

## Psychology's religious revival

Secularization seems to be undergoing a reversal when it comes to the practice of psychotherapy, judging by the growing number of therapists who are catering to different kinds of religious believers. Writing in the conservative Christian magazine *Touchstone* (March/April), Paul Vitz, a New York University psychology professor who has been an outspoken critic of secular psychological trends, claims that in recent years he has seen a reversal of those trends. He describes how the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers that held sway in American psychology up until 40 years ago (and in some ways had challenged Sigmund Freud's materialist and secularist ideas) gave way to new theories, such as cognitive psychology and emotion-focused therapy, which provided an opening, however unintentionally, to spirituality (often more of the "New Age" variety). In the 1990s, two Christian psychologists, Robert Enright and Everett Worthington, "introduced forgiveness as a major intervention in psychotherapy. Research on forgiveness and applications of it have expanded greatly ever since," Vitz writes. During this period, the emergence of narrative theory and the idea that the patient is helped to arrive at a "redemptive story" to address their problems pushed the needle even further toward a faith-friendly approach in psychology.

But it was the "positive psychology" movement of Martin Seligman in the 2000s, which focused on the formation of virtues, that Vitz sees as decisive for the current climate. As these trends developed, a large number of Christians were becoming psychologists, with the great majority coming out of evangelical graduate programs, such as the one at Fuller Seminary. Vitz estimates that there are currently about 100,000 Christian counselors and psychotherapists, with a small but significant number now including Catholic practitioners, and he speculates that serious religious psychologists could even become a slight majority in the profession. He argues that there is now available a "Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person" that integrates evidence-based therapies with the "grand narrative" of Christian redemption. Vitz is sanguine about the future of religion's role in psychotherapy, observing that seekers of such therapies can now easily choose therapists who have compatible values. He adds that the internationalization of



Source: Kendl123 | Wikimedia Commons.

psychotherapy, with an emerging diversity of non-Western Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, will likely challenge the progressive, “sex-focused” positions of the American Psychological Association (APA). He writes that the APA’s and insurance companies’ “rigidity” will make them subject to lawsuits, “and we will see the development of alternative organizations to the APA.”

(*Touchstone*, <https://www.touchstonemag.com/>)

## **War in Ukraine and its impact on religious freedom**

Among the many consequences of the war in Ukraine, several recent publications highlight its impact on a variety of religious denominations, including the destruction or seizure of religious buildings. Alongside neutral efforts to assess the facts, these issues are also being used in propaganda wars. The 38th report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the human rights situation in Ukraine (March 26) reports continued intimidation of clergymen and parishioners of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) during the reporting period of December 2023 to February 2024. The UOC was formerly associated with the Moscow Patriarchate but became independent after the war broke out. OHCHR recorded six cases across five regions where groups of people forcefully broke into UOC churches, justifying their actions



Mother of God Joy of All Who Sorrow Orthodox Church in the village Bohorodychne, Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine. The village came under attack by Russian forces in June 2022. Photo: Volodymyr Kutsenko. Source: World Council of Churches, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/500-churches-and-religious-sites-destroyed-in-ukraine-during-the-war>.

with decisions by local authorities to register new religious communities of the Constantinople-aligned Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) at the same addresses as the existing UOC communities. “UOC buildings and lands have been seized, with parishes coercively transferred into the state’s preferred OCU,” writes journalist Lawrence Uzzell in an article in *Canopy Forum* (February 18) that attempts to maintain a balanced view on both sides’ actions in the war. The UOC’s future legal status is uncertain.

While the UOC seems to be the only group whose religious freedom is under threat on the Ukrainian side, there are reports about a variety of denominations in Russian-occupied territories that are facing serious consequences of the war. In a recent summary of “the assault on Protestants and other minority faiths in Russian-occupied Ukraine,” Mark R. Elliott (editor emeritus of the *East-West Church and Ministry Report*) reports that Russian forces have been responsible for damaging or destroying “at least 660 churches and other religious structures, including at least 206 belonging to Protestants.” Elliott, writing in the journal *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* (March), notes that, “ironically, the largest number of churches Russian forces have damaged or destroyed have been those of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church



with its much-debated ties to the Moscow Patriarchate.” While church buildings may well not have been specifically targeted for destruction, “minority faithful, including Protestants, have been subjected to raids during worship services” in Russian-occupied territories. Baptist and Pentecostal pastors are being pressured to transfer affiliation to Russian associations, and refusal of recognition after re-registration has allegedly led to the closing of “hundreds of Protestant churches,” Elliott writes. He adds that that this represents a continuation of what had started in the previous decade, with institutions like the Evangelical Donetsk Christian University being occupied in 2014 by separatist troops of the Russian-backed Donetsk People’s Republic, who looted the premises and expelled staff and students.

