

Pro-life movement shedding religious language as pro-choice activists invoke spirituality

In the post-*Roe* era, anti-abortion groups are moving away from a strictly religious perspective while religious pro-choice activists are taking a more positive and affirming stance towards abortion than previously, according to two reports. In the online magazine, *The Conversation* (November 7), political scientist Anne Whitesell of Miami University argues that while anti-abortion groups may continue to “reference religion, and specifically Christianity, in their arguments against abortion...these activists also recognize that framing abortion as a human rights issue may appeal to a broader audience.” While a segment of anti-abortion groups have long appealed to natural law and medical evidence in making their case, Whitesell sees even those groups that have cited religious justifications, such as evangelicals, shifting to a more secular approach. Part of the reason for this, she notes, is that the U.S. today is less Christian and even religious than just a decade ago. Whitesell interviewed 45 anti-abortion activists across the country and collected Facebook data from approximately 193 organizations. She reports that these activists acknowledge public perceptions of their movement as anti-woman and driven by conservative Christians, and that they have been trying to articulate more pro-woman messages to counter these views. The majority of the anti-abortion activists she interviewed said that they kept their religious beliefs separate from their activism.

In her analysis of these pro-life groups’ Facebook posts on abortion, Whitesell found that only 11 percent of the posts made explicit religious references, ranging from Bible verses to prayer requests. But there were some sharp differences between groups: while an organization like Texas Right to Life had references to religion in 50 percent of its posts, Ohio Right to Life had them in only 8.7 percent. But even the more religious groups were found to frame abortion as a human rights issue, a strategy seen as more effective as state-based pro-choice laws and activism have been gaining ground. Meanwhile, in the conservative magazine *First Things* (December), Samira Kawash of Rutgers University looks at the way religious pro-choice activists have shifted from a pragmatic approach to abortion to one that is more spiritual and explicitly religious.



Source: Anna Levinzon | Flickr.

Kawash writes that prior to the 2010s, there was a qualified support for abortion among mainline Protestant groups, often expressed in the slogan, “Safe, Legal, and Rare,” which was in line with the public’s moderate views on the issue.

But a new religiously framed advocacy of abortion that may have been less visible (though present) in previous years is now making the rounds, as seen in the activism of Planned Parenthood’s Clergy Advocacy Board and the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights. Framing abortion as a positive moral good, these religious pro-choice activists will often cite theological and spiritual reasons and justifications for having an abortion, even seeing terminating a pregnancy as a “sacred right.” They build on the work of the 1960s pastor and activist Howard Moody, who was unusual back then in providing a liberation theology for abortion rights. This has translated to seeing abortion as a holy and moral act based on a divine gift and right, Kawash writes. Books like *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice*, by Rebecca Todd Peters, and *A Complicated Choice*, by Katey Zeh, hold up choice as a sacred value that overrides the issue of the unborn’s status or rights. The new religious pro-choice activism is also accompanied by a broader concern for “reproductive justice” that embraces “feminist, anti-racist, anti-heteronormative, and anti-colonial ideologies and activism,” Kawash adds.

Theologians like Peters align “the ‘sacred’ and the ‘moral’ with a vision of radical female power and autonomy, which will be realized when the yoke of patriarchal oppression is cast off.”

(*The Conversation*, <https://religionnews.com/2023/11/07/as-states-decide-on-abortion-anti-abortion-activists-look-to-rebrand-themselves-as-not-religious/>; *First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com>)

Shared prophetic teachings a factor in Middle East conflict?

International affairs analysts have overlooked important religious factors in the current situation in the Middle East that may prevent them from grasping its complex nature, writes Paul Marshall on the website *Religion Unplugged* (November 13). These factors hinge on Islamic, Jewish, and evangelical prophetic concepts and teachings. Marshall writes that Muslim concerns that Israel is planning to destroy the site of the Al-Aqsa complex in Jerusalem, which includes the Muslim holy sites of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, may have led them to extreme actions. Some fear that the military campaign against Palestinians after the October 7 attack by Hamas is part of a project by Israel to clear these buildings from the Temple Mount in order to



Source: Boubakar | Pixabay.

build the Third Temple. Marshall adds that a more esoteric component of this conspiracy theory involves efforts by Jewish groups to breed a flawless red heifer. This is in reference to passages in the Old Testament where God requires Israelites to sacrifice a red heifer. A passage in the Koran also alludes to a red heifer that is essential for the ritual purification that is a precondition for building the temple. Evangelical Christian and Jewish groups in Israel, such as the Temple Institute, have been training priests for a rebuilt temple and announced the birth of a suitable heifer in September. (There have been several candidates over the years, supplied by evangelical ranchers.)

