

Spirituality and religion at work aims for more diversity and voice in business

During and after the pandemic and with continuing disaffiliation from religious institutions, many people have found spirituality at their workplaces, as a growing number of corporations are making room for the religious needs of their employees. Under “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) policies at many leading companies, new faith groups based around spiritual practices, interfaith cooperation, and social service have found a welcome home in the world’s largest corporations, according to speakers at the Dare to Overcome conference organized by the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation. The conference, held in Washington, DC, in late May and attended by **RW**, brought together about 250 business and ministry leaders from companies including Dell, Google, Intel, American Airlines, Ford, and PayPal. Brian Grim, the foundation’s founder and director, said that “more companies are opting in” to faith-based friendliness and freedom—including more from Europe—allowing their employees to “bring their whole self to the workplace.”

At a special event to mark the most faith-friendly companies, the foundation presented its Religious Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (REDI) Index that evaluates companies in 10 categories, including religious accommodations, spiritual care offerings, and belief-based employee resource groups (ERGs). Intel was ranked as the most faith-friendly Fortune 500 company for 2022, with American Airlines and Equinix following close behind, according to the survey. This year, based on publicly available information, the index also included companies that did not take the survey. This separate ranking found that 219 companies (44 percent) referred to religion on the diversity page of their website, up from 202 last year, and that 43 companies (8.6 percent) publicly reported having faith-based ERGs, up from 37 last year. Among the top 25 companies assessed in the REDI Index, 96 percent addressed religion in their diversity training and had procedures for reporting religious discrimination. Eighty percent provided chaplains or other forms of spiritual care, and 72 percent matched employee donations to religious charities.



Source: Living by Design Ministries.

The ERGs in these and other companies can dwarf most megachurches in size, even as they are more limited in purpose; Google, for example, has 10,000 members worldwide in its Inter Belief Network, which includes Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, interfaith, Jewish, and Hindu groups. The global reach of these companies also dovetails with Grim’s goal of promoting religious freedom abroad. The mantra of “bringing one’s whole self to the workplace” was repeated by speakers and participants throughout the conference, and it blended with the DEI initiatives so prevalent in American organizational life, although in a different key. “What we are doing is putting the ‘E’ in DEI—that changes things. Having equity reaches out to those of all faiths and is inclusive without marginalizing anyone,” said Fr. Greg McBrades, a flight dispatcher and chaplain at American Airlines, in an interview. He added that faith groups in companies may appeal to those who are not active in congregations, since employees “spend over 100,000 hours of their time at their jobs” and it is natural that they would seek spirituality there. Ismael Rivera, a pastor and employee of Equinix, said that “It’s at work where I’m exposed to those of other faiths. Knowing fellow employees’ religions adds a new dimension to who they are.” Asked whether the DEI approach, which has been criticized for bringing identity politics into the workplace and education, allows for free expression of religion, Rivera said that he has “never felt that I was made to accept views I disagree with. It’s really about accepting and respecting each other as people.”

Several conference participants related how ERGs in the workplace played an important role in meeting people’s needs during the pandemic. Tim Schabel, a human resources contractor for the

metal-coating company AZZ, said that employee contact with chaplains increased threefold during the pandemic and that rates of anxiety had decreased as a result of such engagement. He said that the company's use of the organization, Marketplace Chaplain, had resulted in enhanced employee health and greater productivity and introduced a third-party and confidential source that provided a listening ear to workers' concerns. Aside from utilitarian purposes, Joshua Moore, a Chicago-based consultant, thought that faith in the workplace provided a needed sense of community and belonging to workers, especially after the isolation of the pandemic, and also gave them the integrity that comes from knowing they can "bring their whole self to work."

Throughout the conference, speakers and participants spoke of bringing ERGs to the "next level." This included reaching younger generations with the faith-in-the-workplace message and encouraging business school students to engage with the issue. ERGs are also becoming more involved in social service activities, such as fighting against child trafficking. The expanded role for ERGs was also evident in a well-attended session that focused on how faith in the workplace relates to the new challenges posed by artificial intelligence (AI). The use of AI in the workplace, especially in hiring practices, will likely introduce bias and may be used to discriminate against those of different religions, said Eugene Rogers of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Thomas Osborne, a chief operating officer with Vettd, a Seattle-based staffing consulting company using AI, agreed that "bias will be amplified" with AI systems and that such technologies scrape so much data from people online that privacy will be difficult to maintain. Yet because many aspects of religious practice have been found to be pro-social and healthy, religion could actually be a desired "data point" in AI-assisted job-candidate searches, he said. Noting that greed and the bottom line will only be maximized by the use of AI in business, Osborne called on people of faith to "have a role in running the algorithms; don't let Microsoft run them, because they will be shaped by [its] values."

