

### AI as a dehumanizing or desecularizing force?

The seemingly sudden public emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), especially in its recent incarnation of ChatGPT, has led to a good deal of speculation in both the secular and religious media. Various observers see the technology as speeding up secularization, creating new religions and spirituality, or even making space for a more human-based religiosity to flourish. In the first few months of ChatGPT's appearance, curiosity drew people to experiment with the software, asking it religious and theological questions and even prompting it to deliver sermons and compose prayers. But reflection soon overtook curiosity, as scholars and journalists looked for the long-term meaning of AI for organized religion and spirituality. The secularist historian and futurist Yuval Noah Harari argues that the unique storytelling capacity of AI will further supplant traditional religion while making up its own faiths. Writing in *The Economist* (April 28), Harari sees the end of culture in "its human-dominated part." Since he sees religion as a product of culture and human imagination, Harari asks, "What will happen to the course of history when AI takes over culture, and begins producing stories, melodies, laws and religions? But with each passing year, AI culture will boldly go where no human has gone before. For millennia human beings have lived inside the dreams of other humans. In the coming decades we might find ourselves living inside the dreams of an alien intelligence."

In his *Nonzero Newsletter* (June 29) on Substack, science writer Robert Wright argues that AI as it has recently appeared resembles the "noosphere" envisioned by the Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "more organically than I would have guessed a few decades ago; it's more like collective human cognition, and less like some alien intelligence that walked out of an MIT lab, than I would have imagined." Wright, like de Chardin who coined the term, sees the noosphere as a "global brain" connecting the world together. He does not necessarily accept the theological vision of de Chardin, but adds that it *can* "offer a theological (or at least teleological) framework for our mission. I emphasize the word 'offer.' Though the best-known proponent of a noospheric perspective was a theologian, the theological emanations of this perspective are more speculative than some of its other emanations. That said, I do think a noospheric perspective gives reason to suspect that there is in some sense a 'higher purpose'—that natural selection was



Source: Mohamed Hassan | PxHere.

set in motion for a reason, a reason reflected in the current technological moment, and that AI is inescapably involved in the realization of that reason.”

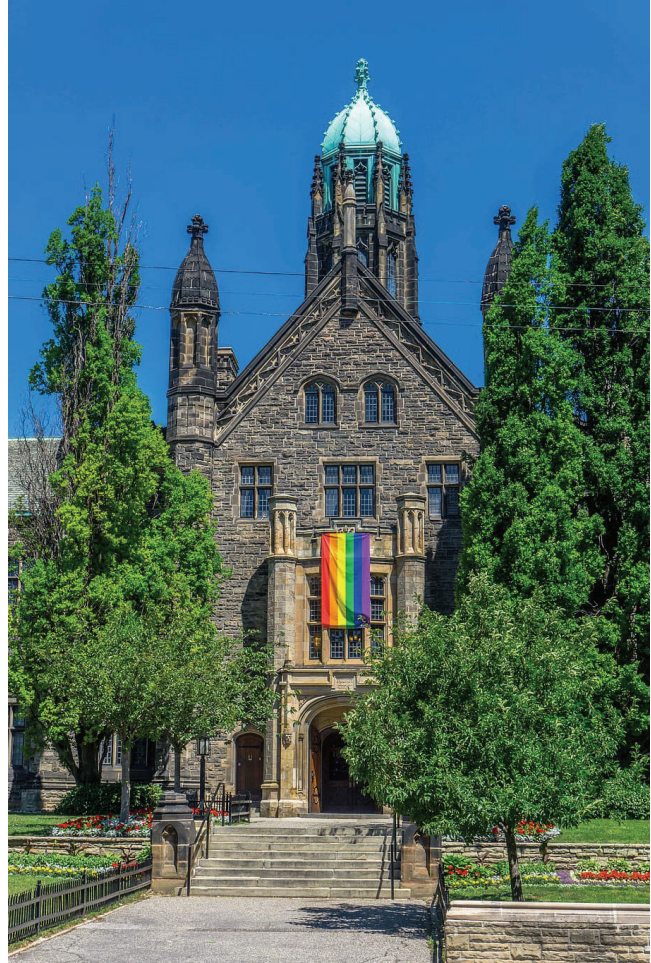
In *First Things* magazine (May), Liel Leibovitz argues that rather than creating a new technological global spirituality, AI will actually allow and maybe even encourage more human-centered religious impulses. He writes that AI will ironically challenge the hi-tech economy that has “focused all of our energy toward marching, in a machine-like fashion, toward the maximization of bottom lines...Were machines to grow so advanced as to outperform our lawyers, our doctors, and all other highly paid professionals, humans will have no choice but to learn how to be human again, which is to say, how to be soulful and not just clever and smart... Maybe we will now see investment flow toward things that engage us spiritually. Maybe we’ll have no choice. ChatGPT and its pals are on course to put many of the information economy’s best and brightest out of business.”

