

Reviewing 2023—a year of schisms and rumors of schisms

*In this review and preview of annual religious trends, it seemed that much of the drama of religion in 2023 came toward the end of the year, meaning that we may have to wait to see if these events will unfold as significant trends in 2024. Yet, developments such as the divisions over the Vatican's declaration on blessing same-sex marriages and the real schism in United Methodism have been a long time coming and are unlikely to fade away in the coming years. As with previous reviews, we cite both the issues of **RW** where these topics have been covered and other publications relevant to our analysis at the end of each item.*

1) The Vatican statement, *Fiducia Supplicans*, approving blessings on same-sex relationships (see this issue) was only the latest sign of discord in world Catholicism in recent years. With the possibility that the next papal conclave might take place in the not-too-distant future, tensions have been rising within the Roman Catholic Church, with harsh and open criticism against Pope Francis from conservative circles. The pope's selection of new cardinals who are likely to follow his line (**RW July**) and his attempt to set the church on a path of irreversible reforms have made the divisions especially evident in 2023. According to Vatican expert Jean-Marie Guénois, author of a recent book in French on the pope, Francis sees his pontificate as having been made providentially possible by the unexpected retirement of Pope Benedict XVI and is convinced that he needs to fulfill a mission. "He believes that God is asking him to go all the way in applying the Vatican II Council and to cut short any attempt to turn back the clock." (**RW, January, July; La Nef, December**)

2) The war in Ukraine continues to impact developments across Orthodox churches. It has intensified divisions among Orthodox Christians in the Baltic States and has motivated priests in Moldova to defect from the Moldovan Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate and join the Bessarabian Orthodox Church under the Romanian Patriarchate. The war has also paved the way for a fast switch of the date of Christmas from January 7 to December 25 in Ukraine—although the change has not been observed by one of the two Orthodox churches in the country (see this issue). With little prospect of a quick solution to either the war in Ukraine or the rift



between the patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow, it is likely that there will be new episodes of Orthodox divisions in 2024, including moves in Ukraine toward a possible banning of religious organizations associated with Russia, primarily targeting the branch of the Orthodox Church that used to be aligned with the Moscow Patriarchate until the Russian invasion of the country. **(RW, July, November)**

3) The split in the United Methodist Church largely over LGBTQ issues took place over several years, but 2023 saw the largest number of congregations departing and more than expected. About a quarter of U.S. congregations in the United Methodist Church have received permission to leave the denomination during the five-year window for such authorized departures that closed in December. Last year alone, 5,641 congregations received permission from their regional conferences to leave the denomination, according to an unofficial tally by United Methodist News. In total, 7,658 have received permission since 2019. Most have gone to the newly formed conservative Global Methodist Church. The first denomination-wide legislative gathering in eight years, scheduled for 2024, will likely introduce further liberal policies on marriage and ordination and there will likely be more agitation among congregations to leave. There will also be calls to either decentralize the international church, which has kept the denomination more conservative than other mainline bodies, or provide churches abroad with exit options similar to those offered to U.S. congregations. **(RW, August)**

4) The October 7 attack against Israel by the militant Islamic movement Hamas has led to wide-ranging debates about the extent of anti-Semitism in Western society. Reports of anti-Semitic incidents have increased, along with acts of anti-Islamic discrimination. More substantive survey

research findings are sure to arrive in 2024, but it is likely that the war has increased solidarity and identification with Israel among Jews in the West where there was previously considerable indifference and even alienation. It was not unexpected that the Hamas attacks would serve as a rallying cry for the world's jihadist groups, but more unexpected was the new friendliness of far-right groups to Islamic militant groups and the Palestinian cause, as well as reports of interest in and even conversions (or “reversions”) to Islam among young, often female, users of social media, especially TikTok. **(RW, November)**

5) Last but not least in significant religious developments is last year's democratization of artificial intelligence (AI) in the form of the public release of ChatGPT. AI was already in use by religious organizations, especially in highly ritualized faiths such as Hinduism and Buddhism. But the release of ChatGPT caused a wave of both concern and enthusiasm, as religious practitioners quickly tested the new technology's ability to write sermons and prayers and answer deep questions of the faith. Just the appearance and spread of the technology alone raised new questions about the nature of the sacred and of divine purpose for both believers and skeptics. A new element of anti-technological belief and sentiment unfolded among both conservative and liberal religionists who fear that future reliance on AI will be either idolatrous, anti-humanistic, or even demonic. But not to be outdone are hi-tech enthusiasts who see AI as providing one more building block to a trans- or post-humanist future and who are already creating quasi- and actual religions to harness this destabilizing force. **(RW, March, June, November)**

