have a rebound, the statistics will show an increase."

Virtual hajj addressing global Islam and alienation from Saudi control

While what is called the "virtual hajj" became a necessity during the pandemic, it will likely assume a greater place in world Islam due to quota limitations on pilgrims and the globalization of the faith, writes Song Niu in the journal *Contemporary Islam* (online in January). Virtual hajj refers to several kinds of participation in the hajj, the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca and the Kaaba stone that is considered one of the five pillars of Islam. These include reenacting and building actual scenes of the Kaaba and other sites, the use of 3D digital and virtual reality technology in pilgrim role-playing, and broadcasting the real hajj to non-pilgrims with 5G network technology (which was especially widespread during the pandemic). All of these methods of participating in the hajj came into play during the Covid pandemic, but even before



Source: Hajji VR.

that many Muslims seeking to perform the ritual were denied access to the holy sites due to shrinking quotas allocated to their home countries or because of deteriorating relations with Saudi Arabia. After the outbreak of Covid, Saudi Arabia “just provided scaled-down hajj quotas for pilgrims in 2020 and 2021, which had a huge impact on the rights of hajj applicants outside of Saudi territory,” Niu writes.

Turkey has most actively promoted the virtual hajjes after hajj-reduction quotas were imposed on its citizens by Saudi Arabia. In 2013, Turkey held its first virtual hajj, involving a Kaaba replica built in the square of Istanbul’s Ottoman Mosque. Turkey has also contested Saudi hajj management through its cooperation with other Muslim nations and more active role in international organizations, putting pressure on the Saudis to compromise on hajj quotas. But it is Saudi Arabia itself that has furthered the reach of the virtual hajj through its Virtual Black Stone Initiative, with the government receiving support from Facebook and its “Metaverse” to virtually construct Saudi smart cities that bring the hajj experience to more Muslims. Religious scholars and leaders from other Islamic countries have criticized the government’s sponsorship of the initiative, arguing that it does not make for a genuine and fulfilling hajj experience. But even those calling for a return to in-person hajj participation see the virtual hajj as serving an important preparatory function, especially for younger Muslims. “From Indonesia to Saudi Arabia, many kindergartens and schools have improved Muslim children’s understanding of hajj rituals” and non-Muslims “can also obtain immersive experiences of the hajj rituals and preliminarily understand hajj’s global significance,” Niu concludes.

(*Contemporary Islam*, <https://www.springer.com/journal/11562>)

New legal framework for Morocco’s Jewish community

Reflecting both the normalization of relations between Israel and Morocco and an interest in Jewish culture in that country, a royal decree issued on November 3, 2022 provides the Jewish population of Morocco with a new legal framework, reports Lamia El Fehaim (French Institute of Geopolitics, University of Paris VIII) in the *Observatoire Pharos* (January 26). Following the creation of the State of Israel and antisemitic outbursts, 250,000 Jews left Morocco to settle in the new state, and Israelis of Moroccan origin number about one million. Nevertheless, with its modest membership of 3,000 Jews, the Moroccan Jewish community is now the largest in an Arab country. The new dahir (royal decree) approves a new organization of the Jewish community into three structures: a national council to manage the affairs of the community; a commission of Moroccan Jews abroad to strengthen ties with their home country and defend Morocco’s interests abroad; and a foundation of Moroccan Jewry to preserve its heritage. All of this is to be implemented by 2023.

There are political dimensions to this approach. The Moroccan authorities hope to benefit from the support of the Jewish community of Moroccan origin and to develop a potential for tourism.



Jewish quarter in Fes (source: Dr Mary Gillham Archive Project / Flickr).

In addition, Morocco is counting on Israeli support on the issue of the Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony largely controlled by Morocco, but whose independence has been claimed since 1976 by a movement supported by Algeria. For its part, the current Israeli government needs diplomatic progress with Arab countries in the context of tensions with the Palestinians.