New books keep religious culture wars and racism concerns alive

While discussing politics, race, and religion may increasingly be seen as off-limits in a polarized society, religion publishers are not shying away from these culture-war issues. In *Publishers Weekly* (May 22), Cathy Lynn Grossman reports that upcoming titles "take on the trauma of racism past and present, the force of Christian nationalism, and the tensions between those who prioritize personal autonomy and those who assert traditional ideas about sexual and gender identity." Grossman's overview of new books shows several taking a radical approach on race, such as Michael Harriot's *Black AF History: The Un-Whitewashed Story of America* (Dey Street), where the author calls out spiritual practices and clerical politics that he says embedded racism in American life. Others are more conciliatory, such as *Loving Your Black Neighbor as Yourself: A Guide to Closing the Space Between Us* (WaterBrook) by journalist Chanté Griffin, "which offers readings and prayers designed to push people into action beyond superficial hashtags and tweets of support for their Black neighbors, coworkers, and church members in



Source: Book Riot.

times of stress or tragedy.” The evangelical InterVarsity Press (IVP) has offerings blending critiques of racism with a “servant leadership” approach, such as Daniel Reinhardt’s *Rethinking the Police: An Officer’s Confession and the Pathway to Reform*. Several IVP books are encouraging churches to embrace racial diversity by confronting racism, such as Pastor Bryan Loritts’s book, *The Offensive Church: Breaking the Cycle of Ethnic Disunity*, and *In Church as It Is in Heaven: Cultivating a Multiethnic Kingdom Culture* by Jamaal E. Williams and Timothy Paul Jones. These books tend to focus on strategies for reaching younger Christians, who researchers have found want to see more diversity in their church.

Catholic presses are also encouraging churches to combat racism and foster reconciliation—from the Orbis Books anthology, *Preaching Racial Justice*, to a resource book for white Catholics from Liturgical Press, *Racism and Structural Sin: Confronting Injustice with the Eyes of Faith*, by theology professor Conor M. Kelly. Buddhist, secular humanist, and “New Age” takes on race can be seen in the books *Home Is Here* (North Atlantic), by Zen priest and Buddhists of Color cofounder Liên Shutt; *A Master Class on Being Human: A Black Christian and a Black Secular Humanist on Religion, Race, and Justice* (Beacon Press), by progressive theologian Brad R. Braxton and secular humanist Anthony B. Pinn; and *How We Ended Racism: Realizing a New Possibility in One Generation* (Sounds True), by Justin Michael Williams and Shelly Tygielski, which proposes inner-healing as a way to confront racism. Several forthcoming books “brand racism and Christian nationalism as a spiritual, social, and political threat to society,” Grossman writes.

Fortress Press executive editor Carey Newman describes three 2023 titles as delving into “racism, the root of Christian nationalism, as the most important theological issue of our day”: *American Heresy: The Roots and Reach of White Christian Nationalism* (Sept.), by historian John Fanestil; *Ancient Echoes: Refusing the Fear-Filled, Greed-Driven Toxicity of the Far Right* (May), by Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann; and *Saving Faith: How American Christianity Can Reclaim Its Prophetic Voice* (Sept.), by religion professor Randall Balmer. Another similarly themed book is sociologist Andrew Whitehead’s *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church* (Brazos Press). While other culture-war issues such as abortion, sexuality, and family remain prominent in current and forthcoming titles, there are also a spate of new books, mostly from evangelical publishers, that seek to mend an increasingly polarized country, including public affairs consultant Denise Grace Gitsham’s *Politics for People Who Hate Politics: How to Engage Without Losing Your Friends or Selling Your Soul* (Bethany), and Joshua Ryan Butler and Jim Mullins’s *The Party Crasher: How Jesus Disrupts Politics as Usual and Redeems Our Partisan Divide* (Multnomah).

