

New York the sending and receiving center for missionaries of all faiths?

New York City is emerging as the “missionary capital of the world,” says researcher and journalist Tony Carnes. In introducing his guest, missionary and researcher Chris Clayman, in an interview published on his website *A Journey through NYC Religions* and his television show, *Journey TV* (July 9), Carnes notes that “there are more missionaries moving in and out of New York City for more religions than is found in any other place around the world. There are Buddhist missionaries from Singapore with their four spiritual laws. India’s Prime Minister recently came to the city to join a mass gathering for Yoga Day at the United Nations. And who hasn’t heard from the ubiquitous door knockers of the Jehovah’s Witnesses? And these people, the missionaries, are savvy about the city. They study it carefully, like scribes writing on a Torah scroll.” In the interview, Carnes and Clayman discuss the new and complex nature of missionary work and flows in cosmopolitan cities like New York. Clayman, whose micro-level research and reporting are based on anecdote as well as statistics, describes how the line between mission-sending and receiving congregations in New York has become blurry. He notes how obsolete the old notion is of missionary activity proceeding from “the West to the rest”: “It’s the rest to the West now.”

He cites the example of a church in Harlem that groups of European tourists regularly visit in order to hear African American gospel music. But the church is actually a French-speaking West African church with an African American mother church, which is the one that is probably listed in the tourists’ guidebooks. Instead of finding gospel music, the tourists end up hearing “French and Mooré and different languages. Well, instead of, you know, just turning them away, [the parishioners] say ‘come on in!’ And they have got to where—they say they do this every Sunday—they will greet the tourists, find out where they’re from...and then they would share like a several-minute ‘gospel presentation,’ as they would call it, in French...And then they go and they follow up with them and try to connect them with some people [and churches] back home.” Clayman finds that the pandemic helped to make New York churches accessible to the world. He describes how one church started a Zoom meeting for Bangladeshi Christians from a Muslim background, which “opened it up to the world. So they came in from Canada and Paris and



Source: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

London and Dubai and Malaysia and Bangladesh and India. It grossed over 600 people that are connected to this group, meeting three hours a day... And because Muslims often—you know, if they're interested in converting, that's a huge problem. They would have to see some sort of community. And they saw community, and [actually] a couple of hundred... people were baptized through that online group during Covid."

Clayman adds that the multipurpose nature of Muslim congregations in New York can give them a missionary function. While in Africa one might go to the mosque only to pray, in New York and other American cities the "imam is a matchmaker for marriages; he's a community leader. In fact, most of the time, you won't even see 'mosque' on the mosque; they'll call them 'cultural centers,' 'Islamic cultural centers.'" One such Islamic center in New York has a "missionary training school, sending out what they call 'messengers' to places around the world. Some of the messengers go down the streets of New York City, and one of their converts is a native-born American who has become head of their school." Clayman points out that while "religion and ethnic group still [have] a huge part of who people are," they are drawn to the city for many reasons, the "arts, or professions, or whatever it is, [and] they're meeting people from so many different backgrounds. And so whereas overseas, maybe what people were doing would kind of spread through a homogeneous ethnic group and it wouldn't really go beyond those boundaries

much, here those boundaries are a lot more porous, and almost like Venn diagrams where they're overlapping...And so they're meeting people and have all sorts of groups they're identifying with—which means that information is spreading from group to group, and that's why you have such great fusion in our cities.”

(*A Journey through NYC Religions*, <https://nycreligion.info/journey-tv-with-chris-clayman-nyc-global-capitol-of-missionaries/>)

American Hindus' borrowing from Jewish playbook pays contested dividends

The long-term alliance between American Jews and Hindus on issues of religious freedom and discrimination has spilled over into related conflicts over Hindu nationalism and Zionism. As American Hindus have faced increasing criticism for their support of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist government in recent years, they have taken a new leaf from their Jewish counterparts' defense of Zionism and Israel, reports Aparna Gopalan in the secular and leftist magazine *Jewish Currents* (Spring). Gopalan reports that criticism of Modi's India and its human rights record, especially its actions against Muslims, has led many Hindu activists and organizations to counter that their faith is being subjected to a new kind of



Source: Swarajya.

discrimination. This pattern was illustrated in the controversy that surrounded last year's parade celebrating Indian independence in Edison, New Jersey. Among the annual parade's usual floats, a wheel loader, which resembles a small bulldozer, holding aloft an image of Modi in its bucket rumbled along, an addition which critics charged symbolized the Indian government's removal of Muslim homes and storefronts in Delhi a few months earlier. When the New Jersey Democratic Party passed a resolution condemning the event and calling for a crackdown on Hindu nationalist operations in the state, nearly 60 Hindu American groups fired back with a statement saying that such condemnation amounted to anti-Indian and anti-Hindu discrimination. The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) has spearheaded a number of these campaigns, as it has moved from its focus on civil rights issues (such as workplace religious protections and immigration reform) to protesting forms of "anti-Hindu hatred" that reflect sectarian conflicts taking place in India.