Morocco's interest in its Jewish heritage is not just political, however. According to El Fehaim, Moroccan society is becoming more open to cultural diversity, which is leading to a growing interest in the Jewish community. This is reflected in radio programs and renovations of Jewish sites, including the maintenance of cemeteries and the restoration of synagogues.

(The full article in French is available at: <https://www.observatoirepharos.com/pays/maroc/maroc-un-nouveau-cadre-legal-pour-la-communaute-juive/>)

Congolese branch of Islamic State targeting Christians for world attention

Recent attacks on churches in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) by the Islamic State suggest a new strategy of targeting Christians to gain world attention, according to the *Terrorism Monitor* newsletter (January 20). On January 14, the Congolese branch of the Islamic State (IS) bombed a church in Kasindi, killing 10 people and injuring several dozen others. The attack was

unique because the IS did not acknowledge it as a suicide bombing. Congolese authorities claimed that the bomber survived the detonation under the church rubble. The incident continued a trend of IS fighters in the DRC targeting Christians in increasingly lethal operations. One of the planners of the church attack was a Kenyan national, suggesting the expansion of the Congolese IS branch. The church bombing followed several other attacks on Christians that included the burning down of Christian homes and the killing of a Catholic nun and six other



Source: Persecution.org.

Christians. The newsletter concludes that, on “the strategic level, IS in the Congo benefits from attacking Christians in two ways. First, the attacks cause an uproar, which generates attention toward the IS globally. This is why IS was quick to promote the church bombing in Kasindi after the operation. Second, IS is able to pillage from Christian villages that it attacks to replenish food and other essentials...The lack of counter-terrorism coordination amid the destructive attacks on Christians indicates the war on the Congolese branch is far from over. In fact, the Congolese branch, if anything, is seeing a resurgence like their Mozambican and Sahelian cohorts in their respective regions.”

(*Terrorism Monitor*, <https://jamestown.org/program/briefs-381/>)

Africa experiences vibrant Christianity but shows ecumenical deficit

While successive waves of missionaries from different Christian denominations over centuries have divided African converts among the different branches of Christianity (leaving aside the impact of African Initiated Churches independent from missionary denominations), ecumenical institutional initiatives remain “generally unknown in parishes, Christian groups and families,” writes Josée Ngalula in *La Croix International* (January 24). Ngalula, a Religious Sister of Saint Andrew in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the first African woman ever to be appointed to the Vatican-sponsored International Theological Commission, writes that while there has been a legacy of antagonism based on membership in different churches, the ecumenical movement has had a positive impact on peaceful relations between denominations.

“African Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and Anglicans...maintain several ecumenical projects and associations in the areas of social work, Bible translation and theological cooperation” and experience “confessional fraternization” during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Ngalula



African Megachurch: The Kwasizabantu auditorium in Zululand seats 10000 worshipers (source: Thomas Scarborough / Public Domain Pictures).

writes. She adds that Pentecostal denominations mostly refuse to join, except in the case of prayers for peace initiated by civil authorities. However, she argues that the peaceful relations between mainline denominations are not developing into “any concern for the organic unity of all Christians.” Denominational migration is widespread in Africa, and these easy moves from one church to another result in a majority of Christian families on the continent being multidenominational, in turn resulting in debates and sometimes fights amongst themselves about what is “true” or “effective.” Ngalula concludes that the need for doctrinal ecumenical dialogue is urgent in Africa and that such dialogue needs to pay attention to these specific African circumstances.