While these groups do not have wide support in Israel, Marshall reports that “influential people, including in Hamas and Hezbollah, maintain that Israelis are actively pursuing this project and that the Israeli government is deeply involved in this scheme. Hamas has repeatedly described its war on Israel not in secular Western categories, such as resistance to colonialism, but as an attempt to defend Al-Aqsa, which Muslim tradition holds was the site of its Prophet Mohamed's night journey.” Hezbollah and Hamas leaders also have viewed their actions as rescuing an Islamic holy site from desecration by infidels (with Hamas calling its October 7 assault on Israel the “Al-Aqsa Wave”). Similarly, the red heifer birth announcement was greeted by the Islamist-oriented *Middle East Monitor* with the headline, “Israel’s red cow will blow up the region.” A senior Palestinian source in touch with the political leadership of Hamas said the “trigger for the 7 October attack was Hamas’s concern that far-right Jews intended to sacrifice an animal at the site of al-Aqsa Mosque, thus laying the ground for the demolition of the Dome on the Rock shrine and the building of the Third Temple.” Marshall writes that while it is unclear whether these leaders sincerely hold such beliefs or are catering to other’s religious fears, “what is clear is that these claims are widely believed and resonate with many Muslims worldwide. We would be wise not to discount them...In the Middle East and much of the world, religion is a fundamental human motive and is correctly seen as such. It is arguable that America’s neglect of this in relation to Iran has helped lead to the present terrible conflagrations.”

(*Religion Unplugged*, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2023/11/8/israel-hamas-war-unblemished-red-heifers-key-to-understanding-conflict-in-the-middle-east>)

In a “negative world,” evangelical support a liability for Israel?

While evangelicals have long been among the staunchest defenders of Israel, the greater hostility they have been facing in American society in recent years may make such support a liability for Israel during its war with Hamas, writes Aaron Renn in his self-titled Substack newsletter (November 16). Renn has been the foremost proponent of the view that American evangelicals now face a “negative world” after a long period of neutrality and even positive responses from non-evangelical American society. The widespread attacks against “Christian nationalism” are one sign of the negative attitude towards evangelical political influence. Renn writes that

evangelicals are also more divided on Israel than they were a decade ago. Both factors mean that evangelicals' role as the backbone of the Republican Party's support of Israel is contested, both inside and outside the evangelical movement. The Palestinian cause and "decolonization" are becoming "high status" issues among young people due to the influence of the left, "while



Source: Juan Cole, Informed Comment.

support for Israel is declining for demographic reasons...If these trends continue, they will make evangelicals, who are themselves shrinking in numbers and significance, more conspicuous as outlier supporters of Israel rather than simply enthusiastic supporters of a pro-Israel position that represents the mainstream. Given the low status of evangelicals as an official out group in American society, that would not be good for the cause of Israel," Renn concludes.

Islam gaining admirers, converts after October 7

After the October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas and the subsequent war, Islam is finding a new and unexpected following of admirers and potential converts on both the right and left, according to two reports. *The Free Press* (November 18) reports that, influenced by the war in the Middle East, non-Arab, left-leaning Western women active on the social media site TikTok are identifying themselves as "reverts" to Islam, based on the belief that all people are born on a natural path to Islam. The online magazine notes that "there are currently scores of TikTok hashtags that include the word *revert*, including #WhiteRevert (with 1.6 million views), #BlackRevert (174K views), #JewishRevert (131K views), and #JapaneseRevert (278K). Biggest of all is the simple hashtag #revert, with 2.9 billion views, followed by #RevertMuslim (1.4 billion), and #MuslimRevert (525 million)." Also drawing new and unexpected support is Osama bin Laden's Letter to America, "in which the terrorist justifies Al Qaeda's hatred of the West and its attack on the Twin Towers...[The document] went viral...on TikTok as young Americans declared admiration for his ideas." But it is unclear if this attraction to Islam is just a social media phenomenon or actually reflects a trend of young people taking up the Islamic faith. Activist Megan Rice has already helped convert others to Islam, such as millennial TikTok influencer Alex, who does not give her last name but defines herself in her bio as a "feral leftist queer gremlin" and says that she started attending pro-Palestine rallies in Boston after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7. Activist Madison Reeves says that she started doing more research



Source: Rawpixel.

and ordered a prayer mat and hijabs. Then, after what she describes as the beginning of a “genocide” in Gaza, she began posting pro-Palestinian videos on TikTok that got her banned from the platform. Reeves says that she has received messages welcoming her to the religion from as far away as Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia.