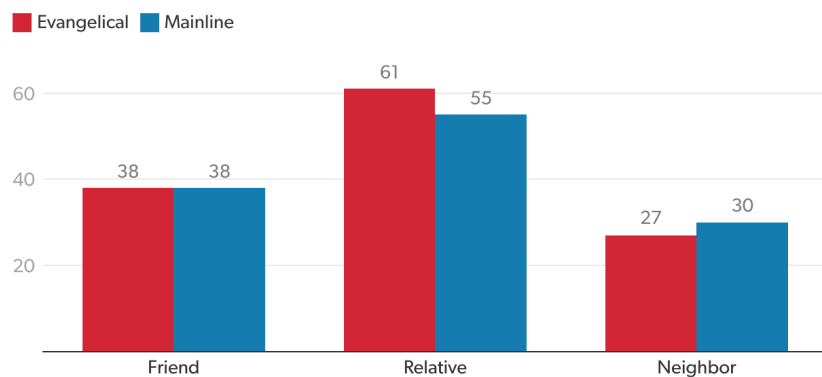
CURRENT RESEARCH

● **Members of mainline Protestant and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints congregations show the highest levels of civic engagement and volunteering in the U.S., a new study finds.** The American Enterprise Institute study, conducted by Scott Winship and Thomas O’Rourke, used the Social Capital Index developed by the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress and state- and county-level data from the 2020 U.S. Religion Census. Adherents of certain religious traditions and denominations were found to be overrepresented in areas with high or low levels of social capital. States with higher shares of mainline Protestants and “other” religious groups had significantly higher social capital than states where such adherents were largely absent. Among these “other” religious groups, the researchers found it to be Latter-day Saints (LDS)

adherents who made the difference. Once the LDS-dominated state of Utah was excluded, the correlation between the adherence rate of “others” and state-level social capital fell to nearly zero.

These relationships were seen more strongly at the country level. Counties with higher shares of LDS and mainline Protestants also

Figure 3. Percent Who Spend a Social Evening with a Friend, Relative, or Neighbor more than once per month, 2014–18



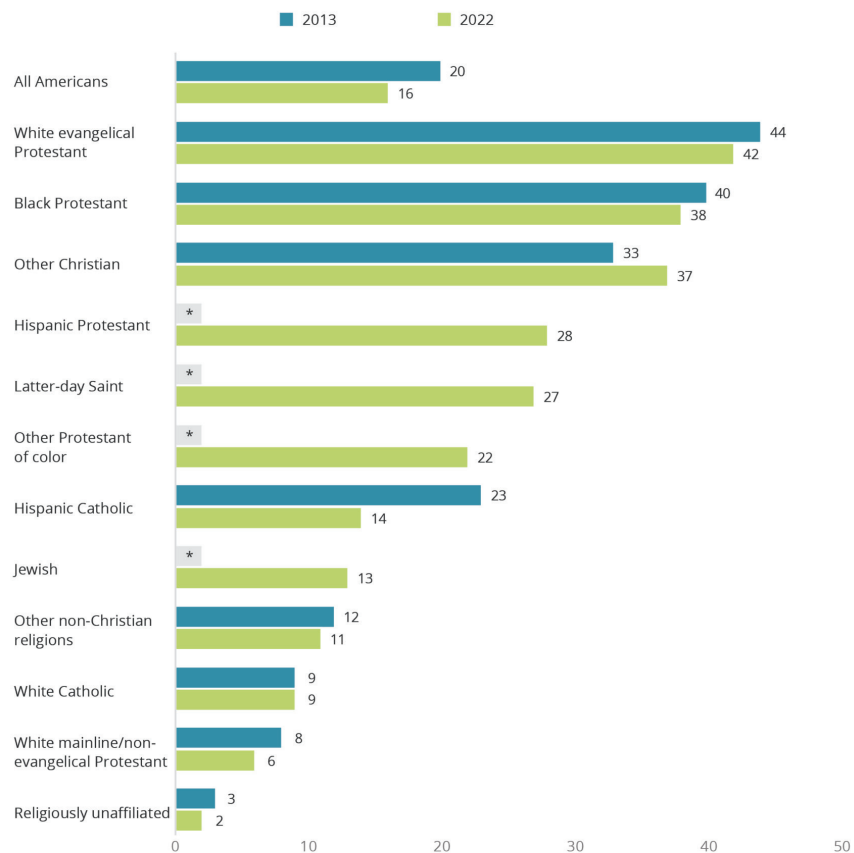
Source: General Social Survey, 2014–2018

tended to have the highest levels of social capital, “suggesting that there may be something unique about these religious traditions that encourages social capital development in communities,” Winship and O’Rourke write. They argue that the more public orientation of mainline Protestantism has influenced the pro-social attitudes of adherents and other residents. In contrast, while evangelicals are more likely to attend church than their mainline counterparts, helping them to build social capital through such participation, they tend to concentrate this social energy within their congregations rather than engaging the wider community. Even with regard to family unity, where evangelicals have been strong advocates, these conservative Protestants tend to have weaker family bonds, with more divorce than mainline Protestants.