"To counter what they view as a rising tide of prejudice, the HAF and other Hindu American groups have turned to American Jewish organizations...Along the way, these Jewish groups have trained a generation of Hindu lobbyists and advocates, offering strategies at joint summits and providing a steady stream of informal advice," Gopalan writes. Hindu groups have most recently borrowed from their Jewish counterparts' definition of anti-Semitism as including anti-Israel and anti-Zionist sentiments, arguing that similar prejudice is being seen in criticisms of Hindus who take pro-Modi and patriotic views of India. In 2021, such activists came up with a working definition of "Hinduphobia" that includes attempts to denigrate Hindus as being "agents or pawns of violent, oppressive political agendas," and the term is now freely used among Hindu groups. Just as Jewish groups have protested against anti-Zionist conferences and groups on campuses, the HAF and other Hindu rights groups are agitating against similar academic initiatives against Hindu nationalism. The politics of Hinduphobia is also seen in inter-ethnic conflicts, such as around initiatives opposing the caste system in various U.S. cities, with the HAF and others arguing that such laws initiated by Dalit or untouchable activists are discriminatory against other Hindus. Gopalan notes that as criticisms of India's human rights record have mounted, anti-nationalist Hindu activists have also tacked closer to anti-Zionist Jewish protestors against Israel and its treatment of Palestinian Muslims. Herself a critic of Hindu nationalism, she questions the sharp increase in the rate of Hindu hate crimes reported by the HAF, arguing that such incidents are often the result of inter-ethnic disputes rather than actual attacks against Hindus by non-Hindus.

(*Jewish Currents*, <https://jewishcurrents.org/>)

New cardinals set to keep papacy in the mold of Francis?

Pope Francis's recent naming of 21 new cardinals in early July is likely to be decisive in tilting the vote of the next papal conclave and keeping the papacy in the mold of Francis, according to reports. *The National Catholic Reporter* (July 21–August 3) notes that 18 of the 21 new cardinals are under the age of 80, making them eligible to vote in the papal enclave and bringing the total



Source: SSPX Society Saint Plus X / Flickr.

number of eligible electors to 137. Among the key appointments are the new head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, Archbishop Victor Manuel Fernandez, the Vatican's ambassador to the U.S., Archbishop Christophe Pierre, and U.S.-born Archbishop Robert Prevost, who is responsible for the appointment of Catholic bishops worldwide. Vatican correspondent Christopher White reports that Fernandez's appointment to the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) and to the rank of cardinal goes along with Francis's conciliatory style; he had asked the archbishop, who is a fellow Argentine, to "steer the [DDF] in a new direction marked by the promotion of ways of evangelization and doing theology, rather than controlling theologians." Also notable among the newly named cardinals who embrace Francis's approach is Hong Kong Bishop Stephen Chow, a Jesuit, who has recently tried to bridge divides between China and Hong Kong Catholics.

The Catholic newsletter *The Pillar* (July 11) notes that in comparison to 2012, the year before Francis's election, the college of Cardinals in September will be "significantly less European and slightly less North American, while the representation of Asia and Africa has increased. Certainly, there seems to be a preferred Francis type of cardinal, and one of these preferences is to name men chosen from widely scattered and often overlooked regions of the world... One of the inevitable consequences of this is a drop in Italian and European representation and influence. How this shift could affect a future conclave is hard to predict — Though some Catholics, maybe even Francis, might see this unpredictability as a space for the Holy Spirit to be heard." In his newsletter *Rod Dreher's Diary* (July 11), the conservative journalist writes that the

new appointments show that “Francis has further stacked the College with men who owe him and are presumably in his theological mold. He is working to institutionalize his progressive revolution.” He adds that the list of new cardinals was “idiosyncratic, typical of Francis, and once again ignored the [conservative] Archbishop of Los Angeles, one of the largest dioceses in the world. You might say that L.A. already has a cardinal, in the retired Roger Mahony. Well, a city having two cardinals—two active cardinals—didn’t stop Francis from naming the auxiliary bishop of Lisbon, Americo Aguiar, as a new cardinal, despite that fact that Lisbon’s archbishop is already one.”