Indian Catholics’ worship war shows few signs of resolution

A long-running “liturgy war” in the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church in India, marked by street brawls, hunger strikes, the burning of pastoral letters, and the immolation of cardinals’ effigies, has reached a stalemate after a violent episode in December, according to the Catholic



Cardinal George Alencherry (source: FSSPX.NEWS).

newsletter, *The Pillar* (January 7 and 16). Shortly before Christmas, gangs clashed inside a cathedral in southern India, dragging the altar across the sanctuary and sending sacred vessels crashing to the ground. The Syro-Malabar Church is one of several Christian communities in the southern Indian state of Kerala that traces its beginnings to St. Thomas the Apostle. This branch of Roman Catholicism is the second largest of the 23 Eastern Catholic Churches in full communion with the pope, after the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, with dioceses in Australia, Canada, the UK, and the U.S., along with India. Even though the Vatican gradually recognized its autonomy, the Syro-Malabar Church was divided about its Eucharistic liturgy, known as the Holy Qurbana, with various groups celebrating it differently. A movement arose seeking a single unified mode of liturgy, and after decades of debate a formula known as the “uniform mode” was endorsed by the majority of bishops and recognized by the Vatican. In the uniform mode, the priest faces the people during the Liturgy of the Word, turns toward the altar for the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and then faces the people again after Communion.

While most of the four-million-member church supports the uniform mode, one diocese, the Archeparchy of Ernakulam-Angamaly, has dissented, arguing that the Holy Qurbana only facing the people, reflecting the liturgical form established in most Catholic churches after Vatican II, should be recognized as a legitimate variant. The archeparchy, with half a million members, is the largest and the most vital of the dioceses, with significant evangelical outreach felt beyond India. Members of the archeparchy have a reputation for militancy, as seen during the “Ernakulam Priests’ Revolt” of 2017 to 2019, when clergy rose up to protest controversial land

deals that allegedly lost the archeparchy \$10 million and led to ongoing legal proceedings entangling the archbishop. The resulting mistrust between members of the archeparchy and the Syro-Malabar bishops was intensified when the bishops sought to implement the uniform mode, leading to street protests. An eagerly awaited meeting of the church's bishops in mid-January ended with no breakthrough on the explosive situation. Observers worry that the dynamism of the archeparchy and its influence on the wider church is being impaired by the liturgical dispute.

(*The Pillar*, <https://www.pillarcatholic.com/where-things-stand-in-the-syro-malabar-liturgy-war/?ref=the-pillar-post-newsletter>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ The sociology of religion journal *Social Compass* devotes its current issue (69:4) to the subject of **exorcism in different world religions and cultures**, noting that the practice is actually becoming more prominent in many faiths (with the first “exorcism center” in Asia being recently founded in the Philippines). In a lengthy and informative overview, Serena Bindi and Verónica Giménez Béliveau write that the increase of exorcism within various religions parallels the scholarly interest in the practice. The term “exorcism” has no equivalences in other religions besides Christianity; in Hinduism such a practice is known as “caretaking.” In a similar way, possession in a Christian sense is different from “trances,” where possession is a desired emotional state, or from its occurrence among the members of a village or a family rather than within the body of an individual. The editors and the other contributors also seek to explain why exorcism and its equivalent practices persist in modernity, citing such classic factors as cultural strains and dislocations. For instance, with the extension of the age of marriage in India, this ritual is practiced more often than before on unmarried adolescent girls whose behavior is seen as beyond the control of the group. Other recent research argues that the growing number of specialists in religions (such as priest-exorcists in Catholicism) and exorcism’s prevalence in popular media entertainment actually multiplies the demand for and incidences of the ritual. Other articles in this issue look at how women actually find greater social roles through exorcism and how exorcism is part of the healing rituals in Burmese Buddhism. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/scp>



■ The **religious freedom of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Central Asia** has become a focus of research as the region has come under the influence of Russia’s increasingly restrictive regime against minority religions. The January/February issue of the *Journal of CESNUR* (Center for Studies on New Religions) is devoted to the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ legal dilemmas, which have served as a test case of religious freedom the world over. In the introduction to the issue, sociologist Eileen Barker notes that court cases against the Jehovah’s Witnesses (for “brainwashing” and “psychological harm”) in such Central Asian countries as