Same-sex blessings as a new dividing line within Roman Catholicism

Released on December 18 under the title *Fiducia Supplicans*, the declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) allowing for non-liturgical blessings of couples of the same sex or in irregular situations led to expected divisions in the Catholic Church. A number of bishops sought to issue clarifications in answer to local reactions—but positions varied considerably. On the one hand, the Archbishop of Salzburg, Franz Lackner (head of the Austrian bishops' conference), expressed “joy” at the recognition that “love, loyalty, and even hardship are shared” among couples in irregular situations, and Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai described such blessings as “natural” in Indian culture. In contrast, bishops in Malawi and Zambia stated that the blessings allowed by the declaration would not be permitted or implemented in their respective countries (*The Tablet*, December 26), while Hungarian bishops instructed priests to avoid blessing couples of the same sex or in irregular situations. *Fiducia Supplicans* claims to remain “firm on the traditional doctrine of the Church about marriage, not allowing any type of liturgical rite or blessing similar to a liturgical rite that can create confusion,” and reminds Catholics that “the Church has always considered only those sexual relations that are lived out within marriage to be morally licit.” But a pastoral approach allows for blessings to everyone outside of a liturgical context, and this includes “the possibility of blessings for couples in irregular situations and for couples of the same sex, the form of which should not be fixed ritually by ecclesial



Lucas Ninna/Getty Images (source: Eurekastreet).

authorities to avoid producing confusion with the blessing proper to the Sacrament of Marriage...”

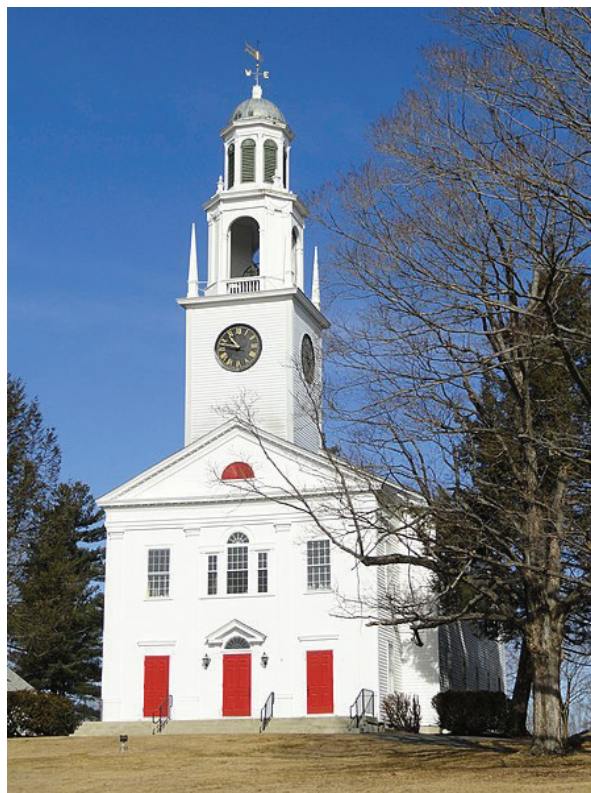
While criticism from conservative corners already very critical of Pope Francis was to be expected, reactions from African bishops indicate the opening of a potential dividing line on ethical issues that is reminiscent of what took place in the Anglican Communion. African bishops are not unanimous, however, with some putting forward opposition to homosexuality and others commenting that nothing has changed in the Catholic doctrine of marriage, since it is people who are blessed, not their union. It remains to be seen if the call of Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), for a single statement of clarification by the African church will be followed. On the other hand, the DDF’s declaration is unlikely to stop those who, in countries such as Germany, are pressing for a ritualized blessing of same-sex couples. The declaration might also be an attempt to navigate a middle way. Gavin Ashenden, a former Anglican priest and continuing bishop who is now a Catholic layman, writes that the Vatican “has set out to appear to change the Church’s teaching without in fact changing it. The distinction is achieved by changing the practice but not the principle.” He attributes the repudiation by a number of bishops to “an instinctive reflex for reality within the Church that may resist the imposition of what appears to be heteropraxis and alternative actions” (*The Catholic Herald*, Dec. 21).

With officials like Kenyan bishop Paul Kariuki Njiru issuing statements that *Fiducia Supplicans* “should be rejected in totality” (*Kenya News Agency*, December 28) while others attempt to adjust pastoral practices (by, for example, blessing members of homosexual couples separately, as individuals, and not as couples), it seems that the new document may increase fragmentation within the Roman Catholic Church and create new fault lines. For now, faced with the wave of reactions, the prefect of the DDF, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, has stated that “it’s proper for each local bishop to make that discernment in his diocese,” taking local circumstances into account (*National Catholic Register*, Dec. 27). But the broad media coverage given to church progressives, such as the Jesuit writer and activist James Martin, who took to Twitter to invite members of the community to receive blessings, suggests that the situation will open up a new front in the culture wars in Catholicism.

(Full text of *Fiducia Supplicans* on Vatican website: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html)

Schism and conflict looming for America’s most liberal church?

Controversy and signs of schism related to “woke” politics and religion have found their way into Unitarian Universalism (UU), a religious movement that has long been considered a standard bearer of progressive, tolerant, and pluralistic religion. In the *Financial Times* (December 7), Jemima Kelly reports that much of the recent controversy and conflict started after UU pastor Todd Eklof published the *Gadfly Papers*, a 2019 book attacking the church’s leadership. Eklof argued that the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) was driving the church in an illiberal, dogmatic, intolerant and “identitarian” direction, devolving into a “self-perpetuating echo chamber” stressing “emotional thinking” over logic and reason. The controversy that this generated in the denomination surprised the staunchly liberal and Democratic Eklof and “serves as a kind of microcosm of the way the culture wars can divide even the most politically liberal members of American society,” Kelly



First Parish Church Unitarian Universalist, 40 Church Street, Northborough, Massachusetts, USA (source: Daderot | Wikimedia Commons).

writes. Indeed, the struggle in the UUA is between people on basically the same side of the political spectrum.

