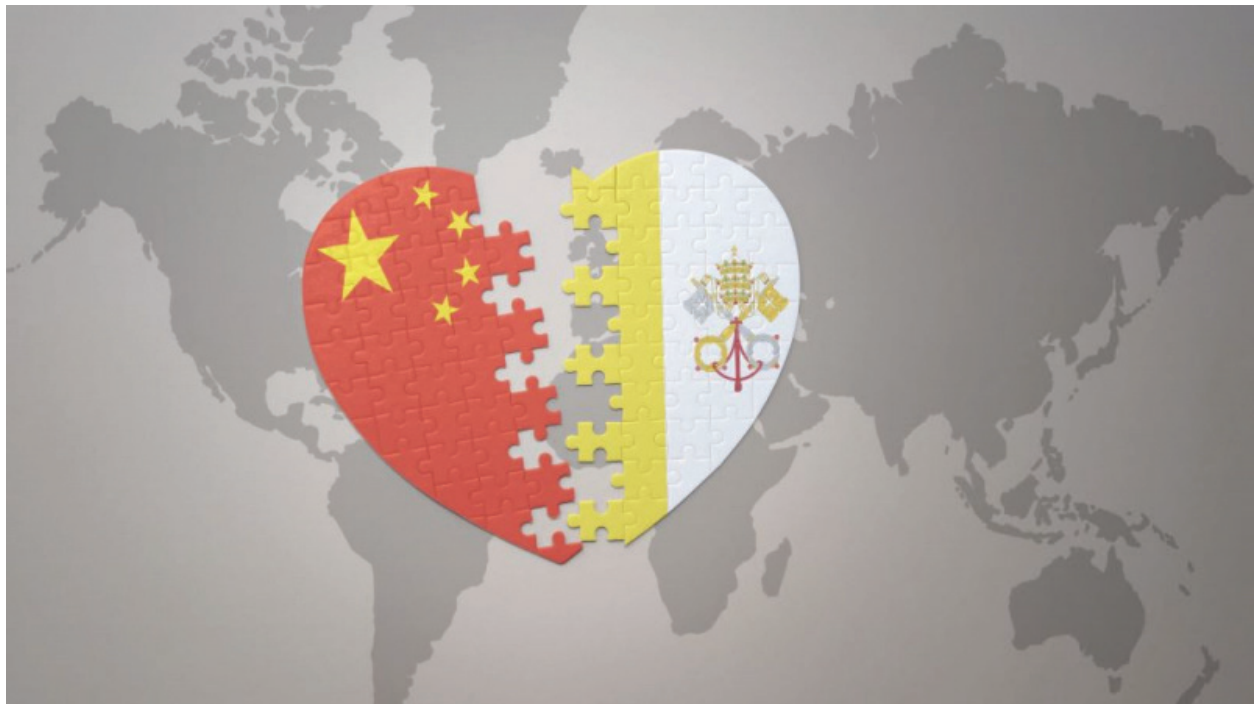


Signs of détente in relations between Vatican and China

After “months of stagnation and tension” there has been an improvement in relations between the Vatican and China—“the culmination of months-long efforts to ease tensions with Beijing,” reports journalist Loup Besmond de Senneville in *La Croix International* (January 30). For Pope Francis, who dreams of visiting the country, China remains a top priority. A 2018 agreement between the Vatican and China providing for their joint appointment of bishops has proved to be a very controversial issue among Catholics, similarly to the *Ostpolitik* with the Soviet Union of an earlier era. “The secretive, two-year provisional deal, which reportedly allows both parties to accept or reject bishop candidates, has been renewed in 2020 and 2022, each time for two years,” and it is expected to be renewed again in October of this year, *UCA News* reports (January 31).



Source: St. Thomas More Priory, Orlando, FL.

But no bishop has been jointly appointed since 2021; in 2022 and 2023, two appointments in the form of transfers from one diocese to another were made by China without consulting Rome. Moreover, China had invoked the pandemic as a reason for suspending dialogue. Critics claimed that the Chinese government was outmaneuvering the church.

In late January, however, three bishops were consecrated in a week with the pope's approval, one of them for a new diocese erected "to conform with China's geographic delineation of the area" (*Associated Press*, January 31). Besmond de Senneville reports that the latest developments are the result of months of behind-the-scenes efforts involving experienced Vatican diplomats, citing the late-November dispatch of a small team under Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli to Beijing. Another key figure in the climate of détente has been the 64-year-old Jesuit, Cardinal Stephen Chow of Hong Kong, who, unlike his predecessors, is said to be trusted by the Chinese government. According to a high-ranking Vatican official, "Chinese authorities now consult the bishops for any new appointment, which was not the case before." But Besmond de Senneville warns against painting too rosy a picture of the situation. Several Vatican officials are disappointed with the results of the agreement, while experts claim that Chinese authorities are reinforcing control over the life of Catholic parishes—with several Chinese bishops critical of the agreement "reportedly missing."

Community organizing programs changing mainline seminaries

Mainline Protestant and Catholic theological education has recently broadened its mission beyond the training of competent clergy to embrace community organizing, reports Aaron Stauffer in the *Christian Century* (February). It is nothing new for mainline Protestant and Catholic seminaries to be centers of social activism, but community organizing has now been integrated into the curriculum at such leading schools as Union Theological Seminary, Boston College, Duke Divinity School, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, and the Graduate Theological Union. All these seminaries now offer either courses, certificates, or shorter-term training programs in community organizing. This change is in line with the way mainline congregations and seminaries "are realizing that systemic change is necessary," especially since the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests of 2020, Stauffer writes. A central player behind the new emphasis on community organizing is the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), one of four national networks that practice such strategies and programs. Along with the community organizing networks Gamaliel, Faith in Action, and the Direct Action and Research Training Center, IAF captured the public's imagination because of the influence of former President Barack Obama and his involvement in community organizing.