## **LGBTQ influence and acceptance drive mainline Protestant, Jewish changes**

The greater acceptance and political support of the LGBTQ community is a source of growth as well as change in liberal religious groups, according to two reports. In the Jewish magazine *Tablet* (June 26), Erica Silverman reports that Reform Judaism has seen a significant increase in



members and conversions to Judaism, especially in urban areas. In a trend accelerated by the pandemic, a significant number of these converts belong to the LGBTQ community. According to Rabbi Eli Freedman, “Judaism is becoming increasingly attractive to those seeking a new spiritual home at a time when people can transition between identities like never before—including religion and gender.” The Reform community was active in receiving seekers online during the pandemic, with introduction to Judaism classes run on Zoom. “Online access was a lower barrier of entry for many and a safer way to begin to explore Judaism, without physically entering a synagogue. Being more inclusive—around questions of who is Jewish, as well as a diversity of family structures and gender identities—has helped attract people to the Reform community in particular,” Silverman writes. There are no national figures on conversions recorded in Reform Judaism apart from individual congregations.



Source: <https://www.pxfuel.com/en/free-photo-iupxk>

Various Jewish LGBTQ advocacy and activist organizations have also mushroomed. Keshet, an advocacy organization for LGBTQ+ equality, has grown extensively since 2019, growing from four to six regions. About 700 synagogues, including about 300 rabbis from across denominations, have participated in Keshet programs and training over the last five years. Silverman writes that “Some converts say once they had explored their own sexuality or gender identity, exploring their faith became much easier. Transitioning connects to a spiritual conversion, as well.” One synagogue member and convert from Lutheranism, who recently had a “nonbinary” wedding, said that Reform Judaism allows “queer and trans people to create their own rituals within the Jewish framework and life cycle.” The national Reform rabbinical organization, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, with about 2,200 members, “runs year-round programming supporting the LGBTQ+ community and clergy, such as training for inclusive worship life cycle events, like gender-affirmation ceremonies.” Silverman notes that many Reform Jews “prefer to attend services without membership, and may attend virtually, even post-pandemic, making geographic limitations less of a barrier.”

Meanwhile, progressive Christian churches are reported to be moving beyond “gay rights, even beyond transgender acceptance, and venturing into the realm of ‘queer theology.’ Rather than merely settling for the acceptance of gender-nonconforming people within existing marital norms and social expectations, queer theology questions heterosexual assumptions and binary gender norms as limiting, oppressive and anti-biblical, and centers queerness as the redemptive message of Christianity,” reports John Murawski in *Real Clear Investigations* (June 13). While these theories are not new in academia and theological education, they are just now filtering into congregational life. Murawski writes that “queer theology is a mature, established theological subject of scholarship now in its third decade and armed with well-honed arguments that queerness is grounded in biblical texts and classic commentaries.” Ellen Armour of Vanderbilt Divinity School said that “Most newly minted ministers coming out of mainline divinity schools today have some exposure to queer theology, either through taking a queer course, reading queer authors in other courses, or through conversations with queer students and queer professors,” Murawski reports.

Courses that are offered at the leading progressive divinity schools have a congregational emphasis, such as Harvard Divinity School’s spring 2023 catalog listing “Queering Congregations: Contextual Approaches for Dismantling Heteronormativity.” Murawski writes that one emerging area that shows the potential for queer theology to be put into practice in congregational life is “polyamory,” which refers to non-monogamous relationships involving three or more people. “It’s already an emerging legal and moral issue and a potential culture war, now that some municipalities and states are beginning to pass anti-discrimination laws that expand parenting rights and housing rights to multi-partner unions.” The Metropolitan Community Church denomination, formed in 1968 and ministering to gay and lesbian congregants, now offers itself as a “spiritual home” to polyamorous unions.