Since the book's publication, Eklof has been accused of racism, homophobia, ableism and bullying, removed from a mentoring position at a theological school, and "disfellowshipped" from the church. He argues that the church's principles of religious freedom and tolerance are being abandoned as it has embraced the anti-racist theory that has gained ground in progressive academic circles. At this year's general assembly, 86 percent of delegates voted for a proposed change to the UUA's bylaws that would effectively scrap the "principles" that have existed in some form since the merged church was founded in 1961, replacing them with a set of "values" that would include a new commitment to "dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression." The amendment to the "Article II" clause will need just two-thirds approval to be voted through at next year's general assembly. Opposition to this amendment is strong, and at least two groups have been set up to fight its passing, Save The 7 Principles, and the 5th Principle Project, Kelly reports.

One of the most vocal opponents of Eklof and his allies, who have become known as "the Gadflies," is Reverend Sarah Skochko, who called Eklof's book "morally reprehensible" in a sermon to her congregation in Eugene, Oregon. She describes "the Gadflies" as an "alt-right movement" within the church, made up of "overwhelmingly retired...mostly white men" who are "trying to stop the justice work of our denomination." Meanwhile, Eklof has gained the support of 62 UU ministers, including the prominent African American theologian and pastor Reverend Thandeka, who signed a letter protesting his treatment by the church. For his part, Eklof has recently started the North American Unitarian Association (NAUA). With just 700 members in four churches, he said that the association will do the things that the UUA was meant to, such as providing an "open-minded community that allows people with different beliefs and backgrounds to live together peacefully." Kelly reports that the NAUA is adding about two new members every day, holds its own services and education sessions, and has its own monthly newsletter. The group is planning its first general assembly and is in discussion with other Unitarian churches in other countries about creating a global association.

(*Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/ec58bccb-668b-445f-ba7c-824297eb885d>)

Hispanic folk healers at the border move into mainstream

Folk healing traditions and rituals that have long existed among Hispanic communities along the U.S. Southern border and more often been associated with the elderly and poor have been revitalized as they have "entered the age of Instagram. More and more younger people are taking on rituals they learned from their grandmothers and deploying them against 21st century problems," Edgar Sandoval reports in the *New York Times* (December 16). The folk healers, known as "curanderas," preceded the arrival of Spanish conquistadors to Latin America and



Source: Pikara Magazine.

Mexico but eventually blended indigenous rituals with elements of Catholicism, taking on Asian and African folk traditions as well. The practice has taken hold in areas with sparse medical resources and where established medicine may be distrusted, such as Texas's Rio Grande Valley, where many people rely on homegrown remedies and folk traditions as stand-ins for traditional health treatments, Sandoval writes. This is especially the case with mental health, where statistics show that Latinos lag behind other minorities in seeking treatment. While medical authorities have warned against the adverse effects of folk remedies, with reports of deaths from consuming some of the substances they can involve, curanderismo has become so accepted in these communities that it is not unusual to see street signs and TV ads advertising folk healing services.

Sandoval writes that spiritual cleansing sessions, known as "limpias" and involving waving the smoke from a concoction with sage over the body of the recipient, are now conducted on public beaches. Curanderas trade recipes online for blocking "envy energies" and sell artisan candles bearing the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe (along with statues of her, St. Jude, and Santa Muerte, the Latino version of the Grim Reaper) in shops. Their clients are often college educated. One young curandera, whose great grandmothers had been midwives, said she began interacting with an entity she believed to be the Angel of Death, known as Azrael. "You make it

your own,” she said. “There is no right or wrong. You do what’s right for you.” Another 39-year-old modern folk healer, who embraces the moniker of “millennial curandera,” combines old traditions she learned from her grandmother and aunt with skills she acquired from her graduate education in medical anthropology and Latin art history. In addition to spiritual services, she will also offer clients practical and scientific advice, such as cutting caffeine and sugar intake for problems with insomnia and anxiety. The side of the border matters to how curanderas operate; in northern Mexico, where indigenous culture is not as widespread and the Catholic Church’s hold is stronger, such folk healing takes place more in the shadows to avoid stigma. In the U.S., one curandera said she felt more freedom to practice, even having Catholic priests stop by for her counsel.

Crossbreeding of witchcraft and spirituality with the help of technology?

Magic and witchcraft groups and movements are merging with organizations holding to Eastern and other forms of spirituality and are being offered together on the same digitized platforms, writes Lionel Obadia in the journal *Social Compass* (online in December). “At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, references to magic and witchcraft seem to have disseminated in almost every sector of Westernized modern cultures and societies: Media, cinema, science, technologies and AI, the economies of well-being, ordinary life, the workplace, politics, religion, fashion, and music all allude to it in [one] way or another.” Magic and witchcraft have especially found a place in popular culture and social media among younger generations, with young female



Source: *Focus on the Family*.