The link between community organizing and faith has a long history, with the IAF's founder Saul Alinsky drawing on churches and other neighborhood organizations in his work. But today the community organizing thrust is more in the mold of the identity politics of BLM, where schools



Photo by Gregg Brekke (source: Presbyterian News Service).

are “attempting to create spaces where racial and economic justice and power building are bound up with theological learning and practice,” Stauffer writes. The trend toward continuing education has been another factor in the new attention to community organizing, with the development of many short-term certificate programs. But Stauffer argues that adopting a community organizing approach in seminaries also challenges traditional teaching methods based on “sage on the stage” and “expert-apprentice” models, as it “strives to be democratic: ordinary people are participants in whatever expertise amounts to, and they come together to solve their problems together.” Community organizing models also take what Stauffer calls the approach of “journeying to and with” communities, where often virtual communities are established to meet students’ needs. One prominent example of these models is Vanderbilt’s Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice, where peer networks that attempt to be laboratories for social change are created. The center deploys a case study method where participants identify and test out concepts and practices for “building political and economic power in their communities.”

(*Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

• **More than 90 percent of American adults support religious pluralism, the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty found in its latest Religious Freedom Index.** In its fifth edition of the annual index, Becket polled respondents on six dimensions of religious freedom, including religious pluralism, religion and policy, religious sharing, religion and society, church and state, and religion in action. The *Baptist Press* (January 19) reports that the index found 59 percent of respondents saying they viewed religion as part of the solution to America’s problems, up 9 percentage points from the previous year; 67 percent said parents should be able to opt their children out of public education classes they find morally or religiously objectionable. Somewhat unexpectedly (since previous surveys have found less support for religious freedom precepts among the younger generations), Gen Z was found to be more accepting than others of religious clothing and religious days off in the workplace. Ninety percent of respondents expressed tolerance and respect for a broad array of beliefs and ideas about God, with 86 percent saying people should be free to express their faith even if it is contrary to popular practices, such as by not consuming alcoholic beverages or certain foods, or wearing religious clothing.

Index Scores by Year	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019
Religious Freedom Index	69	68	68	66	67
Religious Pluralism	84	84	80	77	80
Religious Sharing	72	72	71	69	71
Religion and Policy	66	65	68	66	67
Religion in Action	68	68	67	65	66
Religion in Society	65	62	65	62	63
Church and State	59	56	58	56	58

Source: Becket Fund.

• **A study of Christian colleges and universities finds a gradual accommodation to secular standards even among schools known for their religious orientations, and that mainly those from evangelical and conservative Catholic backgrounds that maintain “orthodoxy” score highest in Christian identity.** Citing the recent book *Christian Higher Education: An Empirical Guide*, Robert Benne writes on the *First Things* magazine website (January 9) that universities and colleges that claim a Christian identity and have a “critical mass” (about two-thirds) of professors, staff, and students who identify with their sponsoring denominational traditions do not score particularly high on measures related to “keeping the faith.” This includes schools such as Valparaiso University (Lutheran), University of Notre Dame, and Baylor University (Baptist). The book, written by Perry Glanzer of Baylor, scored 537 schools on a scale from 0 to 27, using criteria such as membership requirements for the president, faculty, staff, and board, an “ample religion department with required courses,” chapel or Mass observance, a strong Christian



Wheaton College (source: DiscoverDuPage).

definition under the “About Us” section on the school’s website, and the number of centers that engage in Christian concerns.

Benne, who has previously researched these “critical mass” schools, was surprised at their low scores— the Lutheran schools St. Olaf College and Valparaiso scored 5.5 and 8.5, respectively; Notre Dame and Baylor did somewhat better, respectively receiving 15.5 and 13. Only Wheaton College among those in the “critical mass” group scored a high 22. Some of the strongest Protestant schools come from what Glanzer calls “independent, low-church Protestant cooperative endeavors,” with 17 of these schools scoring 20 and above. Thirty-four evangelical schools associated with the Consortium of Christian Colleges and Universities also scored 20 and above. The evangelical standard bearer Biola University scored a 26. Of the Lutheran schools, those affiliated with the Lutheran-Church Missouri Synod scored much higher than the mainline Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and independent Lutheran institutions. A segment of Catholic schools also scored fairly high—34 scored above 12.5 and 23 above 15. The new Catholic schools started by committee lay leaders, such as Christendom and Wyoming Catholic, scored the highest among colleges and universities in that tradition, both 20.5. Benne

concludes that Glanzer's work shows that without a strong, "explicit, orthodox Christian mission" there will be a "slow accommodation to secular, elite culture" among Christian colleges.

(*First Things*, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2024/01/only-the-orthodox-will-survive>)

- **Compared with male clergy in major mainline Protestant denominations, recent research finds that female clergy more strongly identify with Democratic politics and other liberal policy views, according to the newsletter *Religion Dispatches* (December 25–January 5).** The research, conducted by Melissa Deckman and John C. Green, found a significant gender gap among clergy on a variety of policy attitudes, including around cultural issues such as abortion and LGBTQ rights. Deckman had conducted a survey last fall confirming that mainline Protestant clergy overall were more politically left-leaning than their congregation members. Examining the data again, she points out that the "initial analysis failed to note...the significant *gender* gap that continues to shape and define the political identities and opinions of mainline clergy today." In the new analysis, female clergy were found to be far more likely than male clergy to identify as members of the Democratic Party (71 percent versus 43 percent) and as liberal (80 percent versus 49 percent). The gender gap among clergy identifying as conservative is even wider, with men being more than five times as likely as women to claim a conservative identification (27 percent versus 5 percent).



Women clergy protest (source: *Afro News*).