Rice is encouraging others to explore her newfound faith via her World Religions Book Club, where various members answer questions from a curious crowd—even those who might not be traditionally welcome in Islam. But there are conflicts and tensions among these young people attracted to Islam. One commenter identifying as a bisexual man wrote, “I would like to one day revert and practice Islam, however I’m having trouble aligning some of my own moral and political views to the religion.” The current reversion trend has a resemblance to the conversions that took place in the aftermath of 9/11, when at least 8,000 American women converted to Islam. A similar pattern could also be seen during the ISIS conflict in the 2010s, when Western people fled their countries to join the extremist group in the Middle East. That women are leading the trend may be because they are more likely to be religious than men and because such conversions “offer a safe community for them,” according to Internet historian Katherine Dee. For other scholars, the strong contagion and fandom dynamic effects of social media lead young people to share a journey that is more about “tribal alignment” than sincere religious belief.

Terrorist researcher Lorenzo Vidino of George Washington University cited the rebellious nature of such conversions, which attracts the young as well as what the FBI calls “salad bar extremism.” “You can choose different aspects of different extremist ideologies that are completely incompatible with one another,” he said. “You put it all together in a sort of collage that makes very little sense.”

While Muslims protesting for Palestine since Hamas’s attack have found allies on the left, more unexpected is the Palestinian support that has come from far-right groups, reports the *Terrorism Monitor* (November 27). Although Israel may be more associated with the West and the “white” phenotype than the Palestinian side and thus more likely to find support from far-right activists, “nevertheless, in this conflict the white identitarian ‘far right’...is decidedly pro-Palestinian if not openly pro-Hamas,” according to the newsletter. The far-right sympathy with Islamist and jihadist groups might seem contradictory given that far-rightists have opposed Muslim migration to Europe. But, nevertheless, it was evident during the Taliban’s conquest of Kabul in 2021, when such groups openly celebrated. The Taliban’s victory was a vindication of the “traditional” values of patriarchal and heteronormative societies. According to far-right leaders, such as Greg Conte of the National Policy Institute, the Palestinian side is applauded because it is countering “Jewish power.” Nick Fuentes of “America First,” which is nicknamed “The Groypers,” condemned what he said was Israel’s genocide in Gaza, adding that the “enemy of our enemy” could become “our friends.” Fuentes praised the protests of the “ Hamas Islamist Muslim brotherhood” on American university campuses, deeming their presence more positive than that of “tricky Zionist Jews,” so that “maybe now [campuses] won’t be so gay.”

(*Free Press*, <https://www.thefp.com/p/why-western-women-are-reverting>; *Terrorism Monitor*, <https://jamestown.org/programs/tm>)

Nones drawn to psychedelic congregations, experiences?

The new attention being given to psychedelic substances in medicine and psychology has also found a hearing in mainline and unconventional religions, not least among the elusive yet expanding population of the non-affiliated or “nones.” The online magazine, *The Conversation* (October 31), reports that while abandoning mainstream religious affiliation, many nones turn to alternative expressions, including secular, atheist and psychedelic churches. New congregations specializing in cultivating psychedelic experiences, though small in number, have a special affinity for a segment of America’s non-affiliated whose “spirituality does not need a god or the supernatural to address questions of purpose, meaning, belonging and well-being,” writes Morgan Shipley of Michigan State University. Yet Shipley surveys a number of new kinds of congregations that defy an atheistic or secular humanist label and “demonstrate not a rejection of religion, as surveys suggest, but continued interest in spiritual community, rituals and virtues.” For instance, The Divine Assembly (TDA) of Salt Lake City is drawing many ex-Mormons to



Source: Ximena Natera, Berkeleyside/CatchLight.

services that incorporate rituals based on members' psychedelic experiences, from ice baths to group meditation. The actual taking of these substances is done on members' own time outside of the congregation, yet TDA offers courses on growing psilocybin (the substance found in certain psychedelic mushrooms) through its educational initiative "shroomiversity." TDA is not atheistic "but maintains an inclusive notion of belief regarding God or a higher power."

The non-denominational Psanctuary Church of Louisville, Kentucky, brings people together for "healing and connection to divine revelation through communion with sacred mushrooms." As with many of these congregations, the use of these substances is regarded at Psanctuary both as a sacred right and an expression of political freedom, Shipley writes. The way that these churches encourage an individualist though often non-monotheistic spirituality is through their emphasis on helping members explore and "integrate" the psychedelic experience and their everyday spiritual lives. The Sacred Garden Community in Oakland, Calif., sees psychedelics as offering people "direct experience" of the divine and bills itself as a "post-modern church" based on "faith of least dogma." Meanwhile, churches that are particularly devoted to the plant-based psychedelic brew of ayahuasca tend to focus largely on healing rather than divine revelation. The California-based Hummingbird Church and the Orlando, Florida-based Soul Quest Ayahuasca

Church of Mother Earth both see “rejuvenation” of physical, emotional and spiritual health as their objective, leading members to help restore nature or assist others in healing.