(*Tablet*, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/new-spiritual-home-lgbtq-converts-reform-judaism>;

*Real Clear Investigations*, [https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2023/06/13/queering\\_jesus\\_how\\_its\\_going\\_mainstream\\_at\\_progressive\\_churches\\_and\\_top\\_divinity\\_schools\\_903535.html](https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2023/06/13/queering_jesus_how_its_going_mainstream_at_progressive_churches_and_top_divinity_schools_903535.html))

## **Muslim-Christian alliance taking shape over gender wars?**

Growing Muslim activism in the U.S., Canada and other countries on such issues as sex education and gender is finding new support and cooperation from conservative Christians, reports Sarah Haider in her blog *Hold That Thought* (June 15). Recently, conservative Christians have expressed admiration for Muslim parents protesting progressive classroom curricula and teachings on gender and sex education in various countries, believing that they have been more effective and united than their own protests. In June, Muslim parents staged a large protest in Maryland when a school district decided to reclassify sex education and gender material so that





Source: Religious Freedom Institute.

parents would no longer be informed or have the option to take their children out of school. Conservatives also applauded an all Muslim city council in Hamtramck, Michigan, that refused to fly the pride flag in June. Before 9/11 there were numerous instances of alliances between Muslims and conservative Christians, and Haider suggests that the new Muslim activism may convince conservatives to “begin loosening up their xenophobia...[P]rovided terror attacks remain rare, they are unlikely to pick it up with the same intensity as before (against Muslims, at least).” Herself an ex-Muslim, atheist writer and activist, Haider goes on to further speculate that “the religious alliance taking charge of the conversation will discourage secular critics of woke extremism from speaking out—polarizing the debate further.”

The move to greater conservative activism will “make it likely that Muslims will broadly re-join the conservative fold. The Left will abandon Muslims, who are no longer cooperating nor all that useful for signaling tolerance,” Haider writes. Aside from an emerging Christian-Muslim alliance, she notes the likelihood of a sharper rift between progressive and conservative Muslims, although she is skeptical that progressive Islam ever had many adherents, even calling such individuals “MINOs”—“Muslims in Name Only.” She adds, however, that the few MINOs that do exist are “larger than life, as they are the literal poster kids for what I like to call ‘Intersectional Islam.’ This Islam is a product of the West, more specifically, of the desires of elite white liberals...Intersectional Islam provides the kind of diversity that educated liberals are

comfortable with—all the ‘enriching’ accouterments of cultural difference without any of the underlying ideas. MINOs don’t eat pork, but they do support #TransRights.” Haider cites a recently released public statement, “Navigating Differences,” with hundreds of signatories among Muslim leaders, asserting that attempts to reinterpret doctrine to be inclusive of LGBTQ affirmation are “theologically indefensible.”

(*Hold That Thought*, [https://newsletter.sarahhaider.com/p/muslim-christian-alliance-against?; the “Navigating Differences” statement can be downloaded at: https://navigatingdifferences.com/clarifying-sexual-and-gender-ethics-in-islam](https://newsletter.sarahhaider.com/p/muslim-christian-alliance-against?; the 'Navigating Differences' statement can be downloaded at: https://navigatingdifferences.com/clarifying-sexual-and-gender-ethics-in-islam))

## **New Christian far right adopting old anti-Semitic sentiment?**

There is an ideological shift taking place among the alt-right, or “dissident right,” away from paganism toward the adoption of “already existing religious and specifically Christian symbols,” writes Tamara Berens in the Jewish magazine *Mosaic* (June). She writes that while this shift may be more politically effective in a majority Christian society, the move “to a Christian-inflected presentation has also lent a language and structure to the far right’s instinctive anti-Semitism. Many of the most anti-Semitic among the new far right are, at the same time, eager to speak about their Christian faith.” The alt-right or new far right emerged during the Trump presidency and was marked by its criticism of mainstream conservatives and its adoption of anti-immigrant and nationalist ideas. Along with its ideological shifts, its most prominent figures have shifted, as from Steve Bannon, the occult-influenced Trump mastermind, to Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, who became notorious for espousing QAnon and anti-Semitic sentiments, mostly couched in terms of anti-Zionism. Greene more recently espouses such slogans as “stand against the Godless Left” and “Proud Christian Nationalist.” Berens adds that the “Christianity being offered here is closer to a symbolic totem of identity than to a deeply lived and guiding moral code. Many observers tend to gloss over the new-old Christian valence to the far right precisely because the tenor of it is so absurd and lightweight. Nonetheless, it’s a real and canny shift. The far right may be post-Christian still. But they’re now post-Christian in a Christian way.”