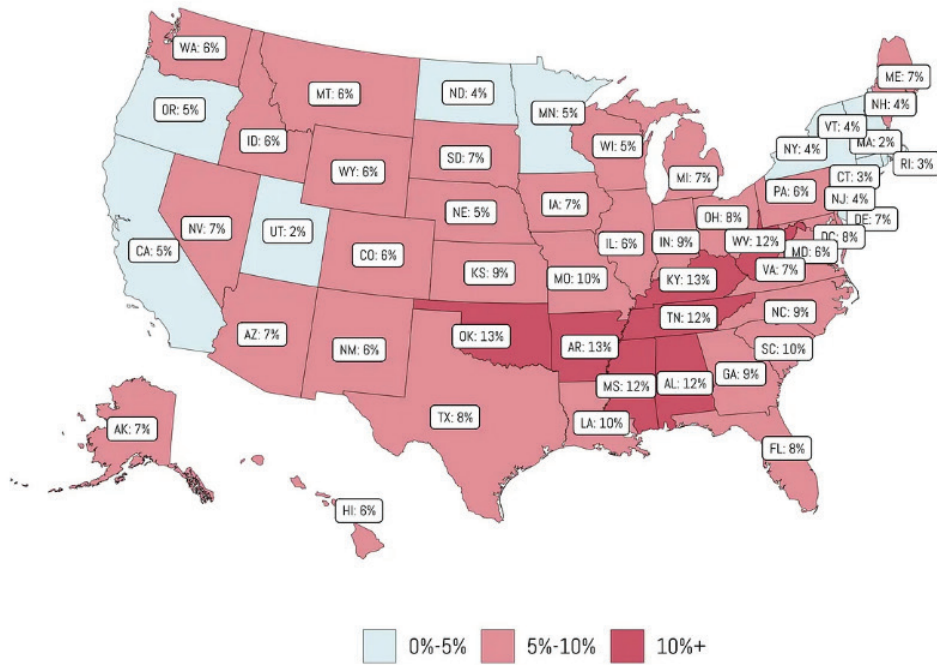
While mainline female clergy have long been more supportive of marriage equality than their male counterparts, after the Supreme Court's *Obergefell* decision supporting marriage equality that chasm has widened considerably. Support for marriage equality is now nearly universal among female clergy members, at 93 percent, while only 75 percent of male clergy members say the same. Women in the clergy are more pro-LGBTQ on almost every measure compared to men; for instance, 86 percent of women, compared to 64 percent of men, oppose allowing small business owners to refuse to provide products or services to LGBTQ people on the basis of their beliefs. In a similar way, the persistent gap between male and female clergy over abortion has remained strong. In asking about the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the researchers found that "a deep gender gap on abortion attitudes remains: while most men clergy opposed the overturning of *Roe* (69 percent), nearly all women clergy (91 percent) opposed the decision." Maintaining the trend, female clergy members are also more likely than male clergy to embrace religious pluralism, such as the view that the U.S. would benefit from having more elected leaders who follow religions other than Christianity or who are not religious (62 percent compared 43 percent). Male clergy are also substantially more likely than female clergy to agree that "America is in danger of losing its culture and identity (40 percent versus 24 percent)."

(*Religion Dispatches*, <https://religiondispatches.org/study-shows-mainline-women-clergy-are-significantly-more-progressive-than-their-male-counterparts/>)

● **A new analysis finds that while evangelicals who are only culturally attached to their faith have not grown substantially as a share of the U.S. population, they are growing in states where active evangelicals are also based.** Much is being written about "cultural evangelicals," especially when it comes to their support for Donald Trump, but little is known about this inactive group of conservative Protestants, writes political scientist Ryan Burge in his Substack newsletter, *Graphs about Religion* (January 29). Burge finds that in 2008, about 5 percent of a sample of U.S. adults polled in the Cooperative Election Study identified as evangelicals but reported seldom or never attending church. Over the last 14 years, "that percentage has only slightly increased to about 7 percent of Americans identifying as cultural evangelicals of any race, with just 5 percent being cultural white evangelicals." On the other hand, while in 2008 about one in five Americans were religiously active evangelicals, that share dropped to 13 percent by 2022.

Using the last three years of the Cooperative Election Study, Burge attempts to estimate the relative size of these groups at the state level. He finds Mississippi to be "the state where church-going evangelicals outnumber cultural evangelicals by the largest margin," while cultural evangelicalism tends to be prevalent in "a weird mish-mash of a bunch of states...[such as] Kentucky, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Washington, Ohio, Iowa, Montana and Nevada...In my mind, this reinforces the narrative that the primary/caucus process is just a mess. Both Iowa and New Hampshire score very high on the cultural evangelical quotient. Then it jumps to South Carolina, which has a whole lot more church going evangelicals. But it's pretty amazing to note how many