“TikTok witches” promoting such services as casting spells, rituals, gem magic, different kinds of herbal and olfactory treatments, tarot card reading, and palmistry. The trend of magic turning more spiritual can also be seen in how such platforms include Yoga, Buddhist-inspired meditation, and other techniques from the New Age movement.

In Obadia’s study of 50 of these “postmodern” witches’ websites, he finds a similar blending of Eastern and nature-based spiritualities with magic and witchcraft. The new hybrid approach also embraces environmentalism and identity politics, such as advocacy for LGBTQ and African American rights. Prominent magic writers and practitioners blending witchcraft with politics as well as spirituality include David Salisbury, author of *Witchcraft Activism*, and Michael Hughes, author of *Magic for the Resistance*. Obadia writes that modern spirituality is currently being reinvented under new economic and ecological conditions and is interacting with a “reinvented magic which is just as modernized and which has largely lost its dangerous and violent character—at least in the particular forms it assumes.” This triad of magic, spirituality, and technology can be considered a “spiritualization of witchcraft” as well as a “bewitchment of spirituality,” he concludes.

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

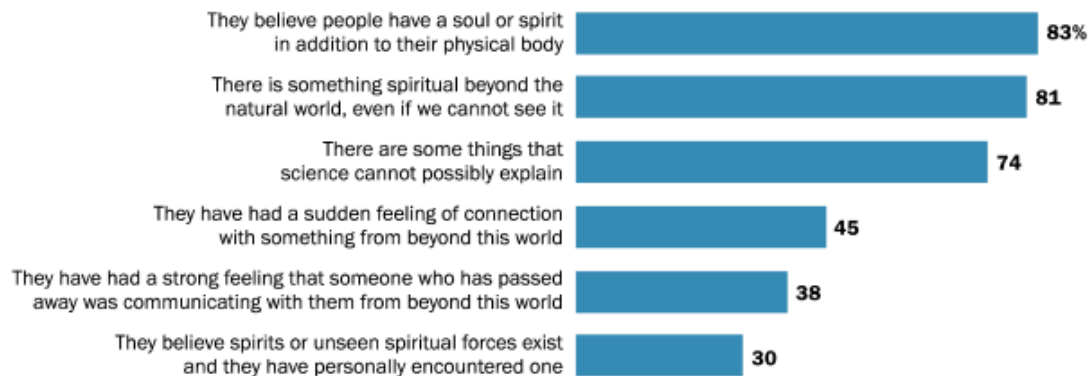
CURRENT RESEARCH

● A recent Pew Research Center survey suggests that beliefs in spirits or a spiritual realm beyond this world are widespread, even among those who don’t consider themselves religious. The survey finds that 83 percent of all U.S. adults believe people have a soul or spirit

Most Americans believe people have a soul or spirit

Most Americans believe people have a soul or spirit

% of U.S. adults who say ...



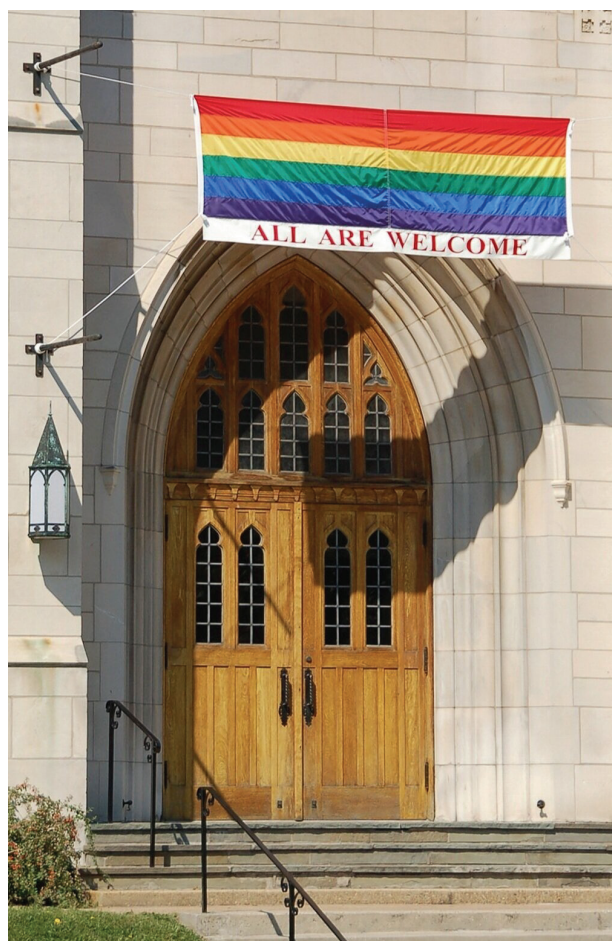
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 31-Aug. 6, 2023.
“Spirituality Among Americans”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

in addition to their physical body, while 81 percent say there is something spiritual beyond the natural world, even if we cannot see it. The survey also finds 38 percent saying that they have had a strong feeling that someone who passed away had communicated with them from beyond this world, and 30 percent saying they have personally encountered a spirit or unseen spiritual force. A total of 70 percent of U.S. adults can be considered “spiritual” in some way, since they consider themselves spiritual people or say spirituality is very important in their lives. Because this is the first time Pew has asked many of these questions about beliefs, practices and experiences, it is uncertain whether they are more or less common today than they were in the past. The center plans to use these questions as a baseline for further survey research.