Methodist schism larger than expected as middle path gives way

Departures from the United Methodist Church (UMC) are increasing, reaching over 6,000 congregations—a fifth of the U.S. total—that have now received permission to leave the denomination, the Associated Press reports (July 6). The departure of conservatives over theology and the role of LGBTQ people in the nation’s second-largest Protestant denomination and the numbers leaving are higher than either conservatives or progressives expected. Those figures emerged after the close of regular meetings in June for the denomination’s regional bodies. Many of the departing congregations are joining the Global Methodist Church (GMC), a



Source: United Methodist Communications.

denomination created last year by conservatives breaking from the UMC, while others are going independent or joining different denominations. Some 6,182 congregations have received approval to disaffiliate since 2019, according to an unofficial tally by United Methodist News Service. That figure is 4,172 for this year alone, it reported. Many of the departing congregations are large, meaning that UMC officials are bracing for significant budget cuts in 2024.

The departures have been most numerous in the South and Midwest, with states such as Texas, Alabama, Kentucky and Ohio each losing hundreds of churches. In some areas, United Methodists have set up “lighthouse” or similarly named congregations, designed to receive members from churches that are departing the denomination. The GMC, with about 3,000 congregations so far, has also begun planting new churches, including in areas where United Methodist congregations have remained in the denomination. The new body has sought to solidify its traditional identity by requiring churches to affirm the Nicene Creed, according to the *Aquila Report* (July 16). With these departures, progressives are expected to seek to revise church law at the next General Conference in 2024 to allow for same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ people. There will also be an attempt at the conference to provide overseas churches a legal way to disaffiliate, similar to the way U.S. congregations have done.

Witchcraft’s commercialization advances at the expense of nature practices

Witchcraft has become a multibillion-dollar business, with a level of commercialization that has been affecting these Pagans’ practices and relation to the natural world, writes sociologist Helen Berger in *The Conversation* (July 26). Today, witch kits are sold by large companies and in stores —“something unheard of when I began my research in 1986,” Berger writes. She has seen a shift among practitioners, who have gone from gathering in covens to now being mainly solitary. She finds that many practitioners’ connection to the natural world is also changing. “When I first began my research, I would join Pagans when they went to forests, the seaside or other natural areas to attend a retreat or to participate in a ritual out in nature. I would often see them pick up a rock, a pine cone, a shell or another natural object” that held special spiritual meanings. Today, however, “most objects can be bought online, and fewer are handmade or handpicked...More recently, companies such as the cosmetic purveyor Sephora and celebrities such as the Olsen twins have started directly marketing starter witchcraft kits online,” she adds.

Berger notes how scholars have observed how knowledge—once shared at no cost in covens—became something to be bought in the form of a book, which shifted the focus from self-growth to individual fulfillment. Many practitioners who learned their practices in covens believe that the “marketing of starter kits and sacred items has reduced them to the mundane. There is no longer a need to enter into a forest or go to the shore to find an object that connects practitioners to Mother Nature. Instead, the object can be sent right to individuals’ homes. Nature is still seen as sacred and celebrated in rituals, but more and more practitioners are finding the objects for



Source: Sophie Spincher / Etsy.

their altars on websites. There is less reason to actually go into the natural world and experience it, but it does make it accessible to more people,” Berger concludes.

(*The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/as-witchcraft-becomes-a-multibillion-dollar-business-practitioners-connection-to-the-natural-world-is-changing-209677>)

Could lab-grown meat be certified as kosher and halal?

Lab-grown meat has become a topic of interest for startups, as the possibility of its being certified kosher or halal could open up access to millions of potential consumers among religious communities, writes journalist Nina Schretr in the Swiss daily newspaper *Le Temps* (July 15). Her article pays special attention to discussions in Israel, after the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, David Lau, stated in early 2023 in answer to a request from the Aleph Farms company that beef cultivated from stem cells could be considered pareve (neutral, neither meat nor dairy from the perspective of Jewish dietary laws) if marketed as a meat alternative, but not if called meat, looking like meat, or smelling like meat. Thus, although dairy products could theoretically

be mixed with lab-grown meat without violating the prohibited association of dairy products with meat, cheeseburgers prepared with lab-grown meat should still be avoided, since they would look like the real ones and potentially induce sinful habits or lead to mistakes among Jewish believers.