Share Who are Self-Identified Evangelicals Who Attend Church Seldom or Never

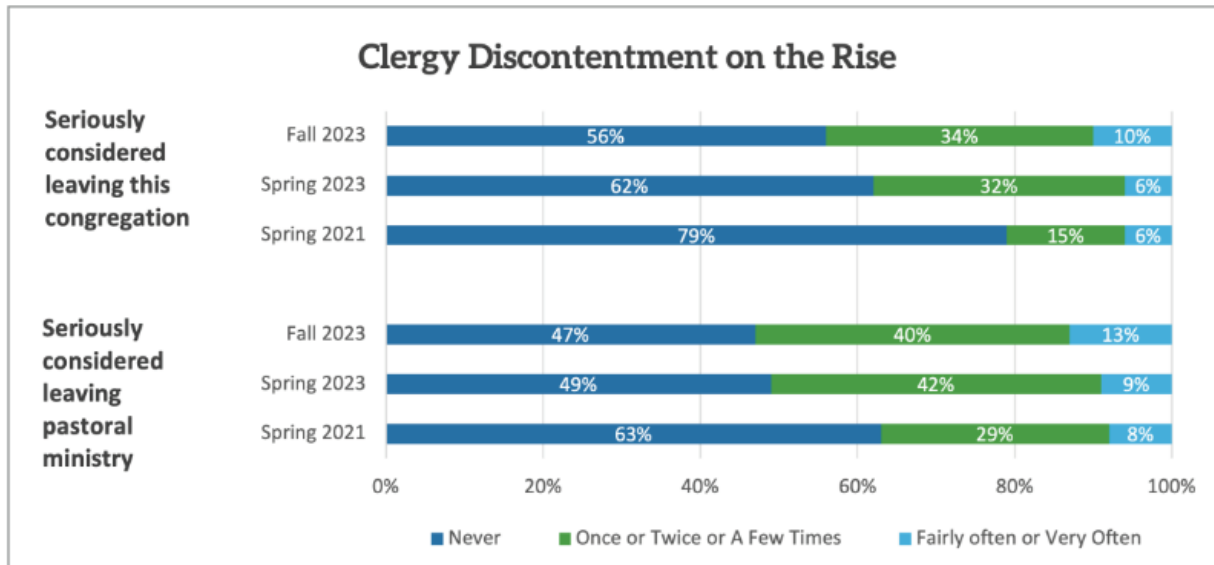


@ryanburge
Data: Cooperative Election Study, 2020-2022

states [there are] where the active evangelicals only outnumber the cultural evangelicals by a few percentage points.” Burge finds that Southern states, including Arkansas, Tennessee, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Mississippi, have seen the largest increases in cultural evangelicals, with low-attendance evangelicals increasing by upwards of four percentage points during the last decade.

• **New findings reveal that larger percentages of clergy are considering alternatives to their present congregations or vocations the more distant we get from the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.** According to survey results released by the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations project of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, in the fall of 2023, more than half of religious leaders—53 percent—reported having seriously considered leaving the ministry at least once since 2020. This is an increase of 16 percentage points since 2021, when 37 percent reported having had such thoughts since 2020. Meanwhile, in the fall of 2023, 44 percent of religious leaders reported having seriously considered leaving their current congregation (rather than the ministry in general) at least once since 2020, more than double the share in 2021, when only 21 percent reported having had this thought. The survey found about a third of the leaders reporting having had both thoughts.

The report notes the importance of monitoring the frequency with which leaders have been having these thoughts. In the fall of 2023, 13 percent of religious leaders reported having



Source: Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations study, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

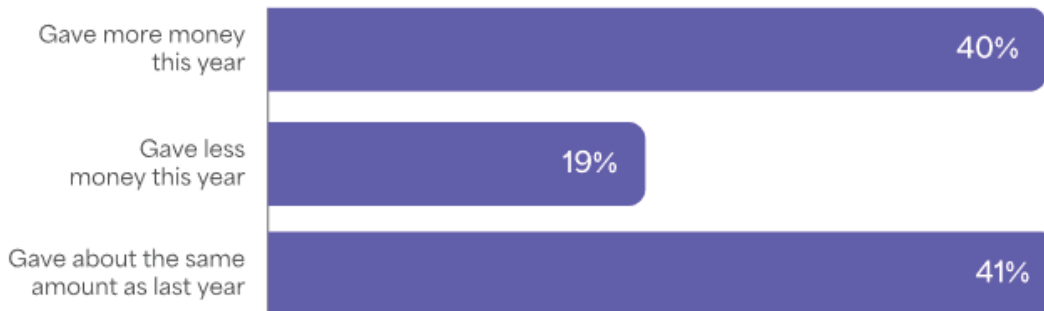
thought “fairly or very often” about abandoning the pastoral ministry, while 10 percent said they considered leaving their current congregation that often. These percentages are larger than they were in 2021, although they still represent a small fraction of the country’s total religious leadership. The researchers write that the “overall level of health and wellness exhibited by clergy is impressive—especially set against the backdrop of the pastoral discontentment results.” More than mental health, it was more often congregational conflicts and the degree of closeness between clergy and congregation members that seemed to have the most impact on thoughts of leaving. As for leaving the ministry altogether, the survey found that a clergy person’s employment status in the church was a significant factor. If the leader is employed full-time, they are more likely to consider leaving the ministry than if they serve part-time. Catholic and Orthodox priests were least likely to entertain such thoughts, while mainline Protestant clergy were the most likely. Even though a large percentage of evangelical Protestant clergy also ponder leaving the ministry, proportionately fewer of them do so in comparison to their mainline Protestant peers. The survey did find that the rosier the church’s outlook for the future was, the brighter the clergyperson’s thoughts were regarding ministry.

(The report can be downloaded from: https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Clergy_Discontentment_Patterns_Final.pdf)

● **Despite fears about the difficulties posed by the economic situation, new research finds that donations to faith-based organizations remain robust, with an expected increase in 2024.** The Giving in Faith report, a collaboration between Givelify, the leading online giving platform, and Indiana University’s Lake Institute on Faith & Giving, is based on a national survey of nearly 1,000 faith leaders and 2,000 people of faith, and incorporates data from 30

SECTION 1: MONETARY GIVING – MONETARY GIVING TO PLACES OF WORSHIP

Change in amount given to places of worship by faith-based givers in 2023 versus 2022 (including tithes and offerings)



Source: Givelify.

million Givelify donations. Ninety-seven percent of the people of faith surveyed reported giving money, time, and/or items in 2023. While there has been a decline in overall U.S. giving the study found 40 percent of givers reporting an increase in their total monetary contributions to their places of worship in 2023, an increase from the 10 percent who reported a giving increase in the previous year. Along with those who gave more to their place of worship, 53 percent of givers reported donating to nonprofit organizations in 2023.

The study confirms that the collection plate has moved to online platforms, with 98 percent of places of worship now offering digital giving (a sharp increase from 64 percent before Covid). It was also found that 88 percent of people of faith used online platforms to donate to organizations, causes, or people they supported in 2023. Differing motivations among the generations also played a role in the types of giving reported. For instance, millennials and Gen Z faith-based individuals were much more likely to report that addressing social justice was a major reason for their charitable giving. The report forecasts increased generosity and a commitment to do more in the years ahead. While more than half of faith leaders are concerned that the state of the economy will negatively affect their organizations' finances, 95 percent of individuals who gave money to their places of worship in 2023 want to give the same or more in 2024, and almost the same percentage of people of faith who donated money to nonprofit organizations in 2023 want to give the same or more in 2024.