She cites the examples of Kanye West, who has “spent years cooking up a form of celebrity-imbued Christianity,” and Nick Fuentes, who “styles himself a devout Catholic and talks of the papacy as his highest authority.” Fuentes is one of the figures most responsible for the far right’s shift away from paganism, though he tends to use the term Christian as a political tool to denounce non-Christians. Nearly every one of Fuentes’s video streams contains barbs aimed at Jews, with his hatred of Jews extending to a hatred of the Jewish state. Berens writes that along with the shift from paganism to Christianity among the new far right, there has been a turn from concrete social issues to “anti-woke taboo-shattering,” a stance associated with “long-standing anti-Semitic tropes that go deeper than fears about Jews and immigration, tropes that left-wing radicals and anti-Semites enjoy playing with as well...In other words, there exists a deep-seated



Marjorie Taylor Greene in December 2021 (Wikimedia Commons | Gage Skidmore).

resentment in these quarters toward some amorphous entity that controls ‘what you are allowed to talk about.’” Berens points to Candace Owens, a friend of West’s who has been described as the new face of black conservatism, as also trading in sentiments that suggest that support for Israel is foreign to American conservatism and to American values at large. Berens concludes that while the “far right heightens tensions with and increases pressure on the mainstream right,” it is unlikely that it will take it over anytime soon.

(*Mosaic*, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/politics-current-affairs/2023/06/from-coy-to-goy/>)

## CURRENT RESEARCH

- **Mormons in America have become less Republican over time, according to recent analyses of the Cooperative Election Study (CES).** In analyzing national CES data from 2008 to 2022, political scientist Ryan Burge found that Republican affiliation among Mormons peaked at 75 percent in 2012 (when Mitt Romney was a candidate), while reaching a low of 53 percent in both 2017 and 2021 (the Trump years). Writing in her blog *Flunking Sainthood* (for Religion News Service), Jana Riess notes that in early June, Latter-day Saints leaders issued an unprecedented statement about the dangers of voting a straight-party ticket. “Merely voting a straight ticket or voting based on ‘tradition’ without careful study of candidates and their



positions on important issues is a threat to democracy and inconsistent with revealed standards,” the First Presidency wrote to members in the United States. Riess notes that since Latter-day Saints in this country have “a decades-long history of voting Republican, the ‘tradition’ church leaders appear to be challenging is the all-too-common default setting of conservative church members voting for whichever candidate has an ‘R’ next to their name.”

Because the CES survey has a smaller sample size in odd-numbered years as compared to election years, Riess compiled the data into three five-year blocks, averaging the LDS respondents’ political affiliation from 2008 to 2012, 2013 to 2017, and 2018 to 2022. Comparing the first and last blocks of years, she found a modest Republican loss of about seven percent, although “this hasn’t been a slam-dunk for the Democratic Party. Democrats appear to have gained only 3 points, while independents gained 4.” The biggest losses for LDS Republicans have been among the younger generations. While Republican affiliation took a hit in 2016 among all generations, it bounced back for older Mormons but continued to decline among those born in the 1980s and later. These findings fit with Riess’s analysis, with Benjamin Knoll, of the second-wave data collected from their Next Mormons Survey in 2022. In the first wave, they also found the largest drop in Republican affiliation among the younger generations. But in the second wave, they found the Democratic Party losing support among younger LDS adherents, with about 3 in 10 Gen Xers and millennials identifying as Democrat, but only 1 in 5 members of Gen Z. “In fact, there are as many people in Gen Z who say they have no political preference as report being Democrats,” Riess writes.

(*Flunking Sainthood*, <https://religionnews.com/2023/06/21/us-mormons-are-becoming-less-republican-but-not-by-much/>)



The U.S. and Utah state flags displayed in front of the iconic Salt Lake Temple of the LDS church (Wikimedia Commons | Pastelitodepapa).

- **Ireland continues its decline in Catholic affiliation, with the 2022 census measuring Roman Catholic affiliation at 69 percent.** The Catholic Newsletter, *The Pillar* (May 31), reports that this figure is down from 79 percent just in 2016. The number of people selecting the “No religion” box rose from 451,941 in 2016 to 736,210 in 2022, accounting for 14 percent of Ireland’s population. The 10-point decline in the percentage of people identifying as Catholics





Source: <https://www.pxfuel.com/en/free-photo-qmpdh>.

went along with a drop of less than 5 percent in the absolute number of Catholics in the country, and is partly explained by the increase in the overall Irish population between 2016 and 2022 due to immigration. While Catholic numbers are declining steadily, Catholics now form a smaller proportion of the overall population. “Ireland is secularizing fast, but at the same time, a lot of non-Catholic migrants have come into the country in recent years which is also changing the picture,” said David Quinn of The Iona Institute. But the Central Statistics Office noted that the structure of the question on religious affiliation had changed radically between the two census forms, making direct comparisons problematic. The 2016 census form asked, “What is your religion?” and listed “Roman Catholic” as the first option and “No religion” as the last. The 2022 form asked, “What is your religion, if any?” and put “No religion” as the first option, followed by “Roman Catholic.” The proportion of Catholics was found to vary considerably by region, with a high of 80 percent in County Mayo, in the west of Ireland, and a low of 53 percent in Dublin, which has received the most immigrants.