Shipley concludes that these congregations tend to see spirituality as well-being, defying both atheistic and traditional categories. Aside from alternative and holistic religions, mainline Protestants have shown considerable interest in psychedelic experiences—most likely because their clergy have been involved in experiments with these substances. The *Christian Century* (November) reports on how earlier experiments with psilocybin that showed users having spiritual experiences have recently been replicated with mainline clergy. Although the results of this research are preliminary, Ron Cole-Turner notes that the clergy involved felt that their experiences resonated with their theological beliefs but also broadened their perspectives, making their theological outlook more flexible. Speaking of other religions, one pastor involved said, “I felt as if I embodied them.” Some of the clergy who had felt demoralized in their work felt that their experiences gave them a greater love for God and a lived experience of the faith. The biggest problem for these clergy is their sense of isolation from colleagues, bishops and supervisors due to their experimentation, as they feel that their openness to such experiences will be dismissed or condemned.

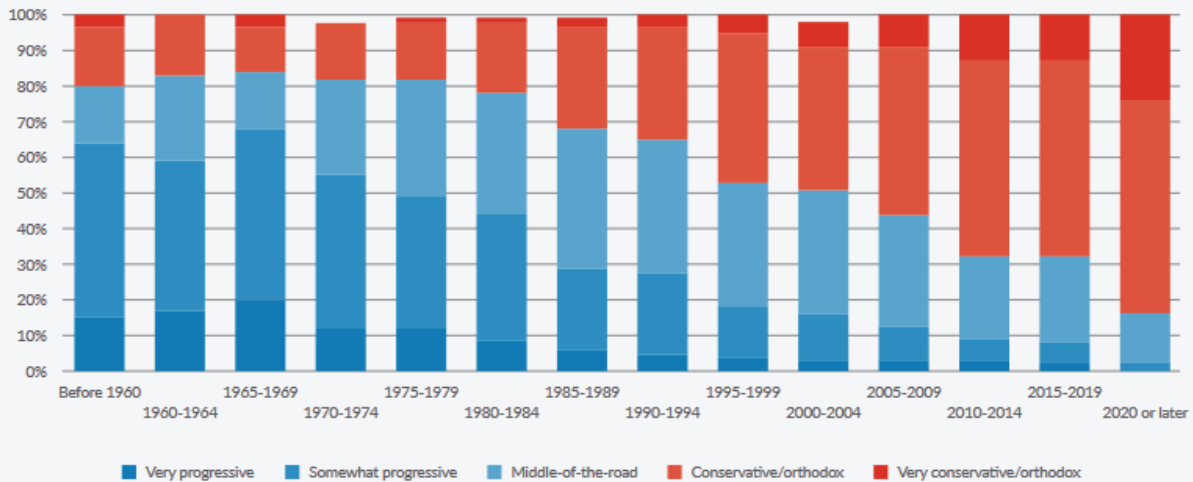
(*The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/how-nones-the-religiously-unaffiliated-are-finding-meaning-purpose-and-spirituality-in-psychedelic-churches-207461>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

- **The share of new U.S. Catholic priests identifying as theologically “progressive” has dropped so low that the tendency has “all but vanished,” a study finds.** The study, conducted by The Catholic Project at The Catholic University of America, is based on a new analysis of the project’s 2022 National Study of Catholic Priests. Billed as the largest of its kind in more than 50 years, this national study consisted of a survey of bishops, with 131 responses, a survey of 10,000 priests, with more than 3,500 responses, and in-depth interviews with more than 100 priests. The current analysis echoes the earlier study in finding among priests a widespread lack of confidence and trust in their bishops. When priests were asked to locate their theological outlook on a spectrum from “very conservative/orthodox” to “very progressive,” none of those ordained after 2020 described themselves as “very progressive.” A graph shows that the proportion of priests identifying as “somewhat progressive” or “very progressive” dropped from almost 70 percent among those ordained in 1965–1969 to less than 5 percent among those ordained in 2020 or later. According to the researchers, there was a similar drift away from political liberalism and toward “moderate” and “conservative” positions. They caution that while the study may show how priests perceive themselves relative to others, it tells little about what makes one consider oneself “progressive,” “moderate,” or “orthodox.”

(*The Pillar*, <https://www.pillaratholic.com/p/study-liberal-us-priests-facing-progressive?>)