“Faith communities are under incredible pressure in occupied territories,” according to Sergey Rakhuba, president of Mission Eurasia. “The ideology of the Russian world is to completely monopolize religion,” he told *Christianity Today* (February 6). An article by Kostyantyn Berezhko, a Ukrainian historian who has conducted research on the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Ukraine, sheds light on the impact of the war for that specific religious group, which counts nearly 110,000 active members and 1,234 congregations in Ukraine (*RISU*, Feb. 26). Twenty-five Kingdom Halls have been severely damaged and 76 other religious buildings of the movement have sustained minor damage. “Those believers who remained in the occupied territory were immediately put on the list of extremists,” Berezhko reports. Many have fled those areas, and Jehovah’s Witnesses have set up aid committees to assist over 55,000 refugees, including non-Witnesses. A fifth of the members (mainly women and children) are reported to have fled abroad, mostly to Germany.

(*Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine*, <https://ukraine.un.org/en/download/156809/264355>; Lawrence A. Uzzell, “Ukraine’s Religious Persecution,” <https://canopyforum.org/2024/02/16/ukraines-religious-persecution>; *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/>; Kostyantyn Berezhko, “Jehovah’s Witnesses and the War in Ukraine,” [https://risu.ua/en/jehovahs-witnesses-and-the-war-in-ukraine\\_n146457](https://risu.ua/en/jehovahs-witnesses-and-the-war-in-ukraine_n146457))

## **Evangelicals dividing on the finer points of gender and sexuality**

Although issues of sexuality and gender continue to roil most Christian churches, evangelical organizations are experiencing divisions less over LGBTQ behavior and more over identity and even terminology. Mary Jackson reports in *World* magazine (March 9) that even such a stalwart organization as Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ) is facing criticism from its staff and supporters for teaching in a new sexuality training program that same-sex attraction may not be sinful, even while retaining its prohibition against same-sex activity. In a similar vein, the program taught that biological sex and gender are different, and that God would accept a man living as a woman. In the face of such protests, Cru, which has faced conservative criticism



Source: World Reformed Fellowship.

recently for its perceived sympathy for critical race theory, has walked back some of its views and tweaked its training material. “Cru’s attempt to fix its messaging sheds light on the ways evangelical ministries are being challenged to clarify their positions on myriad hot-button issues surrounding sexuality and gender. On one side are those who believe Christians can embrace some, if not all, cultural sexual norms. On the other: those who believe the Bible leaves no wiggle room when it comes to creation’s male-female dichotomy, that same-sex attraction has its roots in sinful flesh and that through repentance, all sexual brokenness can be overcome in the savior,” Jackson writes.

While the revisionist views have been prominent in the Revoice or “Side B” movement and the Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, they now are making inroads into mainstream evangelical (often non-denominational) churches and organizations, according to Jackson. Revoice has tried to establish a middle ground in the LGBTQ controversies and debates, prohibiting same-sex relations while making room for those who still retain such gender and sexual identities. The rift within Cru was brought to light by staffers (two of whom have since been fired by the organization) and a former lesbian activist speaking at Liberty University. They were particularly critical of Cru’s support for staffers who describe themselves as “gay Christians” (while remaining celibate) and for the practice of “pronoun hospitality,” which agrees to use transgendered people’s personal pronouns. Cru’s revised document now calls for embracing the pronouns that align with one’s biological sex. But Jackson writes that critics are not satisfied and that deeper theological problems involving repentance and conversion remain unaddressed; these critics point out that Cru still stops short of calling same-sex attraction sinful. Theologian Denny Burk at Boyce College said that on these issues “Evangelicals and in

particular institutions are sorting themselves out. Every Christian institution will eventually land on one side or the other...they won't be able to stay neutral. It's going to march through every institution”

(*World*, <https://wng.org/articles/taking-sides-1708229211>)