On the other hand, the Orthodox Union Kosher, a kosher certification body based in the U.S., has taken a hard line. According to its CEO, “stem cells must come from a kosher slaughtered animal, otherwise they are non-kosher stem cells.” Such an approach would not help companies producing lab-



Source: Halal Focus.

grown meat, since they pride themselves on not sacrificing any animals. Meat or no meat, Arik Kaufman is confident that the products of his company, Steakholder Foods, will one day be kosher certified, and Schretr reports that Aleph Farms is already competing for the halal label. Debates are also starting among Muslims. Some religious experts are open to new approaches, but other ones are opposed. Schretr quotes Olivier Bauer, professor of theology and religious studies at the University of Lausanne: “There are Muslims who believe that this type of product was not created by God, and is therefore unfit for consumption, like artificial flavorings.”

In the U.S., two brands, Good Meat and Upside Foods, received permission in June to start producing lab-grown chicken. Neither has its products certified as halal or kosher (*CNN*, June 27). Since it is developed from animal cells, it cannot be considered as vegetarian either, although it may be an option for those “who don’t eat meat for animal welfare or environmental reasons.” A representative of the Hindu American Foundation ventured that many Hindus would probably consider as acceptable cultured meat not derived from cells harvested from killing an animal. However, the attitude about cultured chicken meat might differ when it comes to cows. And ISKCON global communications director Anuttama Dasa explained that cultured meat would still be considered as unclean from the Hare Krishna perspective, since such products would not be offerable to God before consumption. Lab-grown meat finds itself at the intersection of technological advancements in artificial meat production and religious dietary laws, with different religious communities responding differently to this emerging food technology.

(A slightly longer version of the article from *Le Temps* was first published on July 4 in the associated, paid-access online magazine in French, *Heidi News*: <https://www.heidi.news/explorations/en-israel-dans-les-marmites-du-futur/en-israel-la-viande-artificielle-a-la-conquete-de-dieu>)

Purity culture evolves with lasting influence

Originally a youth movement born in U.S. evangelical circles in the early 1990s for promoting sexual restraint before marriage, purity culture has become a trans-denominational subculture and has also reached other countries, gaining an influence, for instance, among German Evangelicals since the early 2000s. Writing in the *Zeitschrift für Religion und Weltanschauung* (July–August), Claudia Jetter notes that purity culture developed as a reaction against the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and its roots go back to purity campaigns in the nineteenth century. The movement as it took form in the 1990s attempted to answer what its founder saw as a loss of values among young Americans. Sexual abstinence before marriage would be seen as a sign of inner transformation. It soon also drew interest from Catholics and Mormons. Promoters of purity culture have not been averse to using the vocabulary of their opposites, for example, by describing themselves as being at the forefront of the “sexual revolution” (but one of a different kind), or calling the public announcement of a decision to become sexually abstinent until marriage one’s “coming out.”

But the movement has experienced crisis and revisions. In 2017, the author of the 1997 bestseller *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Joshua Harris, issued a sharp criticism of his own work and distanced himself from purity culture before separating from his wife and giving up the Christian faith. Other promoters of purity culture have advocated a more nuanced approach, while leading organizations have rebranded themselves (with True Love Waits becoming Lifeway and Silver Ring Things turning into Unaltered Ministries) and placed an emphasis on courses, such as for parents. Jetter adds that the evolution of online purity culture influencers, or “Christfluencers,”



has also played an important role in changing approaches, and she sees the number of posts, videos and podcasts on the topic as proof of the subculture's continuing influence.

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

CURRENT RESEARCH

● A preliminary study of British Islamic leadership finds that while imams in the UK are shifting toward a British-born, Anglophone modality, they do not have the resources and support among mosque members required to enhance their skills to meet members' needs. Writing in the current issue of *SocrelNews* (Spring), the newsletter of sociologists of religion in the UK, Riyaz Timol of Cardiff University notes that his study included two-thirds of all (1,825) British mosques and approximately 2,001 imams (many mosques employ more than one imam), making it the most comprehensive dataset on British imams compiled to date. Beyond leading