(*The Pillar*, <https://www.pillaratholic.com/p/ireland-is-diversifying-says-dublin?>)

- **A striking increase in the share of religiously unaffiliated people in Switzerland does not preclude the existence of spiritual beliefs and practices among a significant percentage of these “nones,” government surveys suggest.** In June, the Swiss Federal Statistical Office released its data on religious affiliation based on surveys conducted from 2019 to 2021 among

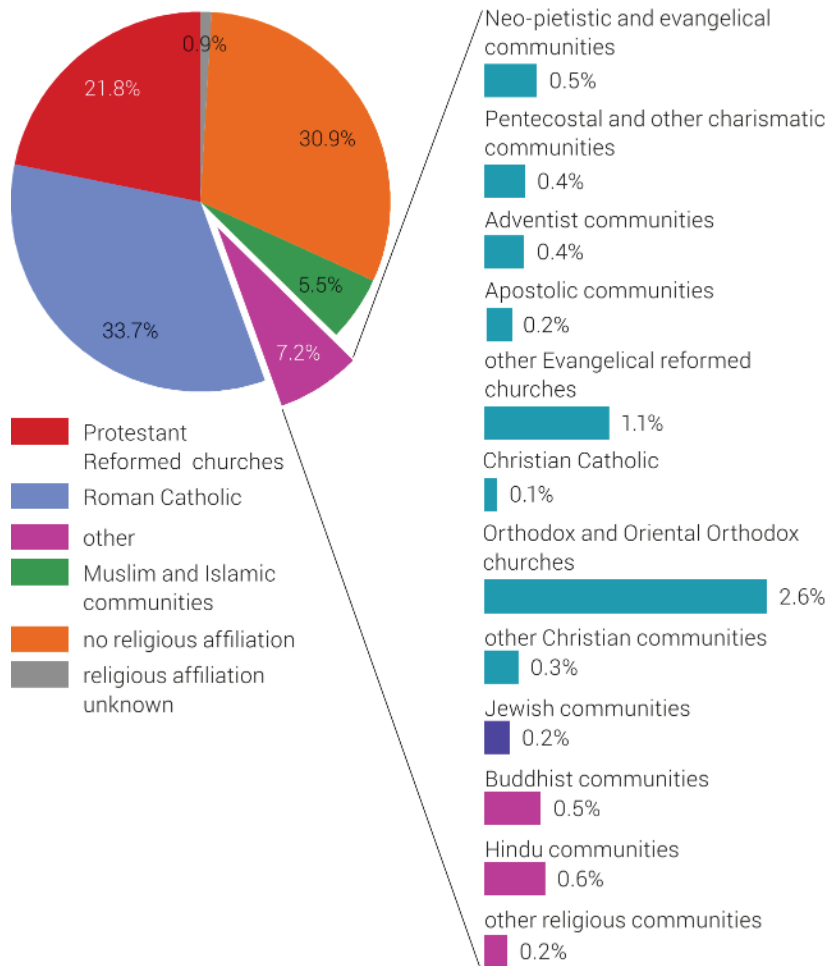
large representative samples. In 1970, 98 percent of the population of Switzerland was Christian. Fifty years later, 32 percent are unaffiliated, making them the largest group after Roman Catholics (33 percent). There are significant regional variations, with the nones making up 57 percent of the population of the city of Basel. The data showed that 35 percent of men and 30 percent of women have no affiliation. The highest percentage of unaffiliated (41 percent) was found among people in the 25–34 age range. Two-thirds of those who do not belong to a religion in Switzerland were religiously affiliated during childhood. About half were Roman Catholic and 40 percent were Reformed. Twenty-nine percent say that they left because they disagreed with

their religious group, 17 percent claim that they never believed, and 15 percent report having lost their faith. Moreover, the study identified a significant number of people who still belong to a religious denomination while feeling estranged from it, since 27 percent of the people who spontaneously claim to have no religion are actually still formally affiliated.