(The study can be downloaded here: <https://www.aei.org/articles/the-mainline-protestant-ethic-and-the-spirit-of-social-capitalism/>)

- **A new survey from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) finds a shrinking proportion of Americans—16 percent—saying religion is the most important thing in their lives, but also resiliency in congregational involvement.** The rate of people who say that religion is the most important thing in their lives has decreased from 20 percent in 2013 to 16 percent today. Nearly 3 in 10 say religion is not important to them at all, which is up from 19 percent 10 years ago. The PRRI survey of 5,872 American adults finds that 57 percent seldom or never attend religious services (compared with 45 percent in 2019). There is also a higher degree of congregational switching taking place, with 24 percent of Americans saying they now belong to a religious congregation other than the one they grew up in—an increase of eight percentage points from

FIGURE 2. Religion Is The Most Important Thing in Life 2013 and 2022, by Religious Affiliation
Percent who say religion is the most important thing in their lives:



* Number of cases too small to report

Source: PRRI Surveys 2013 and 2022.

2021. But an overwhelming number of regular attenders (82 percent) state they are optimistic about the future of their congregation, with 89 percent saying they are proud to be associated with their church.

(The PRRI study can be downloaded here: <https://www.prri.org/research/religion-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-social-and-political-upheaval/>)

- **A new study finds that Hebrew schools, a staple of supplementary Jewish education for children, are in decline in Conservative and Reform branches but are expanding with the growth of Chabad-affiliated education programs that often serve families with little or no Jewish background.** The study, conducted by the Jewish Education Project and based on a survey of 706 schools operating for over 20 years, found an overall enrollment decline when looking at the totality of these educational programs. Most notably, it found that Chabad, a branch of the Lubavitch Hasidic movement, has increased its reach in terms of both students and school count, while the Conservative movement is on the decline. The Reform movement continues to educate over 50 percent of all students in supplementary schools. Most Orthodox



Source: Kerem Shalom.

synagogues do not have Hebrew school programs. There are almost 150 fewer Conservative schools than there were at the time of the 2006–2007 census, but only a two percent decline in the proportion of enrolled students. Eighty-seven percent of Conservative schools enroll less than 150 students, compared to Reform schools, of which 74 percent have less than 150 students.

A growing number of combined Reform and Conservative schools responded to the survey, although they tend to be smaller on average than either Reform or Conservative schools. The Reform movement has, on average, the most schools when compared to other movements. Reform schools are also, on average, the largest by enrollment. More than half of all students who enroll in a Hebrew school do so at a Reform school—or even more if the joint Reform and Conservative programs are counted. Although there are very few (52) schools that have over 300 students, the 20 largest schools nationwide are all Reform. When compared with the enrollment data from the 2006–2007 census, there are very few schools significantly larger now than they were 15 years ago. The decrease in students is proportionately larger than the decrease in schools, although the average school size has also decreased, and every single grade is, on average, smaller. Bar and Bas Mitzvah ceremonies remain a point of “graduation” from supplementary schools, with just shy of about 50 percent of eligible students in 6th and 7th grade enrolling, and less than 20 percent in all grades 8th and beyond. But when asked, most survey respondents said that the most important purpose of supplementary schools was to foster students’ sense of belonging to the Jewish people.

(*The Hebrew school study can be downloaded from:* <https://pathways.jewishproject.org>)

- **As in England, church growth is taking place in Scotland through the rapid growth of migrants, especially in cities, a new study finds.** Writing in the current issue of the *International Bulletin of Mission Studies* (April), Sheila Akomiah-Conteh notes that Scottish churches have largely been in a state of decline for the past 60 years. But the secular narrative is



Source: SIM By Prayer.

changing as “Thousands of new and innovative churches and Christian groups are emerging... One of the most significant contributors to these pockets of church growth in contemporary Britain is migration,” Akomiah-Conteh writes. In one of the first studies of church growth in Scotland, she focuses on the city of Glasgow, which has seen the founding of 110 new churches between 2000 and 2016; 65 percent of the new churches planted were ethnic minority churches, with 79 percent of these being African. The new churches almost outnumber all the Presbyterian churches in the city. The projected decline of churches for 2020 has recently been revised due to the growth of ethnic churches (as well as new “Fresh Expression” congregations in the Church of England and Scotland). Although the researcher does not provide updated figures, she notes that the growth of these churches in Scotland is continual. The fact that these churches draw new members mainly from within their ethnic groups [see **April RW** for more on this issue] means that they are filling an important niche in Scotland’s urban centers.