(The Pew report can be downloaded from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/spirituality-among-americans/>)

- **A study finds that while liberal religious groups and people may indeed be more liberal than unaffiliated Americans, such movements and organizations have a limited “liberalizing effect” on their members compared to their conservative counterparts.** In an exploratory study published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in December), Cornell University sociologist Landon Schnabel utilizes the General Social Survey and the Baylor Religion Survey to analyze what ideological effects liberal and conservative religious groups might have on their adherents. Finding that liberal religious groups and their members, such as the Unitarian Universalists, are often more liberal than unaffiliated Americans in terms of their official denominational positions and the kinds of activism in which they are involved, Schnabel expected to find that politically distinct religious groups would have varying effects on their members going in both liberal and conservative directions. Instead he discovered that involvement in liberal religious groups did not have a significant liberalizing effect on their members. Rather, while these groups may have a less conservatizing effect compared to conservative religious bodies, Schnabel found that the effect “is still generally conservatizing nonetheless.”

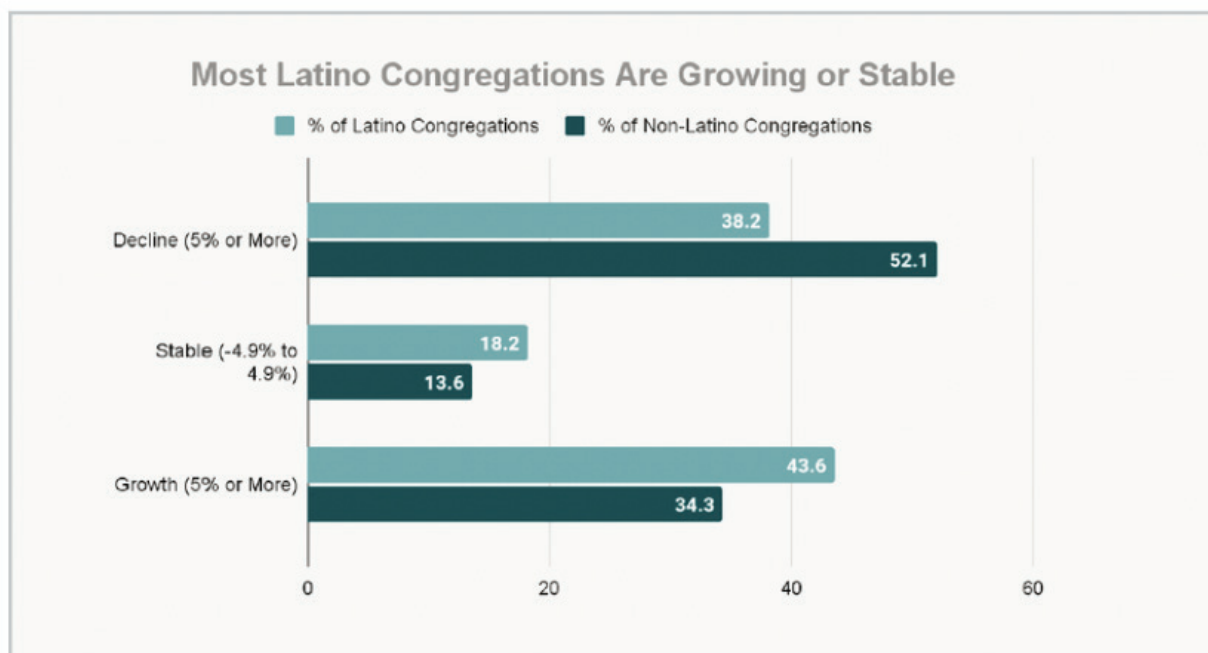


Source: Bethel Congregational United Church of Christ.

He found that liberal religious groups tended to focus more on economic justice than on such distinctively progressive causes as feminism and LGBTQ rights. “In other words,” he writes, “those who frequently attend gay-affirming congregations are not the most liberal. Instead, it is those who attend them least frequently.” Schnabel speculates that it may be that religion is not “endlessly pliable” and there may be something inherently conservative about religious practice. In any event, “liberal religion seems a less effective response to the Religious Right than expected. Rather than a counterbalance to conservative religion, liberal religion seems to generally tip the scales further right.”

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

- Latino congregations are faring better than other segments of American Christianity since the pandemic, but these churches are also facing significant leadership issues and financial strains, according to a new report.** The report is based on data from the Faith Communities Today (FACT) National Survey of Congregations, carried out in 2020, and the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC) National Project, carried out a year or more after the pandemic. The two surveys show some continuities and contrasts between these periods. The report notes that 7 out of every 10 participants attend the largest Latino faith communities of 250 or more congregants and that a majority of Latino congregations have experienced growth or remained stable in attendance over the past five years. But compared to others, Latino congregations are half as likely to own their own facilities and almost three times more likely to worship in the same building as other congregations. On average, participants of Latino congregations are younger and have fewer senior members than other churches. Regardless of whether Hispanic church leaders are full-time or part-time, over one third have



paid employment outside of their congregation. And about 2 in 10 leaders are unpaid for their ministries.