In 2019, among the nones in Switzerland, 67 percent reported themselves to be neither religious nor spiritual, but more than 26 percent considered themselves spiritual; in addition, there were 3.9 percent who claimed to be religious and spiritual, and 2.5 percent religious. Nearly 38 percent do not believe in God or in some superior power and 22 percent are agnostic, but 30 percent believe there is some superior power, while 9 percent of nones believe in one God. By contrast, more than 51 percent of religiously affiliated people in Switzerland believe in one God and more than 23 percent in a superior power. There is practically no difference in beliefs about reincarnation or the possibility of communicating with the dead among people with and without

## Religion 2019–2021

Permanent resident population 15 years or over



Source: FSO – Structural survey

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a religious affiliation. Thirty percent of the nones report using spiritual techniques such as yoga, Tai Chi or Qigong and nearly the same percentage are interested in personal development. In both cases, this is higher than the average interest of religiously affiliated people in such techniques.

(The Swiss Federal Statistical Office's report is available for download in German: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/aktuell/neue-veroeffentlichungen.assetdetail.25225675.html>; and in French: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/actualites/quoi-de-neuf.assetdetail.25225676.html>)

- **There has been an increase in the number of children attending private, and often religious schools, according to data released by the lobby group Independent Schools Australia.** *World* magazine (June 8) reports that enrollments at private schools in Australia are up 35 percent in the past decade. From 2012 to 2022, enrollment at Islamic schools doubled and grew by 49 percent at nondenominational Christian schools, while rising by 38 percent at nonreligious schools. Religiously affiliated institutions make up 83 percent of all independent schools in Australia. During the pandemic, Australian parents gravitated toward private schools because they adopted remote learning more quickly than public ones. Heads of private schools said parents also want a more structured learning environment for their kids. A shortage of affordable housing within commuting distance of public schools exacerbates teacher shortages,



Source: The Association of Independent Schools of the ACT.



and increasing class sizes also make public schools less desirable. Private schools receive funding from the Australian government in the range of over AU\$12,260 (nearly US\$8,000) per student, compared with a little under AU\$21,000 per public school student. With only 65 percent of Australian students in public school, the government saves billions of dollars in education costs, while parents contribute an average of AU\$5,700 in fees per student at private schools. A recent Australian Bureau of Statistics report shows private school retention rates leading public school rates by 18 percentage points.

### **Russia's Protestants intensify adaptation to Russian, collectivist culture**

Russia's Protestant churches are adapting to the country's Orthodox, nationalist, and collectivist culture in their style of worship, architecture, and reconstruction of an indigenous Russian past for themselves, write Eugene Zaitsev and Dmitrii Fokin in the *Journal of Church and State* (online in May). The authors do not specifically mention Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its more hyper-nationalistic turn since then, or the increased restrictions on religious groups that are outside the "historic religions" of the nation—Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and Catholicism. But they write that Russian Protestants "are beginning to understand that their future in Russia...will depend on how they approach the resolution" of the conflict between



Lutheran Church of St. Catherine, Saint Petersburg, Russia (source: Wkiwand).

individualism and collectivist traditions. This can be seen in the way that Protestant historians have recently been tracing their roots not mainly to European and American churches and denominations but back to native Russian spiritual movements, such as the “spiritual Christians” (Dukhobors and Molokans) and other syncretistic “folk Protestants” who were often called schismatics and heretics by the Russian Orthodox Church. Other Protestant leaders and historians acknowledge the contributions of Western missionaries but claim that there was also an evangelical impulse among Orthodox leaders.

These Russian spiritual claims by Protestants are a way to counter the monopoly of the Orthodox Church. At the same time, Protestant churches have sought to contextualize their faith, even as they believe they have a contribution to make to Russia different to that of Orthodoxy. They do this by introducing “certain elements of Orthodox ritual, including decorating the halls of worship, using candles, donning special liturgical robes, and even wearing a cross,” Zaitsev and Fokin write. Protestant churches are attempting to model their buildings after the Orthodox style. While such “low” Protestants as Baptists and Adventists may be more reserved in adopting such a style, Lutherans, Methodists and even the younger charismatic movements have gone further in absorbing Russian Orthodox spirituality and liturgy into their religious practices. “In fact, the most consistent application of an ideology of ‘Russianess’ in Russian Protestantism is carried out by the Association of Christian Churches (ACC), which unites dozens of Protestant (mostly Pentecostal) communities throughout Russia,” Zaitsev and Fokin write.