### **Evangelicals and raunchy culture—a new affinity or reaction?**

Evangelical culture has appeared to become more accepting of vulgarity and even profanity, though the sources of such a change are contested. In the *New York Times* (March 17), Ruth Graham reports on how conservative leaders and “influencers” in politics and the media have appealed to and been accepted by many evangelicals in vulgar and off-color terms. She cites public figures like Dana Loesch, a former model and National Rifle Association spokesperson, and Riley Gaines, a former swimmer and activist against transgender rights, as displaying risqué behavior. Politicians who claim an evangelical identity, such as Reps. Lauren Boebert and Marjorie Taylor Greene, frequently use obscenity or admit to engaging in pre-marital sexual



Source: Jared Stump | Wikimedia Commons.



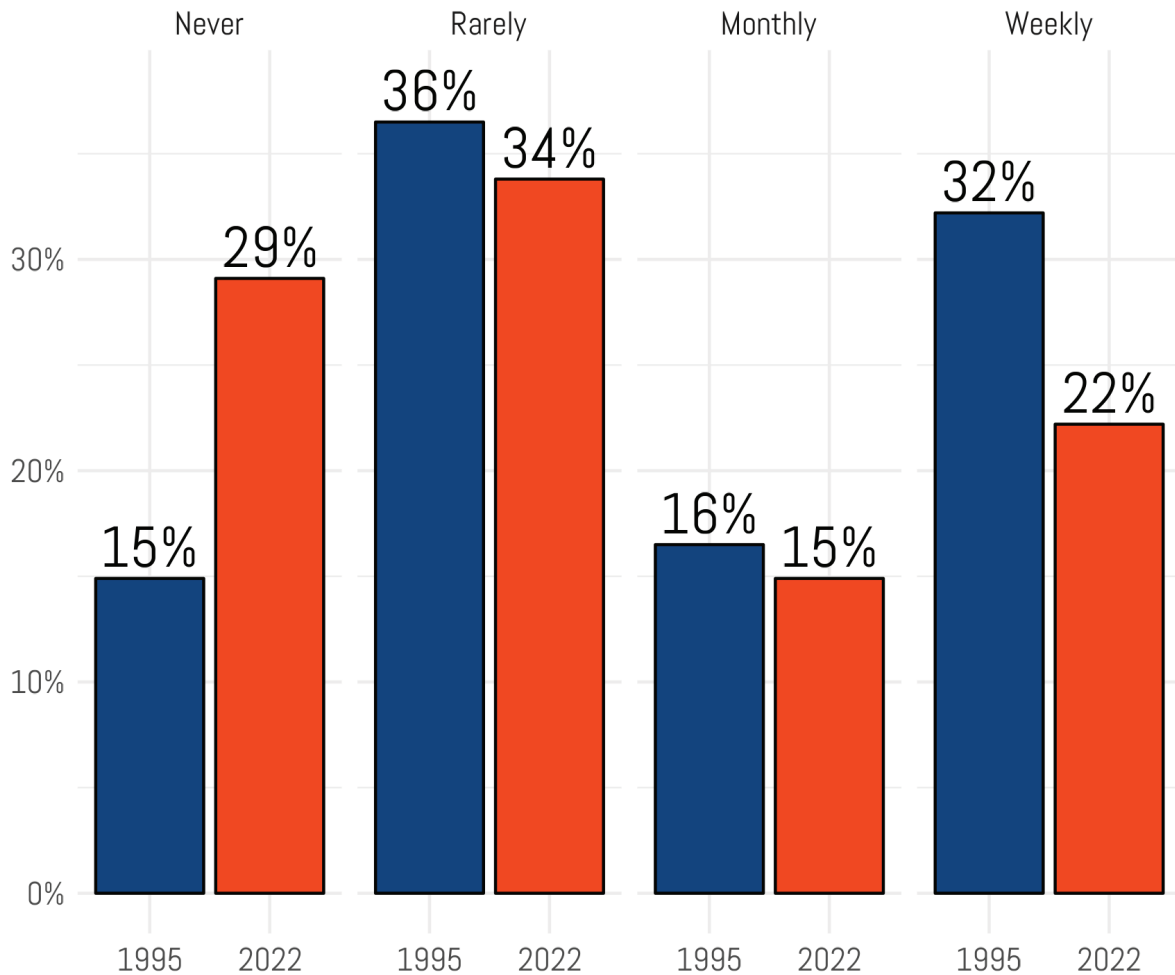
behavior that would have been flagged by evangelicals only a decade ago. Among conservative Christian leaders, Idaho pastor Doug Wilson has used obscenity on his blog without much censure. Graham writes that a “raunchy, outsider, boobs-and-booze ethos has elbowed its way into the conservative power class, accelerated by the rise of Donald Trump, the declining influence of traditional religious institutions and a shifting media landscape increasingly dominated by the looser standards of online culture.” Because of many evangelicals’ association with conservative politics and media, the aesthetics, language and borders of public morality have changed for these believers.