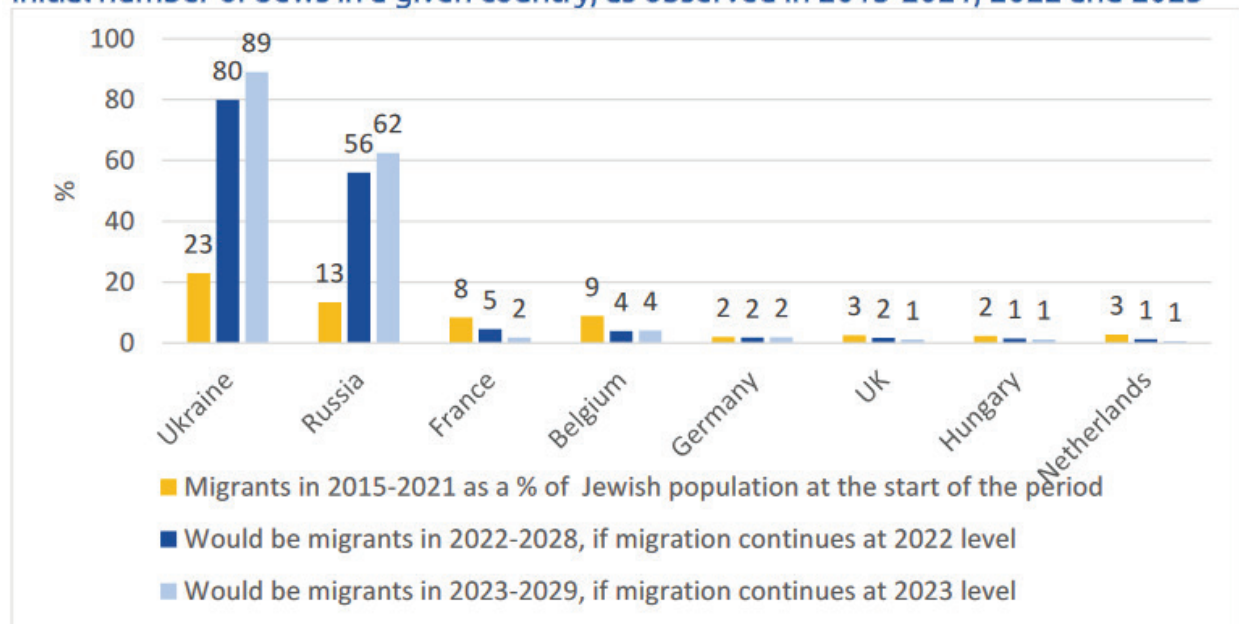


Source:De Montfort University, Leicester.

prayer services and conducting rites of passage, many British imams work as de facto marriage counselors and “are often the first port of call for British Muslims experiencing marital difficulties,” Timol writes. But many of the imams interviewed did not feel their training equipped them for such work, claiming a mismatch between the textual-based educations they received and the people-centered ministry they were often called to perform. There is a huge demand among the imams for continuing education in these areas, but mosque management committees claim a lack of resources to support such extra training, leaving imams to depend upon informal means like YouTube lectures or peer support. Timol also found that imams are “resoundingly overworked and underpaid; many do not have employment contracts and those that do complain about inadequate or unclear terms and conditions.” This “disgruntled underbelly” in the British imamate discourages many younger students from pursuing a mosque-based vocation as the primary source of their livelihood, he writes.

- Large-scale Jewish migration from Russia and Ukraine in the last two years has been proceeding at levels not seen in Europe since last century, a study finds.** The report by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (July 4) identifies three peak periods of Jewish migration in the past century—from Germany in the 1930s, North Africa in the 1960s, and the former Soviet Union in the 1990s—and points out that these periods saw 50 to 75 percent of national Jewish populations migrate in no more than a decade. While no European Jewish population has shown signs of migration at anywhere near that level for several decades, recent patterns in Russia and Ukraine point to that possibility over the coming years. According to the report, for Russian and Ukrainian Jews, 2022 was a “watershed year: if migration from these countries continues for seven years at the levels seen in 2022 and early 2023, 80–90 percent of the 2021 Jewish

Figure 2. Relationship between number of Jewish migrants in a 7-year period and initial number of Jews in a given country, as observed in 2015-2021, 2022 and 2023



population of Ukraine and 50–60 percent of the 2021 Jewish population of Russia will have emigrated.”