(*Journal of Church and State*, <https://academic.oup.com/jcs>)

## **Japan’s “endingness” industry flourishes with loss of traditional Buddhist burial rites**

New practices and products dealing with death are emerging in Japan, as older traditions of families maintaining cemeteries are disappearing due to population loss, lack of family ties, and a subsequent disintegration of the temple system for the deceased. In an article published in *Anthropology Today* (June), Anne Allison and Hannah Gould write that as Japan has entered what has been called an era of the “family-less dead,” the country has seen an “explosion of innovative products, services and community programs centered on ‘endingness.’” They note that the elderly now fear becoming a “stranded soul,” abandoned both in this life and the next. Not only is there a lack of care for the elderly and for their death, but there is now a surplus of unwanted religious goods, such as household altars, abandoned headstones, and even cremated remains which are seen as too costly to inter.

To fill in for these losses and play the role that temples traditionally have, entrepreneurs have created companies, services, and products—from humanoid robots that perform death rituals to the practice of “encoffining.” The latter practice was inspired by the 2008 Oscar Award-winning film *Departures* and seeks to provide intricate care for the dead person in a way similar to



Source: <https://connectingdirectors.com/47446-japans-death-specialists-converge-at-inaugural-life-ending-industry-expo>

hospice care for the dying, which is also now spreading across Japan. In a demonstration at the popular ENDEX convention attended by these deathcare entrepreneurs, the dead body's clothing is deftly removed and it is fitted with a silk white kimono, with the hands molded with Buddhist prayer beads. There are now "butsudan" services that seek to dislodge spirits from unwanted altars, alternative burial societies, and "clean up" companies that fill in for the role that families and religious organizations once provided, Allison and Gould report.

(*Anthropology Today*, <https://rai.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14678322>)

## Findings & Footnotes

■ An article published in late May on the LinkedIn social network, as reported by journalist Loup Besmond de Senneville in *La Croix International* (June 30), proposes that the Roman Catholic Church could contribute to the development of an integral security paradigm for governing cybersecurity. The article, written by four Catholic computer experts (two of them employed by the Roman Curia), argues that the Catholic Church is not immune to cyber threats at various levels and that weaknesses in the Vatican's digital infrastructure should not be ignored. A number of cyber attacks have been reported in recent years, such as the one targeting the Holy See's diplomatic network in 2020, which led to



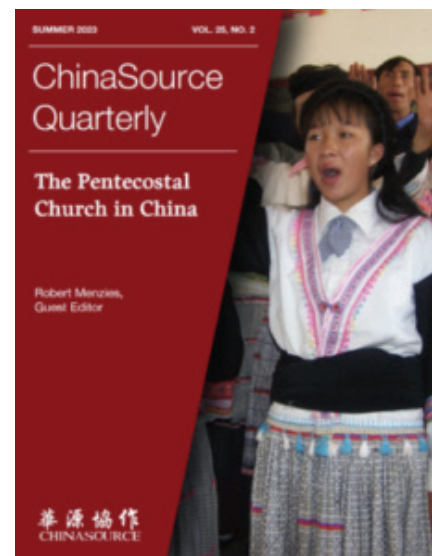


Source: <https://churchexecutive.com/archives/cyber-exposures-in-the-church>

suspicious about China being behind the attack and the Holy See's diplomats being instructed to process the most sensitive information on paper only. Other incidents have taken place in the context of the war in Ukraine. The group of experts pleads for an approach that should benefit both the church by protecting the Vatican's digital assets and mankind as part of the church's multilevel dialogue with the world.

Speaking on their own, the authors advocate a "Vatican Cybersecurity Authority" staffed with experts that could contribute to global thinking on the subject. Since "cybersecurity has become a critical issue in today's digital age," the church as a universal institution is called "to intervene in human history [by] enriching the present with good" and approach the cyber realm as a way to promote "authentic development and long-lasting peace"—not forgetting that "the internet is already home to many Catholic platforms that are irreplaceable tools as a means of evangelization." Seeing the challenges of cybersecurity as illustrations of an interconnected world, the group of experts submits such a project as a continuation of Catholic Social Thinking by "providing pragmatic views that can help actors across diverse sectors and nations to navigate the challenges of a uniquely complex digital age." The article can be downloaded from: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/cyber-commons-humankind-chuck-brooks/>

■ The evangelical quarterly *China Source* (June 12) devotes its current issue to the Pentecostal situation in China amidst growing government restrictions and crackdowns. The Pentecostal revival in China has spread through missionary efforts as well as indigenous churches, pastors, and evangelists, most notably the underground house churches. Several articles are authored by charismatic and Pentecostal practitioners, especially church planters belonging to the "big five" networks in China: China for Christ, China Gospel Fellowship, Yinshang Church, Lixin Church, and Word of Life. But the rapid growth of these church planting networks and congregations during the past 15 years has slowed considerably with the enactment of new religious regulations in 2018. Many churches have been shut down and almost all



missionaries forced out of the country.