(The report can be downloaded from: <https://www.givelify.com/giving-in-faith/>)

● **The Church of England experienced significant losses during Covid that are only now being revealed, with new data showing the church lost at least one in five of its Sunday worshippers during the pandemic, with a decline among children that is especially dire.** David Goodhew writes on *Covenant* (January 8), the web blog of the Living Church Foundation,

Usual Sunday Attendance	1990	2019	2022
Bath and Wells	33.5k	16.9k	14.3k
Manchester	35.1k	18.4k	14.0k
Ely	17.7k	13.6k	11.2k
Southwark	40.5k	31.6k	25.2k
London	51.8k	53.6k	43.4k

Source: David Goodhew.

that “Long-term decline coupled with COVID has left much of the church in deep trouble...The new data show that, during COVID, the condition of much of the church has moved from serious to critical.” Citing the recent Church of England figures, Goodhew does note that there “was a modest rise in attendance between 2021 and 2022, but this was to be expected, as some of those kept away by lockdown chose to return. The more important measure is the comparison between 2019 (before COVID) and 2022 (when most churches were open for in-person worship). All dioceses have lost between a fifth and a quarter of their Sunday worshipers, between 2019 and 2022.” These losses accelerated a deep pre-existing decline. Such dioceses as Bath and Wells and Manchester have lost 60 percent of their Sunday congregations since 1990. Goodhew adds that there is a “leveling down” under way. “For several decades, the Diocese of London held out against the rest of the church and grew (modestly). At last, it has come back into line. London is now declining as fast as everywhere else.”

Although some of the smaller rural dioceses shrank less during the pandemic, this is largely because they already had a small number of children and families—the population that was more likely to stop attending during Covid. Between 2019 and 2022, Sunday attendance for children declined 23 percent overall, with some dioceses showing much worse figures. For example, the Diocese of Canterbury had 1,600 children in Sunday worship in 2019, but by 2022 it only had 1,000, a drop of nearly 40 percent. Children’s average weekly attendance across England dropped 28 percent between 2019 and 2022, a decline of over a quarter in three years. By the average weekly attendance measure, the number of children in the church halved in the decade leading up to 2022. “The net result is that the church has markedly aged since COVID...Worshiping communities markedly aged during 2019–22, with 36 percent of the church being over 70, whereas 13.5 percent of the population of England are over 70.” Goodhew concludes that the C of E is on the same path of ecclesiastical demise that befell the United Reformed Church. “As congregations age, they struggle to fill key posts—wardens, treasurer.

They stop being composed mostly of people in their 70s and become composed mostly of people in their 80s—and then they stop. There comes a point when decline tips over into being unviable and that point is at hand for many congregations.”

(*Covenant*, <https://covenant.livingchurch.org/2024/01/08/after-covid-the-deepening-decline-of-the-church-of-england/>)

• **Although European youth continue on a path toward secularization, with a continued decline in religious practice, a new study shows that there has been a rebound in beliefs concerning life after death and heaven and hell.** The study by Jose Pereira Coutinho and Sarah Wilkins LaFlamme and published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (online in December) analyzed the European Values Study, (ESV) 2017–2021, comparing the beliefs and practices of European youth with those of both affiliated and unaffiliated members of older generations. The researchers found that youth “believe more on average and older age groups believe less when it comes to ‘eschatological’ beliefs,” such as concerning life after death and matters of heaven and hell, among both the affiliated and unaffiliated. But youth continue to practice less and older groups to practice more on average, among both the affiliated and unaffiliated. Coutinho and LaFlamme argue that the influence of popular culture is most likely playing a role in the growing eschatological belief among youth. They conclude that not all religious indicators are trending downward in a linear way among young Europeans, as the secularization theory would suggest. Yet despite the signs of a rebound, the researchers note that the level of these eschatological beliefs still remains lower than levels of belief in God. It is also not clear if these eschatological beliefs are important for individuals’ everyday decision-making behavior. But it does seem that such beliefs do not need the same level of institutional support



Source: Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, Vatican.

and socialization that other beliefs and practices do and that they are “able to survive and to even rebound among certain segments of youth populations with more diffused socialization through family members, friends and popular culture.”

A recent survey of French youth finds a similarly low rate of practice and affiliation relative to other European youth, but also finds that those who believe tend to intensify their relation to religion, with 53 percent of young Catholics and 85 percent of young Muslims claiming that religion plays an important role for them. The survey conducted by Kantar in cooperation with academic institutions and released in early December 2023 (*La Croix*, Dec. 6) found that 43 percent of young French people believe in God, 22 percent are self-described Christians (18 percent Catholics), and 12 percent say they are Muslims. The survey found that 52 percent have turned their back on religious institutions, stating that they are affiliated with no religion. Moreover, a number of them stress that religion should not influence society and see any such influence as a negative development. Believers are thus a minority among young French people.