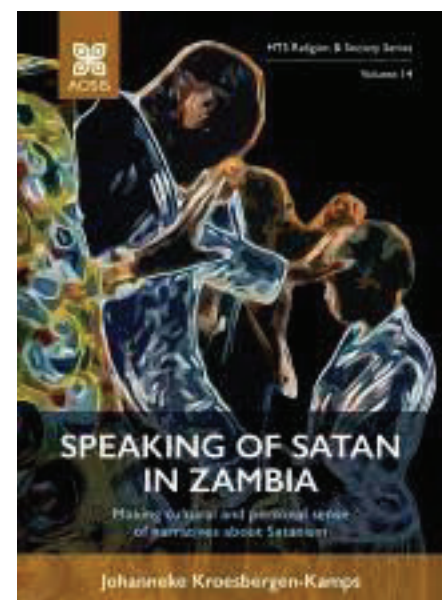
Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan bear the clear imprint of “anti-cult” legal activism based in Russia. The legal jurisdictions the Witnesses have faced can be complex; they may be discriminated against at the local and regional levels but not necessarily sanctioned at the state level.

In one article, sociologist and legal scholar James Richardson looks at how the Witnesses have had considerable success in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and even the UN Human Rights Committee in cases taken against the Russian Federation, even though the countries of Central Asia have no recourse to the ECHR, from which Russia has removed itself. Other articles include one based on a new survey of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Kazakhstan, finding that only a minority identify as Kazakhs, with three-quarters saying they speak only Russian in their homes; and a study of how “expert witnesses” used in trials of the Witnesses and other religious minorities in Kyrgyzstan come from the region’s predominant faiths and judge them by that standard. This issue can be downloaded from: https://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/tjoc_7_1_full_issue.pdf



■ Narratives about Satanism, which became popular in the Christian context of Zambia from the 1990s onwards, make cultural sense because of their links to traditional African notions as well as contemporary Christian theologies, writes anthropologist of religion Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps (University of Amsterdam) in her book *Speaking of Satan in Zambia: Making Cultural and Personal Sense of Narratives about Satanism* (AOSIS Books), which is based on her doctoral research. Zambia is a country that is more than 97 percent Christian, 77 percent of them Protestants and 22 percent Roman Catholics. Satanism in Zambia is a relatively new, mostly urban phenomenon, present in all ethnic groups, in a context of the rapid growth of independent neo-Pentecostal churches. Rumors about Satanism abound, along with cases of moral panic. Satanism is understood as an organization dedicated to bringing evil and harm, especially to Christians, and the testimonies—after deliverance—of ex-Satanists have an important place in Zambian churches, with pastors often being sponsors or “even ghostwriters” of such testimonies. Kroesbergen-Kamps collected almost 50 testimonies from ex-Satanists. It seems that international ministries, including African ones (e.g., from Nigeria), played an initial role in bringing the topic of Satanism to Zambia in the 1980s; it then became more public during the 1990s and widespread in the 2000s.

While some churches have been eager to invite ex-Satanists as speakers, others have been much more hesitant. Roman Catholic groups, such as a youth group called the Fingers of Thomas, have



been investigating cases of Satanism in order to assess their degree of truth. They promote a pastoral approach, especially in answering the fears of families for their children. On the other hand, the spread of stories by anti-Satanists has led some young people to find it attractive and to attempt to embrace it, for instance through online Satanist websites abroad. While recent cases of ritual murders in Zambia are not likely to have been committed by Satanists, Kroesbergen-Kamps analyzes how specifically African imaginaries make Satanism a plausible plot in the country, considering the significance of beliefs about the spirit world and witchcraft. “In the testimonies themselves, Satanism is seen as distinct but closely related to witchcraft.” She concludes that speaking of Satan “also expresses the confusions and anxieties of life in contemporary Zambia, sometimes appeasing them and at other times aggravating them.” The book is currently open access and can be downloaded as a PDF from: <https://books.aosis.co.za/index.php/ob/catalog/book/373>