The surveys find that Latino faith communities rely more heavily than others on informal means of technology-based communication (social media, texting, apps) rather than more formal means (email, e-newsletters, and websites) to foster connections within and beyond their churches. “Nearly quadruple the average percentage of Latino congregations’ income comes from fundraising when compared with other congregations’ income.” Stable congregations have higher per capita giving compared to both growing and declining congregations, and they also are more likely to pay rent than own their facilities. Post-lockdown, online giving decreased in Latino congregations overall despite an increase in congregations having an online giving option. With a substantial segment “of leaders being employed beyond their faith communities and unpaid in their ministry roles, many congregations renting their facilities, most having lower average income and higher per capita expenses, and giving severely decreased post lockdown, congregations—as well as religious and denominational bodies— must begin to address some of these systemic issues in order to ensure continued vitality and viability,” the report concludes.

(The full report can be downloaded here: <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/EPIC-FACT-Latino-Report.pdf>)

• **A new study finds a unique pattern of support for and control of religion in secular European states that is also seen in countries with official religions.** The study by Jonathan Fox, published in the *International Journal for Religious Freedom* (16:2), looked at 43 European states within the larger Religion and State (RAS) dataset, examining to what degree these countries support, regulate, restrict, and control their majority and minority religions. Distinguishing between countries that have an official religion, those that have strict religion and state separation, and those that have



People demonstrate against Islamophobia in October 2019, Paris (Alain Apaydin / ABACAPRESS.COM - source: OpenDemocracy).

neither, Fox found that European states with constitutional religion and state separation show a strong tendency to support religion (in its educational, charitable, and architectural dimensions, for instance), but in a way that allows them to control it. They both directly regulate their majority religions and engage in government-based religious discrimination more than other European countries. “Thus, it is fair to conclude that secular states in Europe are a more direct threat to freedom of religion than European states with official religions...During the period covered by this study the secular Gods are less tolerant than the Christian God,” Fox writes.

But even in states with official religions and no religion and state separation policies, there is an attempt to restrict religious freedom. This pattern can be seen in the fact that the three Muslim and Jewish religious practices seen as objectionable to some manifestations of secular ideology are more likely to be restricted in states with official religions than in states with separation of religion and state. “It can also be seen in the tendency of states with official religions to regulate, restrict, and control their majority religion. Yet it is secular European states which are most likely to engage in [government religious discrimination], suggesting that in Europe, those who are connected to a religion are more likely to be tolerant of other religions,” Fox concludes.

(International Journal for Religious Freedom, <https://ijrf.org/index.php/home>)

Ukrainian Orthodox Christmas date change challenges Russian influence, finds mixed response

As part of the process of Ukrainization in opposition to Russian influence, both the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) have celebrated Christmas this year according to the revised Julian calendar, on December 25, while the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which used to be under the Moscow Patriarchate but decided to become independent because of the war in Ukraine, will continue to celebrate 13 days later, on January 7. Since September 1, most OCU and UGCC parishes have switched to the new calendar for feasts celebrated at fixed dates (but not for movable feasts such as Easter). Moreover, in the summer the Ukrainian parliament decided that Christmas would be officially celebrated on December 25; since 2017, December 25 had already become a public holiday alongside January 7. The move represents a major political and cultural statement about breaking with the country’s “Russian heritage” and aligning with the West. But at the religious level, the results are more mixed. Regina Elsner (Münster University, Germany) remarks in *Ukraine verstehen* (December 23) that the change has not brought more unity among Ukrainian Christians. Indeed, while support for the new church calendar has grown among larger sectors of Ukrainian society, the most religious people among Orthodox believers tend to be more hesitant. Elsner writes that there is a risk that participation in Christmas celebrations on January 7 will be interpreted as a sign of weaker Ukrainian national feelings or even support for Russia, although there may be purely religious reasons for remaining attached to the traditional date.



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A survey on church and religion in Ukraine conducted in November by the Razumkov Center finds significant regional variations among Ukrainian Christians in reaction to the change of date, from high approval in the West (75 percent) to low approval in the East (28 percent). The date change is supported by 82 percent of the UGCC's members, 62 percent of the OCU's, and slightly more than 20 percent of the UOC's. It has reverberations in the Ukrainian diaspora. Some Ukrainians in North America confess that they actually remain attached to the January 7 date as part of their tradition and distinctive identity. There are mixed reactions to the decision of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada to switch to the new calendar, with some parishes preparing to offer Christmas celebrations at both dates this year (*CBC News*, December 14). "Celebrating Christmas on January 7 in Canada is our way of preserving the rich Ukrainian traditions that have defined us for so long," said Michael Bociurkiw, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council (*The Globe and Mail*, December 19). In an article published in *Public Orthodoxy* (December 21), Talia Zajac of Niagara University described her reaction. "I came to realize that it is mourning that I feel, a grief for centuries of tradition coming to an end in my lifetime. Having a separate calendar has been a long-held part of my identity as a Ukrainian Canadian."