(The study can be downloaded from: <https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/jewish-migration-today-what-it-may-mean-europe>)

- **While growing restrictions against religion in China particularly affect Christians, a new study finds that this government regulation also dampens the importance of religion for those without religious affiliations.** Last month, **RW** reported (in the Findings & Footnotes section) on the loss of growth in China’s Pentecostal churches under the new government-imposed restrictions, and the new study by Andrew Francis Tan confirms that while some religions have flourished under persecution, state regulation of religion can have serious effects on both adherents and non-adherents. Appearing in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in June), Tan’s analysis of longitudinal data from the China Family Panel Studies is the first study to estimate the effects of Chinese regulation of Christianity on religious identification and importance in a population sample of adults. The researcher found no evidence that Christianity in China is strengthened by regulation, finding instead that the higher the regulation, the lower the degree of religiosity at the individual level. Most important for Tan was the finding that for those who did not identify with Christianity in any of the waves of the survey, regulation still had a negative effect on the importance of religion. But for those who did identify with Christianity in at least one wave, regulation was not associated with the faith’s importance.



January 2018 demolition of the Golden Lampstand Church (source: Religious Freedom Institute).

Although only 3 percent of the Chinese population identifies as Christian, Tan was struck by the finding that regulation of Christianity would impact the overall population. “Unintentionally or by design,” he writes, “regulatory action may deter individuals from religious participation generally.” Actions such as removing publicly visible crosses, razing church buildings, and disrupting services create a coercive environment for political discipline and impose a secular state morality upon the population, he writes.

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

Orthodox teachings on abortion find little traction in traditional Russia

Vladimir Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) are aligned in the fight for “traditional values,” but politics and religion have been parting ways more when it comes to abortion, Pal Kolsto writes in the current issue of the journal *Religion, State, and Society* (51:2). While in the past, the issue of abortion has not been a priority for the ROC, today there are few concerns that rate higher in the church’s social agenda. Kolsto writes that church officials have inflated the rate of abortions (claiming there to be from 5 to 8 million abortions a year, while official figures estimate only about 800,000) and in 2016 led a campaign that included the gathering of one



Church protest on abortion in Russia (source:<https://orthochristian.com/71051.html>).

million signatures for a petition against abortion. It is true that under Putin, Russia has adopted certain laws and regulations that have made abortions harder to obtain, such as a restriction on elective abortions to pregnancies under 12 weeks, but such legislation has come nowhere near the church's teachings and advocacy. Legislators have attempted to introduce ROC-initiated bills in the Duma, but these attempts have generally been defeated. With few exceptions, Putin has stayed outside the fray, voicing few sentiments about abortion, though other prominent politicians, particularly women, have criticized the ROC's abortion teachings as extreme.

The ROC and pro-life Orthodox activists have stepped up their rhetoric against abortion in recent years, going from calling abortion an act of murder in church statements, to "genocide" and "mass murder." At the same time, activists acknowledge that most Orthodox believers are unaware of church teachings and tend to treat abortion tolerantly. The failure of the ROC to influence legislation on abortion is a puzzle for Kolsto, since Putin has otherwise prioritized what are seen as traditional values. But he suggests that low church attendance in Russia may be the main factor: "churches that are unable to attract believers to their activities cannot expect to wield influence over public policies in the country," he writes. While observers argue that the ROC has usually adapted to the Kremlin rather than vice versa, Kolsto concludes that its conviction that its teaching on abortion is a "moral commandment that comes from God himself" makes it independent from the state on this issue, with "open conflict bound to erupt."

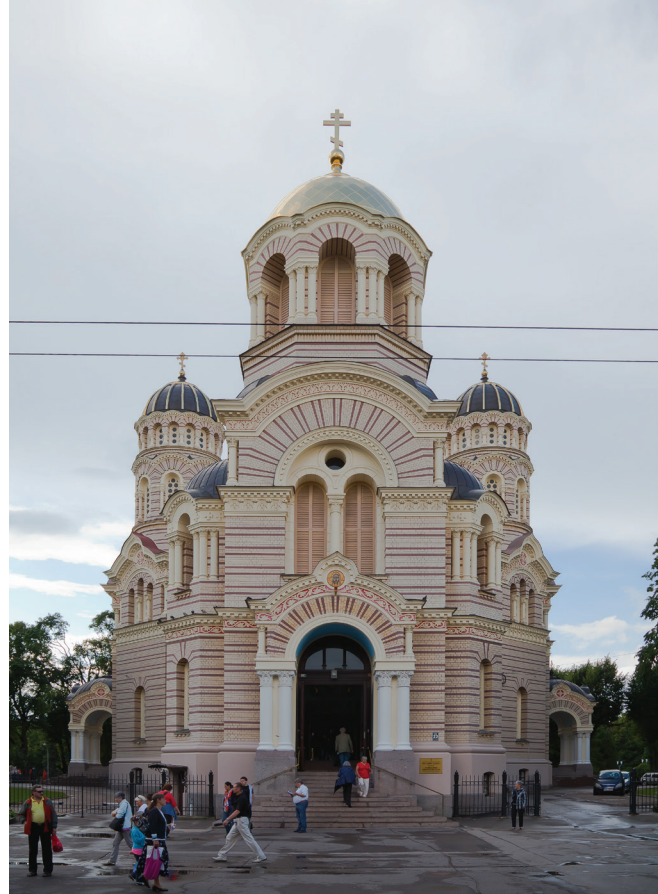
(*Religion, State, and Society*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/crss20>)