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

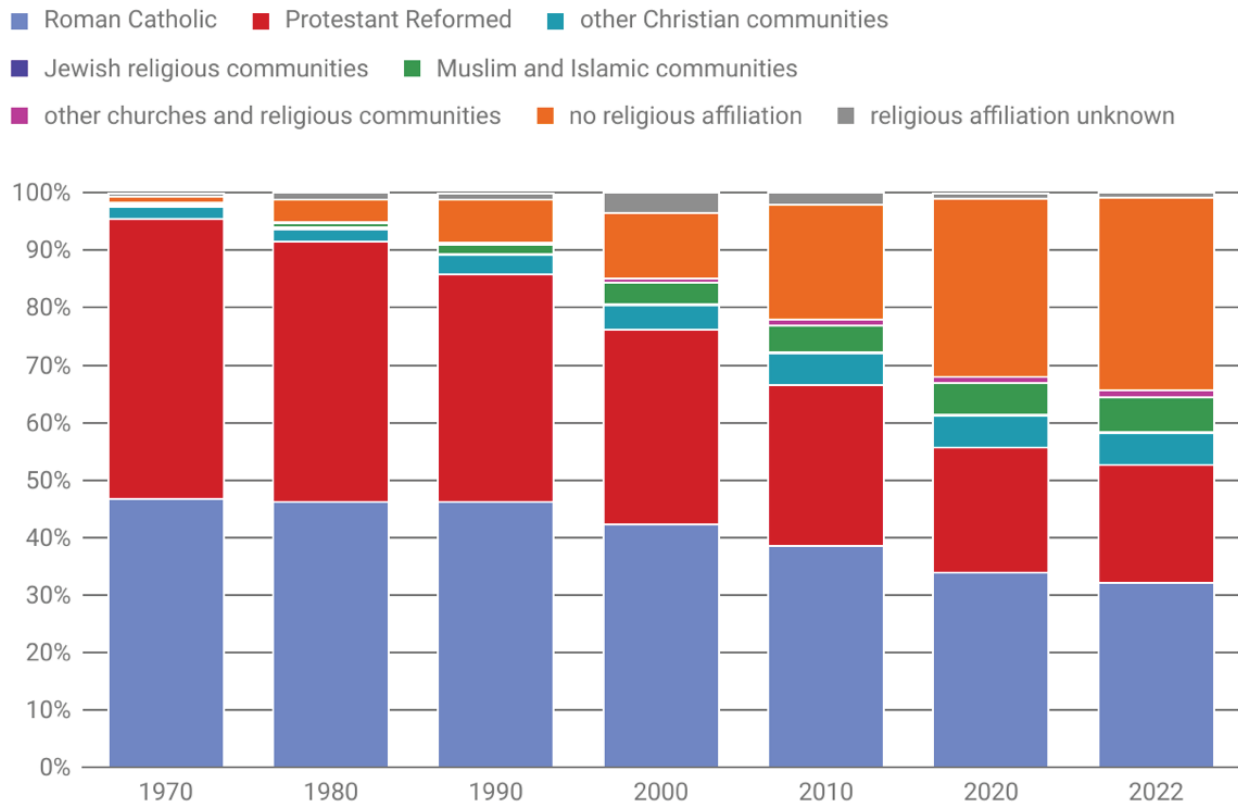
• **At 34 percent of the population, the share of Switzerland’s religiously unaffiliated overtook that of its Catholics (32 percent) for the first time in 2022, the Federal Statistical Office has announced.** While the shares of both Roman Catholics and Reformed Church members (21 percent) have steadily declined in recent decades, the share of those without any religious affiliation (the “nones”) has dramatically grown, from 1 percent in 1970 to 11 percent in 2000, 20 percent in 2010, and 34 percent in 2022. Muslims made up 5.9 percent of the population in 2022 and Christian denominations outside of the Roman Catholic or the Reformed Church made up 5.6 percent.

The nones tend to be younger than the average population, with 42 percent of the people in the 25-to-34-year-old age group having no religious affiliation. Thus a further increase is inevitable, with various consequences (including for the financial resources of the established churches). Two thirds of the nones used to belong to a religion during their childhood, but either had no faith, lost it, or came to disagree with the views of their religious denomination. However, one third of the nones see themselves as spiritual. Nine percent of the population in Switzerland attends a religious service at least once a week, and 24 percent report praying every day or nearly daily.

The fact that the nones are now the largest group in Switzerland is not surprising and confirms a trend observed there as well as in other European countries. In neighboring Germany, people without a religious affiliation already made up as much as 43.8 percent of the population in 2022. This trend raises questions about the consequences for the place of the historical Christian denominations in Switzerland in the coming year. Small but vocal secularist groups can be expected to press the issue. While acknowledging at the same time that the rise of the nones does not bring many new members to organized secularism, the president of the Freethinkers

Evolution of religious landscape

Permanent resident population 15 years or over



Source: FSO – FPC (1970–2000), Structural Survey (2010–2022)

© FSO 2024

Association of Switzerland, Andreas Kyriacou, has been eager to stress that the state should adjust to a new environment and no longer give any privilege to religious groups, which should be placed at the same level as other types of private associations (*Tages-Anzeiger*, January 28).

Baltic Neo-Pagans attempting to expand their legal status

While Neo-Pagans only constitute a tiny percentage of the population of Baltic countries, they aspire to become increasingly established in Latvia and Lithuania, although not without meeting resistance, according to media as well as reports recently published on *Eurel*, an academic website and network reporting on sociological and legal data on religions in Europe. In all Baltic countries, there were groups advocating for a return to a reconstructed ancient, native faith in the interwar period. Such efforts resumed after the fall of the Soviet Union, also with inputs from Neo-Pagan groups active in the respective diasporas of each nation. In Lithuania, building upon the activities of an ethnocultural organization active during the Soviet period, Romuva was registered as a religious organization in 1992 and gained the status of a “non-traditional religion”



Source: Quora.

in 1995. Currently, says Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson (Vilnius University), Romuva is applying for the status of a state-recognized religion (*Eurel*, January 3), a status that entitles an organization to receive financial support from the state. The initial application by Romuva had been turned down in 2019, but the decision was subsequently deemed unfair by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