(*Ukraine verstehen*, <https://ukraineverstehen.de/>; full report, in *Ukrainian*, of the Razumkov Center, <https://razumkov.org.ua/images/2023/12/19/2023-Religiya-F.pdf>; Razumkov Center

survey, <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/component/k2/attitude-of-ukrainian-christians-to-switching-to-the-new-julian-calendar-november-2023>)

Faith-based social services in Czech Republic torn between tradition and secularism

A study of faith-based social services in the strongly secularized Czech Republic reveals a growing dilemma that these groups face, needing the identity and resources provided by sponsoring churches while not wanting to alienate a predominantly unchurched and secular clientele. The study, conducted by Andrea Beláňová of the Czech Academy of Sciences and published in the journal *Social Compass* (online in December), is based on interviews with the CEOs of 10 faith-based organizations connected to the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, the largest Protestant body in the country. The CEOs tended to see their work as their own individual projects only loosely connected to the church, while also appreciating the support and the religious identity (with the church's strong historical heritage) that they got from such a connection, which distinguished them from other groups. The CEOs interpreted religion in secular terms, such as “care for individuals, respect for diversity, and accessibility. Within such a definition, religion takes the shape of universal human values,” Beláňová writes.



Statue of Jan Hus, Hussite Church, Prague (source: Wikimedia Commons).

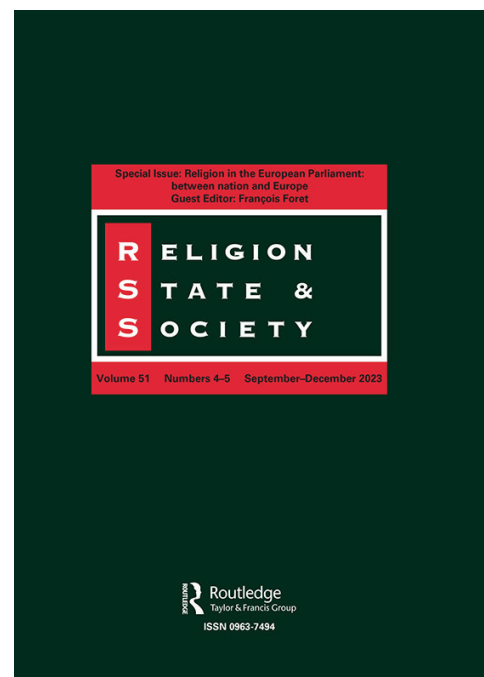
This identity shift is further affected by a declining church membership whereby fewer employees and clients are committed to the particular church ethos and the former are losing the religious motivations to do their work. This could mean a further loosening of the bonds connecting these faith-based organizations to the church as they become more mainstream secular social service organizations. The loss of religious distinctiveness has also been a question among Czech church schools and can be seen in debates about the Church of Sweden's role in social service delivery. In these cases, there is a conflict over the use of theological language in the delivery of social services and education where religious elements are also downplayed in actual practice so as not to scare off secular clients.

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

Findings & Footnotes

■ The journal *Religion, State, and Society* devotes its current issue (51:4–5) to the state of religion in the European Parliament (EP) and opens with the provocative observation that “The ongoing secularization of Europe...is little contested. Its outcomes, especially regarding European integration, are much more controversial.” This is borne out in several contributions, where it is acknowledged that the Christian Democratic parties that were started after World War II have gone the way of the churches into a state of decline. But it is a different matter for the Christian Democracy movement as a whole, which has “reinvented itself and remains a key actor for the future of European integration...In other words, religion has not exited European politics. It has mutated and is even more visible than ever,” editor François Foret writes. The issue is based on the second wave of the project, Religion in the European Parliament and in European Multilevel Governance, which consists of surveys of member representatives (MEPs) and country case studies (of Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, and Spain) conducted during the 2019–2024 term of the EP.

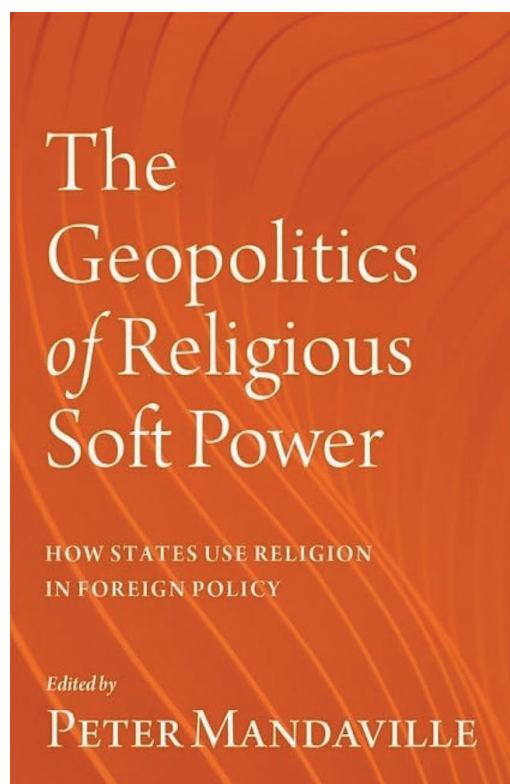
Major concerns about acknowledging Europe's Christian heritage that were evident in the first wave of the project (2009–2014) have shifted from legal considerations to an outright political rallying cry today by many politicians more influenced by populism than traditional Christian Democratic philosophy. Also more common among the recent respondents and EP players is the notion of “permanent crisis”—whether it is the situation in Ukraine or terrorism or immigration—that also has religious implications. Noteworthy articles in the issue include one by John Nelson and James Guth showing how Catholic and Protestant support of the EP and European Union have given way to a religious