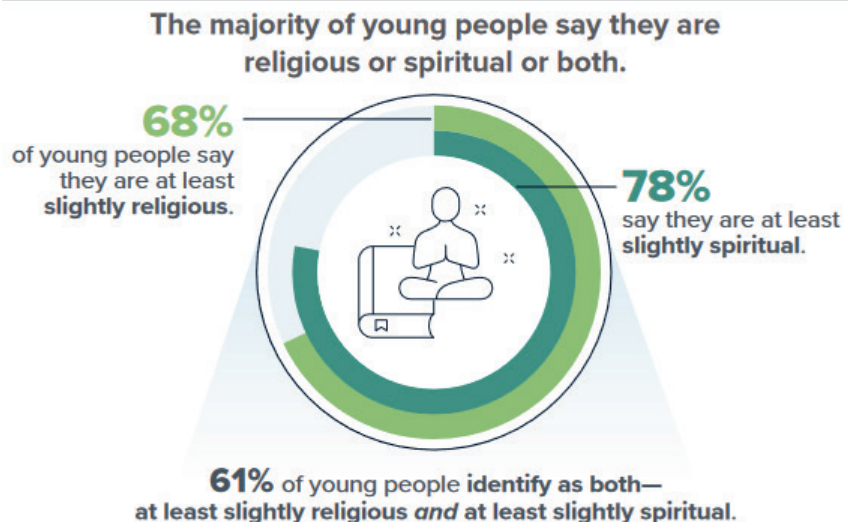
Figure 1. Self-rated priest theological orthodoxy by ordination year



Source: The Catholic Project, Catholic University of America.

● According to a new study, a majority of young Americans from different and no faiths say that they have experienced a sacred moment, though what they consider sacred may be different from previous generations. Springtide Research Institute’s study, “The State of Religion & Young People 2023: Exploring the Sacred,” surveyed more than 4,500 young people between 13 and 25 years of age. Fifty-five percent responded that they had had “experiences that evoked a sense of wonder, awe, gratitude, deep truth, and/or interconnectedness in [their] life.”

Of these respondents (who could select more than one of the following options), 69 percent said that they had experienced a sacred moment more than once in nature, 68 percent said they had done so in the privacy of their home, and 55 percent said this had occurred at a place of worship. More of the respondents said they felt connected to nature than to a higher power. Nearly a third of those surveyed told Springtide they had



Source: Springtide.

never participated in a spiritual or religious community. Fifty-six percent said they considered their daily or weekly engagement in art as religious or spiritual practices. This was also the case with 54 percent of those who spent time in nature, 49 percent of those who read, and 45 percent of those who prayed. Sixty-eight percent said they were at least slightly religious (32 percent slightly, 25 percent moderately, and 10 percent very), while 78 percent said they were at least slightly spiritual (32 percent slightly, 29 percent moderately, and 17 percent very).

(The study can be downloaded from: <https://www.springtideresearch.org/post/news/sacred-experience-benefits-gen-z-spirituality-wellbeing>)

- Despite New Age practitioners' use of non-conventional and holistic health techniques, many are also invested in genetic testing, an established medical practice that seems contradictory to their more spiritual orientation.** In a recent study published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in November), Christopher Scheitle, Katie Corcoran, and Bernard DiGregorio analyzed a probability sample of 50,000 individuals from the AmeriSpeak panel, looking at measures related to science, religion, and what are considered paranormal activities. The researchers found a positive association between individuals' involvement in New Age practices, such as the use of crystals and acupuncture, and their use of direct-to-consumer genetic health tests. This association proved to be strong even after accounting for such control variables as education and interest in science and scientific knowledge. Scheitle, Corcoran, and DiGregorio argue that this finding can be explained by the affinity New Age practitioners have for individualized health care outside of institutional boundaries. They speculate that if something like genetic health testing can be reconciled with New Age healing practices, a “shared framing around personal autonomy and anti-institutionalism” could potentially resolve other conflicts between spiritual beliefs and scientific practices.



Source: National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health.

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

● **In contrast to the Catholic Church’s growth in the rest of Africa, Catholicism in Ghana is experiencing decline, church statistics show.** According to the Catholic news service *The Pillar* (November 14), available records show that the Catholic population in Ghana increased steadily from 1880 until 2000, when its share of the total population reached 15.1 percent. Since then, Catholics’ share dropped to 13.1 percent in the 2010 census, subsequently declining to 10.1 percent in the 2021 census. This means that the church lost approximately 230,000 of its members within the last 10 to 11 years. Ghana’s statistics run contrary to broader African trends, with the number of Catholics on the continent rising from 257 million in 2020 to 265 million in 2021. The ratio of Catholics to the wider African population also grew slightly. Bishop Gyamfi, who has led Ghana’s bishops’ conference since 2022, cited rapid urbanization as an important factor in Catholicism’s decline in the country. He said that while “the church appears to post decent percentages in rural communities, it is hemorrhaging most rapidly in the urban centers... The census data suggests that when Catholics move from the rural areas to the urban centers, they fail to sustain their Catholic faith and fall prey to other sects.” The proportion of Ghanaians identifying as Pentecostals has increased from 24.1 percent in 2000 to 31.6 percent in 2021. There has also been a rise in the percentage of Muslims in Ghana, from 17.6 percent in 2010 to



Parish church in Ghana (source: Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church).

19.9 percent in 2021. The overall proportion of Christians barely changed in the same period, rising from 71.2 percent in 2010 to 71.3 percent in 2021.