Graham has more difficulty locating such cultural shifts within evangelical congregational life itself, as she writes that “most transgressions come not from the pulpit or the podium but the keyboard.” Other critics say that the lowering of expectations regarding public morality started from the cultural left and cannot be blamed on Trump. Conservative writer Aaron Renn argues that it was only after American culture and society became coarsened that someone like Trump would be considered a viable candidate. Others see the decentralized nature of evangelicalism and its embrace of technological change as key in understanding the embrace of vulgar culture. Graham observes that the “old institutions and personalities that defined the culture are fading: Church attendance has declined at the same time that several lions of the movement have died, retired or been felled by scandal. Influencers and outsiders have filled the vacuum.” She adds that the rise of more raunchy yet staunchly heterosexual behavior may also be a reaction among conservative believers feeling beleaguered by a rising tide of progressive influence that challenges the traditional roles of gender and sexuality.

## CURRENT RESEARCH

- **High school students’ religious attendance and the importance they assign to religion in their lives have undergone significant declines over the last 27 years.** In his newsletter *Graphs about Religion* (March 7), Ryan Burge analyzes datasets from the annual survey of high school students, “Monitoring the Future,” from 1995 and 2022, focusing on high school seniors on the two questions the survey asks about religion (attendance and the importance of religion). He finds that in 1995, just 15 percent of high school seniors said that they never attended services, while 32 percent were attending at least once a week. Frequent attenders outnumbered never attenders by a ratio of two to one. By 2022, 29 percent of seniors were never attending religious services while only 22 percent were in the weekly attending category. The percentage of never attenders increased by 14 points, while the percentage attending weekly dropped by 10 points. Burge finds that there was little movement in the middle two categories, with the rare attenders going down by two percentage points (from 36 to 34 percent) and the monthly attenders shifting by just one point (16 to 15 percent). “In essence, all the movement is on the ends—never and weekly. Now, 63 percent of high school seniors attend less than once a month; it was only 51 percent in 1995.”

## How Often Do You Attend Religious Services? Among 12th Graders



@ryanburge  
Data: Monitoring the Future, 1995-2022

On the perceived importance of religion, the results are similar to the responses about religious attendance, with much of the shifting taking place on the ends. Among high school seniors in 1995, 30 percent said that religion was very important to them, a share that dropped to just 20 percent by 2022. At the same time, the share that said that religion was not important at all almost doubled, going from 15 percent to 28 percent. Burge finds that in 1995, a high school senior was twice as likely to say that religion was very important as they were to say it was not important at all. By 2022, a 12th grader was almost 50 percent more likely to place no importance on religion than to say it was very important. But, again, the middle two categories have stayed very static during this time period. In 1995, the most chosen responses of high school seniors were attending church weekly and indicating that religion was very important,