The recent wave of persecution has “diminished the church in terms of its size, social influence, outreach ministries, and even its global vision,” writes Dennis Balcombe. The overwhelming majority of Christians in China remain Pentecostal or charismatic (though many go by the name “evangelical” to avoid further problems with the government), but the Covid pandemic added another stressor to these churches. Some congregations in the largest underground church network, China Gospel Fellowship, lost between 30 to 40 percent of their members, with other networks reporting similar losses. What is called “house church model 3.0,” where members meet in each other’s homes but are also linked electronically to other home churches, has shown signs of growth post-Covid. This issue can be downloaded at: <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/pentecost-in-china-2/>

■ A special issue of the Serbian journal *Politics and Religion* (17:1) highlights the Taliban’s unique hybrid political and religious identity as the key to understanding how it has endured after so many challenges, including the U.S. occupation and withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Last year’s strike against Al-Qaeda’s Ayman al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan, where he was under the protection of the Taliban, indicated that the group had maintained its terrorist alliances despite its claims to the contrary. Several articles in the issue look at the continuing pattern of militance and support for terrorism in the Taliban by comparing it to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Unlike these groups, the Taliban does not have a radical Islamic vision or ideology but rather a consistent strategy of Pashtun supremacy and forming strategic alliances with radical Islamic groups to consolidate its rule in Afghanistan. But its routing of two superpowers (the Soviet Union and the U.S.) has also led Taliban leaders to see themselves as emerging leaders of world Islam. An article by Ahmad Shaye Qassem concludes that the difficulty in understanding and predicting the Taliban’s actions stems from the fact that it combines a “self-contradictory outcome” of radicalized religion, organized crime (through narcotic trafficking), ethno-nationalist hegemony, and longstanding tensions in Afghan-Pakistani relations. The issue can be downloaded at: <https://www.politicsandreligionjournal.com/index.php/prj/issue/view/33>

■ The current issue of the journal *Religion* (April) looks at the relation of contemporary Sufism to different forms of universalism. Francesco Piraino of Ca’ Foscari University (Venice, Italy) identifies the existence of a discourse that can be defined as “Islamic humanism,” partly overlapping with other expressions of universalism but also distinct from the others. He defines a religious universalist discourse “as the conceptualization of otherness in religious terms, which overcomes boundaries and proposes inclusive narratives.” It implies both exclusivist and universalist dimensions, leading to different (and necessarily unachieved) types of universalism. In contemporary Sufism, one can identify three main types of universalist discourses: Traditionalist, New Age, and neoliberal. The first type, influenced by the understanding of a “primordial tradition” as it was developed by René Guénon (1886–1951), is anti-



modernist and engages in interfaith dialogue with institutional religions. In contrast, New Age Sufism is anti-institutional, seeing sacred truth as scattered and present in a range of religious and secular phenomena, and reconfiguring gender roles. “Neoliberal” Sufism (or “moderate” Islam) accepts Western modernity, calling for religious pluralism and sacralizing a free market economy and democracy.

Studying two Sufi orders originating in Northern Africa, the Budshishiyya and the Alawiyya, Piraino notes that their universalist discourse challenges some mainstream Sufi understandings while not being identified with either of the three aforementioned types. It should be noted that “humanism” is here an emic category used by representatives of both groups. They see human beings as stewards of creation. They are both involved in local and international interfaith dialogue. They are not averse to mixing Islamic hermeneutics with human and social sciences. They emphasize responsibility towards society and encourage socio-political engagement. At the same time, their Islamic humanism remains a religious discourse “rather than a reformist project or a specific ideology.” Both groups have partly different ways of approaching it—it is not made part of the spiritual path for the Budshishiyya. And there are also debates within and around those organizations on those issues. Piraino explains that Islamic humanist discourse “expresses the centrality of the human being within the frame of a divine project.” There are similarities with the other contemporary Sufi universalist discourses, but differences as well. Acknowledging the diversity of Islamic discourses, Piraino points out, challenges simplistic dichotomies often present in approaches to contemporary Islam. For more information on this article, visit: <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rrel20>