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

Converts to Islam in Latin America caught between transnational influences and dreams of a local faith

Although most Muslims living in Latin America have roots in Muslim-majority countries, the phenomenon of some local communities embracing Islam has drawn attention from various sectors, including Islamic organizations eager to develop missionary activities. A new study (in French) by Swiss researcher Baptiste Brodard and published by *Religioscope* (May) offers a realistic assessment based on recent field research conducted in Colombia and Mexico. In Buenaventura, on the Pacific coast of Colombia, local people of African descent were first converted to the Nation of Islam before being convinced to turn to Sunni Islam and then switching to Shia Islam through contact with (and support from) the Iranian Embassy in Colombia. From there, the religion spread to other places. In the Mexican state of Chiapas, Spanish members of the Murabitun movement succeeded in converting several hundred indigenous people to Islam in the 1990s and 2000s in San Cristobal de las Casas. However, not all converts remained faithful and Islam has become quite fragmented in Chiapas, with some 200 local Muslims spread across five different Muslim groups with divergent orientations. In addition to converts from indigenous groups, some Mexican converts dreaming of a life in an Islamic environment have moved to Chiapas.

Some claims regarding large-scale conversions among indigenous groups, such as the Wayuu tribe in the border area between Colombia and Venezuela, appear to be largely unfounded, according to Brodard’s observations. And while one can indeed come across converts to Islam in Brazilian favelas, the number seems to be far from the alleged wave of thousands of converts. Brodard stresses local factors that may have played a role in conversions to Islam, but also the role of transnational Muslim organizations in the birth and/or development of local communities in Latin America. He observes instances of missionary zeal not unlike that of Christian



A group of Muslims in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico (source: Religioscope).

organizations, and a similar need to provide evidence of success in order to convince foreign donors to support missionary efforts. These organizations are experiencing challenges similar to those of Christian missions, with some converts primarily looking for material support in exchange for embracing a new religious faith.

Regarding Sunni Islam, Saudi Arabia used to be a primary source of influence and support for missionary efforts, but non-state sponsored Salafi groups are now tending to become primary promoters of Salafism in Latin America. Moreover, private Turkish Islamic groups are emerging as new key players for spreading Sunni Islam on the continent. Divisions and competition among Muslim groups in Latin America appear to present a major hurdle the significant spread of Islam there. Moreover, far from all converts stay Muslims or succeed in passing on the faith to the next generation. On the other hand, those very challenges motivate some converts to plead for the development of a local and service-oriented Islam, independent from foreign organizations and adapted to local cultures and needs. Despite adverse factors, Brodard concludes that contextualizing Islam might be the key to the development of Islamic faith in Latin America.

(The research paper, in French, can be downloaded as a PDF from the website of Religioscope Institute: <https://www.religioscope.org/cahiers/17.pdf>)

King Charles's monarchy—traditional and multifait?

The coronation of King Charles III in early May was the subject of intense speculation as to whether the ceremony and subsequent monarchy would depart from or uphold tradition in an increasingly secular and multifait Britain. Commentators and analysts were divided on the degree to which the monarchy would change with the first coronation since that of Queen Elizabeth in 1953. In *Commonweal* magazine (May 9), Austen Ivereigh notes that Catholic and other religious leaders were prominent during the coronation, with Cardinal Vincent Nichols, the



Source: Twitter account of Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

Archbishop of Westminster, being the first cardinal to attend the coronation of a monarch since 1543. The event was informed by Queen Elizabeth's 2012 address to faith leaders that sought to redefine the Church of England, stating that it was recognized as the official church not to "defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions [but] to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country." This reframing of the church's mission went along with its identity as a "liberal national church whose liturgies are rare and sparsely attended [and that] has taken on the role [of] an NGO, in partnership with other churches and faiths," Ivereigh writes. The Church of England has exploited its physical omnipresence and relations with powerbrokers to support a wide range of social services. In the same way, the monarchy has become an "uber-NGO" in its charitable activities, even as it embodies a national mythos that still resonates with the British people.