But in September 2023, the Lithuanian parliament again voted down a proposal to grant state recognition to Romuva. An MP belonging to a Christian party declared that she was appreciative of Romuva's efforts to nurture ethnic culture, but could not accept Romuva as a religion, adding that "Europe was built on the foundation of Christianity" (*Baltic Times*, September 19). According to internal sources, there are currently 30 local Romuva groups in Lithuania and abroad. There are other Neo-Pagan groups in Lithuania besides Romuva, explains Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson. Romuva is a well-known movement in international Neo-Pagan circles, since it was strongly involved in the creation of the European Congress of Ethnic Religions (ECER, formerly the World Congress of Ethnic Religions, WCER) in Vilnius in 1998. In Latvia, the Dievturi, a Neo-Pagan group that had originally been registered as early as 1926, is enjoying some success in pushing for parity rights, writes Anita Stasulane (Daugavpils University, Latvia). A wedding celebrated by a Dievturi minister will have legal force according to amendments to the civil law put into place in October 2023. "However, the new legal provisions cannot be applied until the law on mutual relations between the state and the Dievturi religious

organization is adopted” (*Eurel*, November 21). Stasulane reports that data received by the Ministry of Justice “suggest that there are about 500 Dievturi in Latvia,” and that 17 Dievturi ministers are expected to receive the right to celebrate weddings.

(*Eurel*, <https://www.eurel.info/?lang=en>; see also: Anita Stasulane, “Current Challenges to the Protection of (Neo)pagans’ Religious Freedom in the Baltic States,” *Religions*, 10 August 2023, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/8/1027>)

Russian Orthodox clubs offering young men an alternative masculinity?

The growing number of militarized Russian Orthodox organizations and clubs for young men have replaced the far-right violent groups of earlier decades, serving to temper their radical tendencies, even as these clubs are put to use by the government and political leaders, writes Victoria Fomina (University of St. Andrews) in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (online in December). The growth of militarized Orthodox organizations has catered to the drive to strengthen masculinity and connect it to Russian Orthodoxy and has largely eclipsed the radicalized, neo-Pagan groups of the 1990s that also linked masculinity with military service (which in actuality was often marked by draft evasion). By the mid-2000s this focus on masculinity and military service had acquired a strong Orthodox orientation, with young men with a background in martial arts and paramilitary training drawn to these Orthodox clubs.



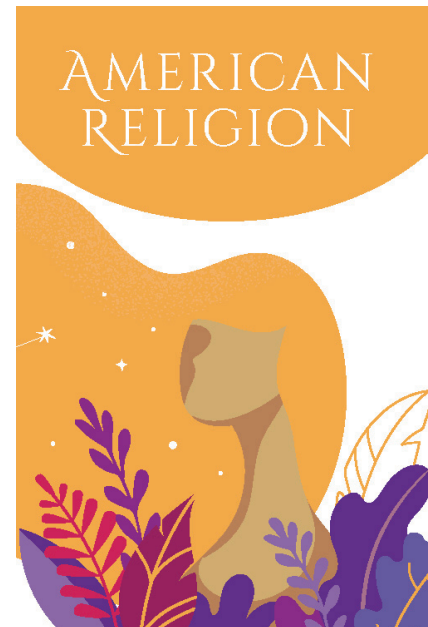
Source: Center for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), Berlin.

In drawing on interviews with members of a Moscow-based military-patriotic club, Fomina finds that the potential for violent action in such organizations, such as vigilantism, is real. But she writes that the media coverage of some violent acts by these organizations “belies the fact that the vast majority of Orthodox military-patriotic organizations remain within the bounds of legality and that their appeal lies precisely in their capacity to offer young men a regulated space to enact militant-masculine subjectivities, while staying safely within the confines of rhetoric and practices acceptable to state authorities.” The Orthodox masculine influence has already introduced a conservative sensibility into the Russian army, as reflected in its rejection of hazing culture and “search for a more ‘socially acceptable militarism’ compatible with middle-class values and aspirations,” Fomina writes. But this rise of Orthodox clubs for young men has also in turn influenced the “militarization of church activities and institutions, creating a mutually reinforcing dynamic that has cemented the dominance of a more militant Orthodoxy,” even if it is not conducive to radicalization.

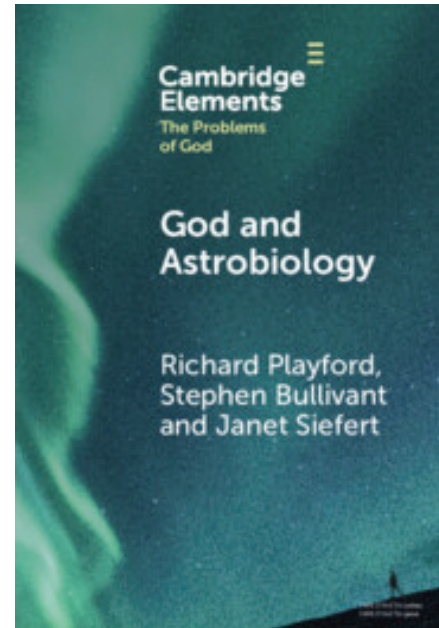
(*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, <https://rai.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14679655>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ Media (and soon most likely book) coverage of the relationship between Artificial Intelligence (AI) and religion and spirituality is widespread. While little of such speculation has been based on research, the current issue of the journal *American Religion* (Fall 2023) moves the conversation along in that direction with several articles and a roundtable discussion on the religious implications of this technology. Beth Singler’s article is based on an online survey asking participants if they think AI will create a religion, taking a leaf from futurist Yuval Noah Harari’s idea that this technology will create a new religion to control people. She found that her respondents were unsure of the definitions of AI, limiting their responses to robots and religion; they did not agree if AI is or will be intelligent, or even if humans are intelligent. Another article suggests that just the hype and spin put on AI and its possibilities by its promoters may itself have religious overtones. Several articles coming from a progressive political angle argue that AI will perpetuate inequalities. Dheepa Sundaram looks at how Facebook follows an algorithmic process, presented as AI, that steers people to Hindu nationalistic groups. Another article looks at the harmony between Tarot and astrology and algorithm driven systems such as chatbots. Jeremy Cohen provides a thorough yet complex account of the occult dimensions of AI, finding that the esoteric nature of algorithmic codes corresponds with the conspiratorial nature of many of these groups and teachings. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://www.american-religion.org/home/journal>