(*The Pillar*, <https://www.pillarcatholic.com/p/ghanas-bishops-sound-alarm-as-church>)

● **According to the most recent population census conducted in 2021, Northern Ireland is the only country in the UK that has seen Christian growth, although it has also experienced a significant increase in non-affiliation and an aging of churchgoers.** Northern Ireland (and also Scotland) records particular Christian affiliations in its census, something that England and Wales have refused to do. Christian adherents make up 80 percent of Northern Ireland's population, much larger than their 52 percent share in Scotland, 44 percent in Wales, and 46 percent in England. The 2021 census showed a population increase in Northern Ireland of 0.5 percent compared to 2011, but a 1.7 percent increase in Christian adherents. This was due to the 0.9 percent increase in the number of Roman Catholics, who make up of 53 percent of Northern Ireland's Christians, as well as the 2.2 percent increase in other denominational groups, including blacks and charismatics, who only make up 9 percent of all the Christians. The three main Protestant churches all saw declines: the Anglicans by 1.2 percent, Presbyterians by 0.9 percent, and Methodists by 1.9 percent. In addition, the census showed that since 2011 there has been a considerable increase of 6.1 percent in the number of those with no religion. They now represent 17 percent of Northern Ireland's population, a proportion that is still dwarfed by their 36 percent

Year	Catholic	Ch'ch of Ireland	Presbyterian	Methodist	Other denoms.	Other religions	No Religion	Not stated	TOTAL
1861	571,690	320,634	457,119	27,919	18,646	~	~	445	1,396,453
1871	534,441	329,279	435,731	26,536	32,816	~	~	387	1,359,190
1881	495,559	321,998	414,236	31,179	40,317	~	~	1,527	1,304,816
1891	448,304	313,299	393,505	36,987	41,956	~	~	2,005	1,236,056
1901	430,390	316,825	396,562	44,134	47,971	~	~	1,070	1,236,952
1911	430,161	327,076	395,039	45,942	49,827	~	~	2,486	1,250,531
1926	420,428	338,724	393,374	49,554	52,177	~	~	2,304	1,256,561
1937	428,290	345,474	390,931	55,135	57,541	~	~	2,374	1,279,745
1951	471,460	353,245	410,215	66,639	63,497	~	~	5,865	1,370,921
1961	497,547	344,800	413,113	71,865	71,299	~	~	26,418	1,425,042
1971	477,921	334,318	405,717	71,235	87,938	~	~	142,511	1,519,640
1981	414,532	281,472	339,818	58,731	112,822	~	~	274,584	1,481,959
1991	605,639	279,280	336,891	59,517	122,448	~	59,234	114,827	1,577,836
2001	678,462	257,788	348,742	59,173	102,211	5,082	118,224 ¹	115,629 ¹	1,685,311
2011	738,033	248,821	345,101	54,253	104,380	14,859	183,164	122,252	1,810,863
2021	805,151	219,788	316,102	44,729	130,377	25,520	330,983	30,526	1,903,176
%11-21	+0.9	-1.2	-0.9	-1.9	+2.2	+5.6	+6.1	-13.0	+0.5

Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

share in Scotland, 47 percent in Wales, and 37 percent in England. In his newsletter *FutureFirst* (December), editor Peter Brierley writes that the age patterns are reason for concern. Twenty percent of the Church of Ireland's adherents are under 20 years old and 26 percent are 65 or over; the distribution for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is 20 percent and 25 percent, respectively, and for the Methodist Church in Ireland, 18 percent and 29 percent.

Brierley notes that, in contrast, the Roman Catholic Church has 28 percent under 20 years old and 14 percent over 65, "a very great difference, and the combined non-institutional denominations are 25 percent and 17 percent, somewhere between the Catholics and the Institutionals (mainline) in both percentages. Other Religions, however, have 28 percent who are under 20 but only 8 percent 65 and over, this latter indicating they have far fewer older people, some of which are likely to be immigrants or other newcomers, though they are only a small part of the population (1 percent)." Brierley adds that the age structure is actually more significant than the figures suggest because the percentage of those 75 and over is increasing faster in the mainline churches than the others. "In other words, it is not just that the combined institutional churches are significantly older than the population as a whole, but very much older. In 2021, 7.9 percent of N. Ireland's population were 75 or over, [but this group accounted for] 12.7 percent of the institutional churches...[B]y 2031, 9.6 percent of the population will be 75 or over, which could mean 15.5 percent for the institutional churches. While many elderly people are still active and can play a positive part in church life, and therefore should not be bewailed or assumed to be a 'negative' in statistical interpretations, replacement inevitably involves younger people coming to faith, though not necessarily into institutional, traditional church structures."