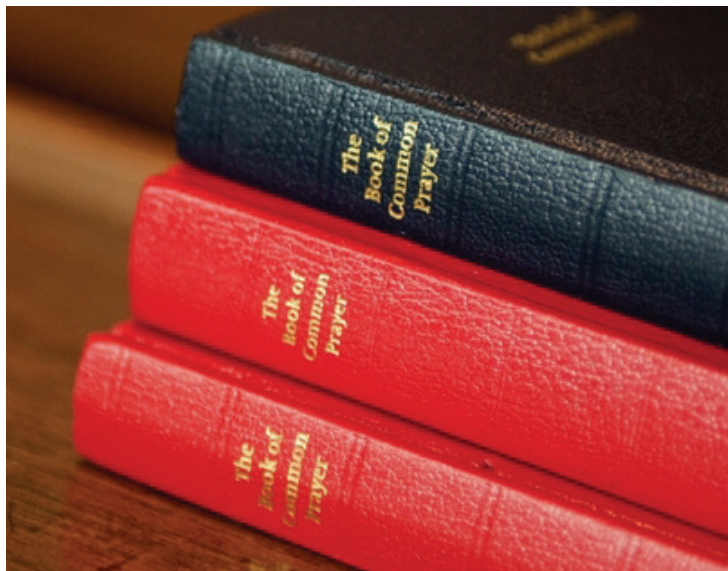
But Ivereigh adds that the retention of the coronation oath, dating back to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, of maintaining a "Protestant and Reformed religion" is offensive to Catholics, other religions, and even Anglicans who do not view themselves as Protestant, even if it has been downplayed by Charles himself. In the *Religion and Global Society* blog (May 11), James Walters writes that although the coronation service was spun by the media as a multicultural and multifaith event, it did not live up to such expectations. That the biblical reading was delivered by a Hindu prime minister and a Muslim mayor of London was in attendance did show that religious minorities in the UK have come of age. But non-Christian religions were kept at arm's length during the actual ceremony, although, Walters writes, "not because religious pluralism was ignored; it was because we are finally starting to take it

seriously. Other faiths are not exotic variations on the Christian model. They have their own worldviews, their own ideas of the sacred, and their own theologies of governance and the monarchy, which should not be appropriated and shoehorned into an ancient ceremony as a tokenistic form of inclusion.” He concludes that the reign of King Charles as an “era of flourishing religious pluralism will depend on...how well we continue to take religious communities seriously on their own terms...With his strong interfaith friendships and knowledge of different traditions, King Charles shows every intention of taking the lead.” Esoteric scholar Mark Sedgwick, writing in the same issue of *Commonweal* cited above, might concur with Walters, as he notes that King Charles has long espoused a “traditionalist” view which teaches that there is a mystical core to all religious traditions, a view which also informs his environmentalism.

(*Commonweal*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org>; *Religion and Global Society*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2023/05/the-coronation-was-not-a-multifaith-service-for-sound-interfaith-reasons/>)

Prayer Book’s ancient pedigree draws seekers back to church

The Book of Common Prayer, the devotional and liturgical book of Anglicanism, “is enjoying a revival in the Church of England,” writes Daniel French in *The Spectator* magazine (May 2). French, a vicar in the Church of England, writes that “Over the past two years, more and more churchgoers have asked me about a return to Thomas Cranmer’s exquisite language, essentially unaltered since 1662, for church services and private devotions. Other vicars tell me that they have had a similar increase in interest.” Much of the renewed interest came with last year’s funeral



Source: Church of England.

of Queen Elizabeth, the recent coronation of King Charles, and the use of traditional Church of England rites to mark these events. But it is the younger generation that is registering the most interest in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), as they appreciate the challenging and demanding nature of its spirituality that seems worlds apart from the generic worship of megachurches. Bradley Smith, the chairman of the Prayer Book Society, said that the organization has been overwhelmed with inquiries, interest, and new members. Churches are

trying to plug into the enthusiasm for the BCP by holding events such as “Matins ’n’ Brunch” and “Evensong ’n’ Curry.” Even the Catholic Church is harnessing the interest through its Anglican Ordinariate, an enclave for ex-Anglicans. Some church schools have assimilated the BCP into their curriculums.

Smith finds that the new members of the Prayer Book Society are not only young but also tend to be male. Both he and French speculate that the new interest may be a spillover effect from such popular teachers as Jordan Peterson, who is said to have revived young men’s interest in traditional Christianity. The Prayer Book Society’s recent involvement with prison ministry may reflect this masculine spiritual appeal. French notes that the “revival also appears to transcend the normative Anglican tribal divides of ‘High’ and ‘Low’ church.” He argues that, however beautiful the text, the BCP revival is not so much an aesthetic as a theological enterprise, and that the BCP can be the guidebook on the route to spiritual awakening. “The 2022 census showed an ever-shrinking Christian population inhabiting a secular wilderness. Church attendance continues to decline. Nothing seems to work. Maybe the C of E can be renewed by vicars and laity salvaging the old Prayer Book from vicarage dustbins? Stranger things have happened in Church history,” French concludes.