War in Ukraine intensifies Orthodox divisions in the Baltic States

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has further divided the Orthodox Christian world, putting pressure on Orthodox churches in the Baltic States to take a clear stance against the war and distance themselves from the Moscow Patriarchate, writes Sebastian Rimestad (Leipzig University) in *Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West* (June). In the small Orthodox Church of Lithuania, five priests were suspended by their bishop in 2022 because of discussions they had about a possible switch to Constantinople. Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople lifted that suspension in February 2023 and visited Lithuania the following month in order to discuss with the government the possibility of a new, autonomous ecclesiastical jurisdiction under Constantinople being established on Lithuanian soil. Metropolitan Innocent (Vasilyev) expressed disagreement with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow about the war and is attempting to obtain autonomous status from Moscow, but the answer is uncertain. In Latvia, where the Orthodox Church already has an autonomous status, Metropolitan Alexander (Kudryashov) of Riga expressed solidarity with Ukraine and condemned all military violence, without facing much internal criticism. After security concerns were nevertheless raised in Latvian political circles, the Latvian government decided on its own to declare the Orthodox Church of Latvia autocephalous.

The Latvian church adjusted its statutes accordingly—while continuing to commemorate the Patriarch of Moscow—and submitted the revised versions to the Patriarchate. No answer has come yet. Several observers expect Moscow to consider Latvian autocephaly as a purely political statement without canonical consequences. In Estonia, the Orthodox Church has been divided since 1996, with one part under the Moscow Patriarchate and the other under Constantinople. The stance of Metropolitan Eugene (Reshetnikov) on the conflict has been questioned, and the Estonian Orthodox Church under Moscow faces challenges due to its unclear attitude about the conflict and the potential for further divisions. Rimestad's article highlights how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has intensified existing divisions, testing the loyalty of Baltic Orthodox churches that are caught between Moscow and the expectations of their home countries. While Baltic Orthodox churches are small and not a powerful voice in the Orthodox world, how they respond may nevertheless impact the future reconciliation or further division of world Orthodoxy. Patriarch Bartholomew's activities in Lithuania point to a further deepening of the schism in world Orthodoxy.

(*Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West*, Institut G2W, Bederstr. 76, 8002 Zürich, Switzerland - <https://www.g2w.eu/zeitschrift/>)



Nativity of Christ Cathedral, Riga Latvia (source: Diego Delso, Wikimedia Commons).

China's religious diplomacy and the New Silk Road

China has been increasingly using religion as a diplomatic tool to further its foreign policy goals, especially in relation to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), writes Juyan Zhang (University of Texas at San Antonio) in *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* (21:2). Sometimes called the New Silk Road, the BRI was launched in 2013 and is part of China's efforts to take a new role in global affairs. It is meant to improve connectivity and cooperation on a transcontinental scale and to develop new trade routes connecting China with the rest of the world. Since the early 2000s, China started to see religion as a diplomatic resource and launched a variety of



Source: PAGEO (Pallas Athene Geopolitical Research Institute, Hungary).

initiatives. The goals of its religious diplomacy include improving the country's international image, defending its religious policies, addressing domestic ethnic issues (since religion is perceived to be associated with ethnic issues in China), and resolving disputes. China coordinates its religious diplomacy through government agencies and different arms of the Communist Party, as well as semi-official organizations. The latter are the China Committee on Religion and Peace (CCRP) and the China Religious Culture Communication Association (CRCCA). In different ways and at different levels, China engages in “religious diplomacy” with Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Taoism.