traditionalism disconnected from religiosity with much more skepticism toward these entities. But Foret points out that religious contestation by today's political upstarts, such as Poland's Law and Justice Party, is less explicit inside of the EP, where they may be viewed as fringe players, compared to their own countries' public spheres and political systems where the electoral stakes are higher. That is why the case studies in this issue, particularly the ones on Poland and Italy and their populist resurgences, show much more of the ongoing "controversy" of religion in the European Union. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/crss20>

■ In several issues of **RW** over the last few years we have run articles about how nations and governments use religion in their political relations and interactions with other countries, known as "religious soft power." The new book *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power* (Oxford, \$110) does a good job of comparing different cases of religious soft power and finding some common themes and trends. The book, edited by Peter Mandaville, notes that while many international affairs specialists have downplayed or not paid attention to this development, those who are of a more "constructionist" bent (emphasizing identity, culture, and norms) have taken the concept on board in their work. The editor adds that religious soft power was initially meant to mean actions and practices of transnational religious organizations and networks that have some impact on national and international affairs. Today, governments and political leaders are just as likely to use the state to leverage religious soft power to accomplish their geopolitical goals. Mandaville also points out that Joseph Nye, who coined the term in the early 1990s, mainly used it in reference to how American interests are accomplished overseas apart from force and coercion. Today, soft power, especially the religious kind, has become even more important in a multi-polar, "post-Western" world, where the "dissolution and consolidation of new world orders are often accompanied by heightened salience of discussions and narratives about identity, values, and meaning. Religion is a major source of all of these and carries unique discursive power."

The book's many contributions testify to the almost universal use of religious soft power both by religious actors, such as Pope Francis, Chinese Buddhist monks, and Russian Orthodox bishops, and by prominent state leaders, such as India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russia's Vladimir Putin. Noteworthy chapters showing the multifaceted and complex nature of religious soft power include one on Israel and how its state actors collaborate with American evangelical Christians, and one on how Turkey's religious affairs department, known as the Diyanet, is overseeing a network of Islamic charities and clergy in Europe furthering Turkish national interests. Religious tourism also plays a role in the use of religious soft power, seen most clearly in China's rehabilitating and building new Buddhist temples.



There can also be religious soft power exerted through new geopolitical alliances, as shown in a chapter on Russia's attempt to portray itself as a center of traditional family values and reach out to other countries through such a call to activism. The final chapter of the book offers a critique of the concept of religious soft power, arguing that while its insights into international affairs are valuable, it also has its weaknesses, not least being the fact that it is not testable as to its outcomes and that many attempts to use religious soft power have not proved to be effective or successful in the real world of foreign policy.

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

Romana Didulo, the self-proclaimed “Queen of Canada” has been among the most successful in starting a new religion based on QAnon conspiracies. Using Theosophical ideas found in earlier new religious movements, such as the I AM and the Church Universal and Triumphant movements, Didulo, who is almost 50 years old and originally from the Philippines, has created an online ministry that applies these esoteric doctrines to QAnon. She came into the public eye through her anti-Covid activism, even making a foray offline to make a citizen's arrest of Canadian police for committing treason during the government lockdowns. The silence and mystery involving the originator of the QAnon conspiracies is seen as confirming I AM teachings (propagated by Guy Ballard in the 1930s), which hold that “ascended masters” appear who will lead humanity into a realm of peace and harmony to displace evil in the world. As with other ascended masters, Didulo offers followers “Decrees,” which represent a form of amplified prayer between followers and such leaders. “The Queen” and her followers operate several channels and groups on the social media site Telegram, which is considered an underground platform for far right and jihadist movements.



Source: Saltwire.

Since setting up the channels in 2021, their followings have grown considerably (from a few hundred messages a day to thousands), especially during the Covid-19 controversies, such as the truck convoy protests in Canada in 2022. As in the I AM movement, visualization is also important, with followers able to turn their desires into tangible experiences. Didulo sees herself as working with extraterrestrials to eventually rule over Canada to create what she calls a “Canada 2.0.” A number of conspiracies converge in Didulo’s movement, from standard QAnon claims about child sex abuse to the idea that world leaders such as Justin Trudeau and Queen Elizabeth were replaced by clones. But Didulo also espouses positions supported by conservatives and nationalists involving curbing immigration, suppressing transgender activism and treatments, and banning sex education for those under 24 years of age. (**Source:** *Studies in Religion*, online in December)