Ukraine war has varying impact on Russian Orthodox Church in France

Due to their diversity, the war in Ukraine and the Patriarch’s statements on the war have impacted Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) communities in France in different ways depending partly on the demographics of a given congregation, writes Catherine Tyson in the *Bulletin de l’Observatoire International du Religieux* (May). Tyson, a Fulbright Grant Awardee, has conducted research in churches belonging to the Exarchate of the Moscow Patriarchate in France. She remarks that Russian Orthodox parishes in France “are often home to a rich diversity of ethnicities, including both Russian and Ukrainian



Source: Amin - Wikimedia Commons.

people,” with priests of various national backgrounds and some parishes using French as a liturgical language, “and they also exist in a space with more autonomy to voice anti-war opinions.” Such diversity has made a

collective statement regarding the conflict difficult. The war in Ukraine has actually divided Russian Orthodox parishes in France and Patriarch Kirill's support for the war has caused controversy.

Some priests have stopped commemorating Kirill during services as a protest; this is the case in at least one parish, after discussions between the priest and the congregation. Others feel that commemorating the Patriarch is traditional and should not be stopped unilaterally, although this does not necessarily mean that they support the war. Priests differ on whether to openly condemn Russia's actions, with some seeing politics as outside the church's role. Moreover, people have a variety of reasons for attending a specific parish or not, and personal ties to a parish and its parishioners may be more important than statements by the Patriarch. A number of Ukrainians continue to take part in the life of Russian Orthodox parishes, including people who left Ukraine after the war began and now attend ROC churches, because they feel that they should be part of a canonical church. In the Paris area, a new Ukrainian Orthodox church under Metropolitan Onuphry of Kyiv now gives Ukrainians an alternative place to worship without commemorating Kirill. The situation is complex and evolving, based on the progression of the war and individual circumstances. Tyson stresses the need for research regarding the consequences of war on religion.

(*Bulletin de l'Observatoire International du Religieux*, <https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/bulletin/effects-of-the-war-in-ukraine-on-russian-orthodox-parishes-in-france-english-version/>)

War in Ukraine as factor in division among Muslims?

While the Muslim world initially reacted with indifference to the Russia-Ukraine war, the conflict has gradually given rise to opposing positions among Muslims and their religious leaders, with Shiites often supportive of Russia, Sunnis calling for an end to the conflict, and jihadists rejoicing in a war of opposing "miscreants," writes Pierre-Jean Luizard (French National Centre for Scientific Research) in the *Bulletin de l'Observatoire International du*



President Putin and Muslim religious leaders of Bashkortostan (source: Russian Presidential Press and Information Office, Wikimedia Commons).

Religieux (May). The initial indifference is easily understandable, since there seemed to be little at stake for Muslims, with their own experiences of successive crises. Iran took the most pro-Russian position due to geopolitics and historical ties going back to the Soviet Union. Russian support for the Syrian regime is also valued by Hezbollah in Lebanon, and support for Putin seems to be widespread there. But the reactions of other Shia actors (such as in Iraq) have been more nuanced.

Sunni religious authorities have called for an end to the conflict and a peaceful resolution. Most Sunnis seem reluctant to take sides. Muslim public opinion is characterized by hope that the war might be the harbinger of a multipolar world, marking the end of Western domination. Among Islamists, supporters of Al Qaeda as well as followers of the Islamic State have rejoiced in watching a war taking place between their enemies. As for the Taliban, despite their historical enmity with Russia, they at first adopted a neutral stance and later signed economic deals with Russia, following a pragmatic approach as they face a very difficult economic situation.

(*Bulletin de l'Observatoire International du Religieux*, <https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/bulletin/comment-la-guerre-en-ukraine-a-accentue-les-divisions-du-monde-musulman/>)

Prophecy beliefs find wide hearing in contemporary Greek Orthodoxy

In recent years, prophecies recycled through modern means of communication have proliferated in Greece and Cyprus, where conservative moral values and nationalist aspirations have been promoted as an answer to influxes of refugees and financial and health crises. Writing in *Social Compass* (March), Efstathios Kessareas (University of Erfurt) reports that the producers of such discourses—both clerics and laypeople—do not claim to receive direct revelations from God, but see themselves as “prophetologists,” active in interpreting and disseminating prophecies to the public. Their discourses refer to signs of the times, to specific prophecies received from various (late) holy men, and to a salvific divine plan for bringing mankind back on the right path, emphasizing the role of the Greek Orthodox nation. Current events, such as the pandemic crisis, are getting integrated into the prophetic scenario, “fueling contemporary conspirational thinking.”