■ A new volume in the Cambridge Elements series, *God and Astrobiology* (Cambridge University Press, 2024, pb. \$22), is authored by Richard Playford (Leeds Trinity University), Stephen Bullivant (St. Mary's University and University of Notre Dame Australia), and Janet Siefert (Rice University). The implications of life on other planets for religious beliefs have long raised questions and been a topic for discussions. What makes this small volume (of less than 70 pages) interesting is its attention to those issues both in the different mainline religious traditions and also in other religious currents, from Mormonism to “alien-positive” new religious movements (e.g. Scientology, Raëlians) or the famous “Ancient Astronauts” theory popularized by Erich von Däniken. The limited length of books in this series means that the passages about new religious movements remain a short overview, with a disproportionate focus on failed prophecy in UFO religions (e.g., Heaven's Gate), still making readers aware of a wider range of religious issues. Some space is devoted to the Ancient Astronaut hypothesis, under the fitting title of “Atheism and (Ancient) Astrobiology.”

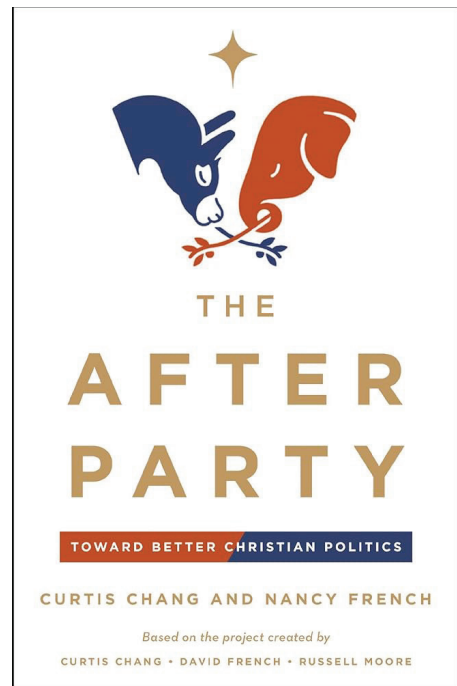


The book not only considers the consequences of extraterrestrial life for religions, but also devotes a section to theological problems that would arise if only the Earth were home to life. “Might a mostly empty, barren universe itself undermine belief in a creative God?” For Christians, problems raised by the possibility of intelligent extraterrestrials pertain to creation, revelation, and redemption. The first category is the easiest one—since God is the creator of all things, if there are extraterrestrials, they have been created by God. The main problem is how “extraterrestrials might fit into Christian beliefs about incarnation, redemption and salvation.” The volume devotes several pages to those issues, summarizing various types of options and answers. And the section ends with an upbeat caveat: “Given that God’s ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8–9), it seems perfectly possible that if there are intelligent aliens out there that they will fit into God’s plan for Creation in a way we have not considered, and perhaps in a way that we cannot imagine, at least at present.”

Other traditions are explored in a more cursory manner. In the case of Judaism, for instance, the subsection is limited to two contemporary authors, one of them discussing the intriguing question of assessing if aliens could convert to Judaism. When it comes to Hinduism, “it might be better to start by examining why the possible reality of such beings poses so few problems,” since Hindu cosmology admits the existence of a vast number of universes. Maybe optimistically, the authors conclude “that none of the major world religions are threatened by the existence of ETIs,” and they show confidence in the intellectual resources of each tradition, despite very real issues for “the Abrahamic faiths, because they are tied to certain historical events, places and people.” The volume can serve as a readable and short introduction to the questions raised by astrobiology for various kinds of religious traditions.

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

1) The After Party is seeking to become a leading publishing program to counteract the influence of Donald Trump and political polarization among evangelicals. Led by Duke Divinity consulting professor Curtis Chang, head of the program's founding organization Redeeming Babel, and developed with two prominent "never-Trump" evangelicals, the New York Times columnist David French and Christianity Today editor-in-chief Russell Moore, the program offers pastors and small groups a curriculum "reframing Christian political identity from today's divisive partisan options." The curriculum initially found little interest among evangelical donors in funding an explicitly political Bible study. The three founders turned to secular and often progressive foundations, such as the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. While Chang has said their program doesn't stress parties or policies, the Rockefeller announcement said it would launch the program in the "battleground" of Ohio, though none of The After Party founders call that state home. Other funders include the One America Movement, an ecumenical group whose board includes LGBTQ and Black Lives Matter advocates, as well as other groups seeking to promote the "leadership of rural LGBTQ+ people," and fight for climate justice. Such foundations as Ford, Rockefeller and Tides have in the past contributed to efforts to mobilize evangelical support for amnesty legislation and liberalization on immigration. Chang and associates say they are mainly interested in counteracting politicization among evangelicals. But critics charge that by receiving such support, the program is in danger of being used in the culture wars and by the political left. (Source: *First Things*, January 22; *The Kingdom*, *The Power and The Glory* by Tim Alberta)



2) Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo of the Congo is leading the pack of the "papabili," those who are considered leading candidates for the next papacy. Ambongo led the African bishops in crafting a January 11 statement critical of the declaration from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith approving of giving blessings to same-sex couples, *Fiducia Supplicans*. After soliciting the responses of African bishops' conferences to *Fiducia* he flew to Rome to share them with Francis. The pope then asked Ambongo to work with Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez of the Dicastery of the Faith, giving the impression that the pope sympathized with some of the reservations of the



African bishops about his own statement. Thus he has the respect of conservatives but also papal loyalists for the “dialogical way” he has handled himself. Ambongo has been viewed as a “troubleshooter and statesmen in national politics, the continental leader of a body of bishops, and papal adviser with insider’s knowledge of Vatican reform efforts.” (**Source:** *Crux*, January 31)