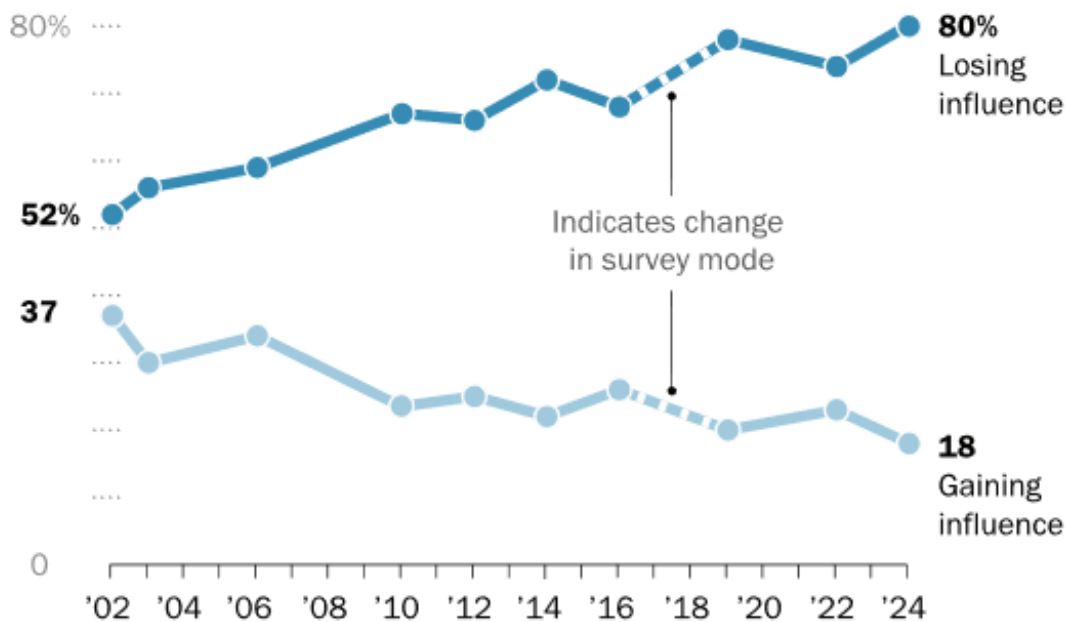


with about one in five respondents fitting into these categories. Just 9 percent of the sample said that they never attended religious services and that religion was not important at all. Now, only 11 percent of high school seniors attend services weekly and deem religion very important. Burge concludes, “There’s no other way to look at this than high school seniors, male, female, educated, non-educated, are a whole lot less religious now than they were back in the mid-1990s.”

• **A large majority of U.S. adults say that religion’s role in public life has declined, a trend that most of these adults find unfavorable, a Pew Research Center report finds.** The survey found that 80 percent of U.S. adults agree with the statement that the role of faith in everyday American life is shrinking. This is the highest percentage holding this view since Pew first asked this question in 2002, when only 52 percent agreed that religion’s influence in the U.S. had

### Share of Americans who say religion’s influence is declining is as high as it’s ever been

*% of U.S. adults who say religion is \_\_\_ in American life*



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown. Dotted line indicates a change in survey mode between 2016 and 2019. Data from 2019 and after comes from Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel (ATP); 2016 and earlier used telephone surveys. The wording of the question on the telephone surveys was slightly different than on the ATP; Refer to the Topline for details.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Feb. 13-25, 2024.

“8 in 10 Americans Say Religion Is Losing Influence in Public Life”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

waned. Nearly half of the new survey’s respondents (49 percent) said both that religion is losing influence and that this is a bad thing, while 8 percent thought that religion’s influence is growing and that this is a good thing. Fewer respondents had a negative view of religion, saying either that its shrinking influence is a good thing (13 percent) or that its growing influence is bad (6 percent). The survey found that Christians (64 percent) were the largest group holding a positive view of religion’s role in American life.

Many Christians also said that their religious beliefs made them feel like a minority group (38 percent of Hispanic Protestants, 37 percent of white evangelicals, and 25 percent each of Catholics and black Protestants). Other findings include an increase in the share of respondents who say that the best course of action is to avoid talking about religion if someone disagrees with you (from 33 percent in 2019 to 41 percent today) and an increase (to 48 percent from 42 percent four years ago) in the share who agree that there is “a great deal” or “some” conflict between their religious beliefs and mainstream American culture. Seventy-two percent of religiously unaffiliated adults accuse conservative Christians of having gone too far in pushing religion in government and public schools, while about the same percentage (73 percent) of conservative Christians say the same about secular progressives pushing secularism.