In 2015, at the annual meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, it was recommended that religion be used as a bridge and vehicle of the BRI. Buddhism has been the religion most actively used in supporting the BRI, while Christianity has been the least active. Islam and Taoism are in between. Indeed, half of the 65 countries involved have Muslim majorities. Factors that impact China's religious diplomacy include the sustainability of the BRI, competition with the U.S., China's emphasis on “Sinicizing” religions, and its policies on internet regulation and ideological security, which affect the country's religious exchanges with other nations. China's utilitarian approach to religion may undermine the effectiveness of its religious diplomacy, however. While it is leveraging religion as part of a broader strategy to advance the BRI and further its foreign policy goals, challenges remain due to skepticism of its motives and policies regarding religion.

(*The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfia20>; official Chinese Belt and Road Initiative Portal: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ A thematic series growing out of a partnership between the Berkley Center’s Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power project and the United States Institute of Peace looks at a wide range of religious and political dynamics in the Balkans. The working papers in the series touch on external religious influences on the Balkans, post-war religiosity, Middle Eastern influences, and interreligious relations in the region, and politics of the Russian Orthodox Church and its transnational expressions. The researchers present a profile of a still volatile and complex “intermingling of religion, culture, and politics in a geopolitical hotspot.” One working paper by Harun Karčić examines how the political architecture created after the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s has stepped up Russia’s political and economic influence and mobilized proxy organizations to project its narratives, protect its interests, and slow the region’s integration into Western institutions. Other papers look at how the Serbian Orthodox Church maintains a position of authority in Montenegrin society due to the church’s power over the decision-making processes in the country; and how transnational evangelical communities create interethnic tolerance in Serbia through their humanitarian activities, inclusiveness of minority and marginalized groups, and influence in the Serbian diaspora. The series can be downloaded from: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/subprojects/the-geopolitics-of-religion-and-culture-in-the-western-balkans-a-thematic-series>



Source: The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs.

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

1) **Marcos Witt** has emerged as a key Latino evangelical figure in the U.S., both for his praise and worship music and, more recently, his evangelism and social action, particularly through his AOA or America Ora Adora (America Prays and Adores) tour. The 61-year-old Witt may no longer be the most popular worship leader among Latino evangelicals (with the group Miel San Marcos holding that honor), but he revolutionized Latino church music by synthesizing it with pop and rock forms. Against winds of branding, polarization and politicization affecting Latino churches, Witt has maintained an inclusive approach that ministers to all Hispanics regardless of denomination, including Catholics and even Mormons. Based at Joel



Source: David Munoz, Wikimedia Commons.

Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, TX, Witt has expanded the Latino ministry at the megachurch to over 6,000 people, and he is taking his ministry to Latin America through AOA. The highly coveted Latino evangelical vote has given Witt and his fellow church leaders new influence, but, unlike others, he has stepped away from culture war issues on both sides of the spectrum, believing it hurts his evangelizing efforts. His main activism is focused on fighting the secularization of Latinos, giving special priority to youth; at every AOA event, he invites those under 25 to come forward and commit their lives to Christ. Witt hosts his AOA events at Anglo megachurches because English-language services are popular with the younger generation and there is less rivalry with other Hispanic churches. (Source: *New York Times Magazine*, July 2)

2) In recent years, the culture wars have found a new home in Eastern Orthodoxy in the U.S., with **Father Peter Heers** standing at the epicenter of such contention. Many of the conflicts over church teaching and social issues in Orthodoxy have been waged on social media, and it is Heers's attacks on the Orthodox hierarchy, within his own Greek Orthodox tradition as well as others, that has led to offline controversy in church circles. Heers has moved between the Greek Orthodox and more traditionalist Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) orbits. Last spring, the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States issued a statement claiming that Heers was outside of canonical Orthodox



Source: Saint Kosmas Orthodox Christian Education Association.

jurisdictions and thus not under the authority of a bishop. Heers, an American-born convert to Orthodoxy from Anglicanism who was trained and ordained in Greece, has been particularly active since the pandemic, criticizing Orthodox churches and clergy for compromising the faith under government lockdowns and vaccination mandates. His criticisms often dovetail with traditionalist Orthodox critiques of globalism and prophecies about the end-times and other conspiracies that are being issued from a circle of Greek Orthodox monks [see the June **RW** for more on the prophetic movement in Greek Orthodoxy]. Heers's digital reach is said to be global, through his own *Orthodox Ethos* online magazine and such dissident Orthodox outlets as Pascha Press and his own YouTube channels. Critics charge that he is promoting not only conspiracies but also "elderism," which puts undue stress on obedience to monks and their prophetic teachings. (Source: *Public Orthodoxy*, June 23 and July 19)