(*FutureFirst*, www.brierleyconsultancy.com)

Tensions between Russian and Romanian Orthodox churches rise in Moldova

The war in neighboring Ukraine is giving a new impetus to the competition between Russian and Romanian Orthodox Churches in Moldova, with some clergy leaving the first to join the second, reports the *Nachrichtendienst Östliche Kirchen* (November 16). Due to historical circumstances, the autonomous Moldovan Orthodox Church finds itself under the Russian Church and is estimated to gather around 90 percent of the Moldovan Orthodox faithful, while a Metropolis of Bessarabia under the Romanian Church was established in 1992. As reported by **RW** (Vol. 34, No. 3, January 2019), Moldova remained a relatively quiet front in the context of intra-Orthodox disputes, but this is now rapidly changing, with differences being exacerbated by the geopolitical context. In 2023, around 50 priests defected from the Moldovan Orthodox Church, "largely because they were unhappy about the Russian Orthodox Church's support for the war in Ukraine," and have joined the Romanian Orthodox Church's local diocese (*Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty*, November 9). The Synod of the Moldovan Church has stripped six defecting clergymen of their priestly status.



Nativity Cathedral in Chișinău, Republic of Moldova. Built in the 1830s, it belongs to the Moldovan Orthodox Church, subordinated to the Patriarchate of Moscow (© 2016 Alexandru Panoiu | Flickr).

In a leaked letter sent in September to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, the head of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Vladimir, seemed to give up his pro-Russian stance and expressed concern about the consequences of support by Russian Orthodox clergy for the war in Ukraine, stating that it was costing souls for the Moldovan Church, and that the latter might have no choice but to become fully independent. Moreover, in November, Moldovan clerics remaining under Metropolitan Vladimir have appealed to him to enter into discussions with the Romanian Church for the purpose of joining it and thus correcting a “historical mistake.” However, on November 16, the Synod of the Moldovan Church distanced itself from such calls and announced that priests switching to another church without permission would be stripped of their priestly status (*Nachrichtendienst Östliche Kirchen*, November 30). The Romanian state meanwhile announced earlier this year that it would be granting financial support to the Metropolis of Bessarabia. Together with Moldova’s bids for membership in the European Union, what is happening in that small country (of 2.5 million inhabitants) has to be placed within the wider context of the reshaping of the political and ecclesiastical map of the Orthodox world.

Halal food producers seek potential market among non-Muslim customers amidst restrictions

Producers of halal food could make higher profits by finding more non-Muslim customers, but marketing efforts remain limited despite promising developments, writes Heba Hashem in *Salaam Gateway* (November 6), a platform on the global Islamic economy. Several Muslim experts are convinced that halal food could expand into the mainstream food industry by appealing to people's curiosity about other cultures and demand for healthy food. They argue that as people have become more health-conscious, the organic nature of the food is a card that could be played. Omar Subedar, chief operations officer at the Halal Monitoring Authority (HMA) in Canada, claims that the secondary (non-Muslim) market has already grown in that country. According to him, a hurdle is the Islamic jargon that is used for halal food, with an Arabic terminology that suggests it is only for Muslims. A UK-based Shariah scholar and Islamic finance expert, Sheikh Bilal Khan is pleading for an alternative vocabulary to attract a non-Muslim customer base.

But Khan warns that many halal food companies are content with the profits made from Muslim customers and lack the drive to market and grow beyond that community. However, some companies have already done it. Hashem mentions Saffron Road, an American brand offering



Source: Faunalytics.

“ethically sourced halal food inspired by flavors from around the world.” The company sells its products mostly to non-Muslim consumers, and many of the foods are “also certified kosher, vegan, vegetarian, organic, gluten-free, and non-GMO.” Last September, a World Halal Food Festival in London that is now in its 10th year witnessed to the growth of this food segment among some non-Muslim foodies, whose expectations include finding cleaner meat (*The Guardian*, Sept. 24). Earlier this year, a report by food futurologist Lyndon Gee, on behalf of halal convenience food manufacturer TAKUL, predicted further growth for the halal market, not only due to Muslim consumers but also the increasing popularity of halal food among non-Muslims attracted by a traceability that inspires a sense of safety (*Food Navigator Europe*, Aug. 23).

Meanwhile, halal food products can also face restrictions, as in the case of India's Uttar Pradesh government's enforcement of a ban on the production, storage, distribution, and sale of food products with halal certification (*Economic Times*, Nov. 30). With 240 million people—nearly 20 percent of them Muslim—Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state in India, and like 15 other states in the country it is ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which claims to have faith in “cultural nationalism” and is committed to a “positive secularism” as opposed to a secularism “reduced to minority appeasement.” Since 2011, all vegetarian products for sale in India are marked with a green label, while those containing eggs, fish or meat have a red label, according to Nathalie Mayroth in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (November 29). A member of the BJP youth movement complained that unnecessary halal certification of vegan products like toothpaste or soap was creating unfair competition for non-halal products and argued that the red and green labeling system should be sufficient. In its decision to ban halal products, the government of Uttar Pradesh claimed that the extensive use of halal certification was adversely affecting the business interests of other communities, and went as far as to claim that it was part of a strategy to create divisions and weaken the country. The ban does not apply to products manufactured for export.