The consequences of crises and the perception of threats to religious and national identities have stimulated prophetic beliefs. Current events are understood as having been predicted a long time ago. Kessareas also sees some specific Orthodox factors making people receptive to such beliefs. “In the Orthodox cosmos of spirits, angels, and saints miraculous intervention is taken for granted. What is more, it is used as an explanatory framework for every historical event,” he writes. The Internet plays an important role in the circulation of prophecies to larger audiences, even among those not attending church. They “oppose secular culture by using the same means and strategies,” ironically contributing in various ways to the very secularization that they denounce, according to Kessareas. For “prophetologists,” the public stance of the official church



Greek Orthodox Priests at Monastery of Saint John's (source: Jakobthurn, Wikimedia Commons).

does not go far enough, because it is too inclined to accept compromises. The fact that the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece issued an encyclical in 2022 against “false prophets” bears witness to “the proliferation of such agents within the ranks of the church.”

(*Social Compass*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/scp>)

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

1) From its founding in 2006, the **Moishe House** movement has expanded considerably in building a sense of community among Jewish young adults. Moishe Houses started in order to meet the needs of young Jews who wanted to more actively engage in the Jewish community and were too old for Jewish life on campus and too young for the traditional young adult and family programming being offered. Started by Morris Squire, a philanthropist in Santa Barbara, Calif., the first house in the Bay Area started with hosting Shabbat dinners but then gave way to a variety of peer-led Jewish programs. From that one house, the model spread and expanded its scope, with a network of houses now spanning more than 27 countries and reaching more than 70,000 unique young adults around the world every year. They are not affiliated with any particular branch of Judaism, though they may shade toward the progressive side,



embracing sexual diversity. They represent one model among several that are attempting to give Jewish community to young Jews who are in danger of drifting away from it. (Source: Rod Dreher's Diary, May 18)

2) The Vatican's establishment of an "**observatory**" at one of its several academic institutions, the Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis, to investigate claims of apparitions attributed to the Virgin Mary suggests a centralization of the Catholic Church's process for authenticating such phenomena. Deirdre de la Cruz of the University of Michigan writes that the creation of this office "signals a major shift in how apparitions of Mary have been evaluated and authenticated in modern times." The Council of Trent first gave bishops the authority to recognize new miracles or relics. While the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith established a set of norms prescribing how alleged apparitions should be judged at the local level, only a minority of apparition claims are investigated and only 25 have been approved by the local bishop, with just 16 of these being recognized by the Vatican. "Yet, throughout the Catholic world, hundreds of shrines commemorating a miraculous appearance of Mary enjoy devotional followings, with Vatican intervention and investigation often depending on the extent of the apparition's following," de la Cruz writes. The new office will serve both as



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an academic and pastoral task force for the study of apparition claims worldwide. It remains to be seen precisely how the office will coordinate with local bishops who have until now enjoyed the authority to determine whether the “Mother of God,” as Mary is often called, appeared in their jurisdiction. De la Cruz concludes that the new observatory is an “intriguing development in the long history of balancing the universal claims of the Catholic Church with the myriad expressions of local devotion and belief.” (Source: The Conversation, May 26)

3) **Andreas Kornevall**, a Swedish-British ecologist and educator, is leading a movement to mobilize Old Norse mythology and rituals and pre-Christian spirituality to address contemporary issues, particularly climate change. Kornevall is the founder of the UK-based Earth Restoration Service, an educational organization serving 750 schools on ecological concerns. More recently, he has started lecturing on Norse myths, teaching workshops on runes (phonetic symbols) and leading ceremonies known as blots (a form of worship that has traditionally included sacrifices). These ancient ceremonies and myths are meant to instill a memory of the pre-Christian past and rituals and how they establish a relationship with the land. Kornevall acknowledges that pagan symbols and practices have been used by the far right and that the Old Norse religious practices of



Source: <https://www.kornevall.com>.

Vikings included human sacrifice and slavery. In his educational efforts, he seeks to counter what he sees as the harmful use of these symbols. Kornevall is far from alone in seeking to rehabilitate pagan practices and myths for ecological purposes. The UK has seen a significant rise in people exploring the ecological implications of ancient regional customs and identifying as pagan or neopagan, while Iceland and Denmark are also seeing a revived paganism with a strong ecological thrust. (Source: Religion Unplugged, May 2)