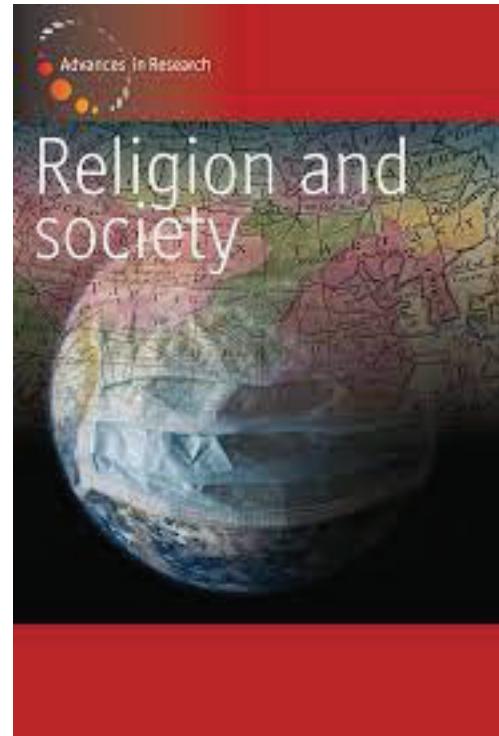
Opponents of the BJP claim that the ban is an attempt by Hindu nationalists to mobilize their supporters for electoral purposes. In an analysis of the ban (*Medium*, November 22), Asif Nawaz confirms that halal-certified products have indeed been gaining popularity among non-Muslim consumers. Major Muslim organizations in India have denounced the ban and have warned about the potential impact for Indian exports to other nations, reports Shaik Zakir Hussain (*Salaam Gateway*, November 29). One of the targeted organizations, Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind Halal Trust, stressed the importance of the halal industry for Indian exports and tourism, but also the fact that several non-Muslim-run companies are also using halal certificates. Nawaz remarks that complex factors are at play, “such as religion, economics, and national security.” Academic observers of the Indian scene say that the 210 to 220 million Muslims in India increasingly have to deal with the reality of a “majoritarian State” that sees the country as fundamentally Hindu. No doubt the halal ban in Uttar Pradesh constitutes one more episode in those developments.

(*Salaam Gateway*, <https://salaamgateway.com>; *Food Navigator*, <https://www.foodnavigator.com>; Dr. Asif Nawaz, “Halal Certification Ban in Uttar Pradesh: A Multifaceted Analysis,” <https://draasifnawaz.medium.com/halal-certification-ban-in-uttar-pradesh-a-multifaceted-analysis-82f51487c06d>; *BJP website*, <https://www.bjp.org>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ As with sociologists of religion before them, anthropologists specializing in religion are branching out to study atheism and other forms of non-religion, according to the annual journal *Religion & Society*. The 2023 issue is devoted to anthropological studies of non-religion, although these focus less on the familiar

sites of secularism, such as atheist and secular humanist societies, and more on the discreet and unexpected places for non-religion in largely religious cultures. Anthropology has addressed non-belief largely through theories about secularization and the notions of the secular but until recently has not examined the rituals and practices of “lived non-religion” in the way that anthropologists have long studied religions. The articles cover a wide range of groups and movements often co-existing yet being in conflict with religion, as in a study examining an increasing numbers of Turks leaving Islam, and another looking at more ambivalent forms of non-religion among South Asians in India and Bangladesh, who may not express their atheism. All these articles suggest that non-belief and losing religion are not necessarily tied to modernization—a key tenet of the secularization thesis. For something different, an article on the Satanic Temple movement in the U.S. looks at how non-religion can challenge political religion, even if its attacks on religion unwittingly operate from a Protestant and anti-Catholic framework. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/religion-and-society>



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

While artificial intelligence (AI) has been imputed with spiritual, even mystical, power by its proponents and critics, **Way of the Future** is among the first organized religions based on the technology. The church was originally launched by Anthony Levandowski in 2015, while he was working on the self-driving technology Waymo for Google. Levandowski envisioned a religion that would merge AI with spirituality. While the church eventually closed down, Levandowski, who



Source: TS2.

had been prosecuted for theft of trade secrets (and then pardoned by former President Donald Trump), has recently revived the group, and it is reported to have already drawn a “couple thousand people.” Way of the Future plans to serve as a “mechanism” for people to understand and shape the public discourse about this new technology. Levandowski says that AI will have the power to “see everything, be everywhere, know everything, and maybe help us and guide us in a way that normally you would call God.” (Source: *ZeroHedge*, November 26)