*(The Pew report can be downloaded from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/15/8-in-10-americans-say-religion-is-losing-influence-in-public-life/>)*

- **A new Gallup Poll finds that the percentage of adults who report regularly attending religious services remains low, with only 3 in 10 Americans reporting weekly or almost weekly attendance.** Among the survey’s respondents, 21 percent say they attend religious

	Every week	Almost every week	About once a month	Seldom	Never	Cases
	%	%	%	%	%	N
U.S. adults	21	9	11	25	31	32,445
Mormon/Latter-day Saints	54	13	7	14	12	612
Protestant/Christian	30	14	13	27	16	15,147
Islam/Muslim	28	10	17	26	18	238
Catholic	23	10	17	32	18	6,934
Judaism/Jewish	16	6	15	41	21	792
Orthodox	15	11	18	40	16	150
Buddhism/Buddhist	12	2	12	29	46	213
Hinduism/Hindu	7	6	36	26	25	111
None/Atheist/Agnostic	2	1	2	16	79	6,328
Other	16	5	8	21	50	974

Get the data • Download image

GALLUP

services every week and 9 percent say they attend almost every week, while 11 percent report attending about once a month and 56 percent say they either seldom (25 percent) or never (31 percent) attend. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stood out as the most observant religious group, with two-thirds attending church weekly or nearly weekly. Protestants (including nondenominational Christians) ranked second, with 44 percent attending services regularly, followed by Muslims (38 percent) and Catholics (33 percent). Majorities of Jewish, Eastern Orthodox, Buddhist, and Hindu Americans say they seldom or never attend religious services. (Twenty-six percent of Orthodox adults, 22 percent of Jewish adults, 14 percent of Buddhist adults, and 13 percent of Hindu adults report attending services regularly.) Buddhist adults are much more likely to say they seldom or never attend (75 percent) than Hindu adults (51 percent). Two decades ago, an average of 42 percent of U.S. adults attended religious services every week or nearly every week, with that figure falling to 38 percent a decade later. While this decline is largely driven by the increase in the percentage of non-affiliated Americans, most religious groups have also seen a decline in regular attendance.

*(The Gallup report can be downloaded at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>)*

● **According to a new study reported in the *Journal of Religion and Health* (pre-published in March), religious reasons may not have been central for most Israeli ultra-Orthodox Jews who avoided the Covid-19 vaccine.** Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel had both the highest Covid-19 infection rate and the lowest vaccination rate compared to the general population, which led Miriam Schiff and Nitzan Sharon-Lavi (Hebrew University) to explore the rates of vaccine uptake among different ultra-Orthodox subgroups and the reported motives for vaccination avoidance. Making up 12 percent of the Israeli population, the ultra-Orthodox community is divided into three main subgroups: Hasidic, Lithuanian/Misnagdim, and Sephardim. While all are observant of religious law and traditional values, Misnagdim place more emphasis on a rational approach and on cognitive powers. For analyzing ultra-Orthodox attitudes toward vaccination, the researchers used Protection Motivation Theory (PMT), according to which “the individual undergoes a two-stage process before deciding to be engaged in a health-protective behavior: threat appraisal and coping appraisal.” Based on a survey conducted by a specialized team familiar with the ultra-Orthodox milieu on a fairly representative sample (except for the one-third of the community without phone or internet access), two-thirds of the ultra-Orthodox population appeared to have been vaccinated with at least one dose. The rate was lower among women, apparently due to being pregnant or concerns about potential harm to fertility.

Other surveys confirm a higher rate of refusal among younger ultra-Orthodox women in comparison with older women, while no age difference has been observed among male ultra-Orthodox. While this requires further study, the authors suggest that “the risk of harming fertility may be perceived by ultra-Orthodox women as a potential violation of a major religious role and



An ultra-Orthodox Jewish man receives a vaccination against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) at a temporary vaccination centre in the Jewish settlement of Beitar Illit, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank February 16, 2021. Source: Reuters | Ronen Zvulun.

the core role of women in this community.” Compared with other subgroups, the Lithuanian/Misnagdim had a higher rate of vaccination and lower mistrust of its efficacy, reflecting their greater openness toward secular information and scientific data. Among those who refused to get vaccinated, with multiple responses possible, the most frequent answer was that they had received immunity from Covid-19 (63 percent), while 36 percent cited concerns about the harm the vaccine might cause in the long run. Very few selected religious reasons for not being vaccinated, with 5.3 percent stating that their rabbi had told them not to get vaccinated. Except for the possible connection between religious beliefs and concerns about harm to fertility among women, “barriers to vaccination among the ultra-Orthodox Jews are not religious-framed but more related to lack of knowledge, fears, trust, and logistics.”

*(Journal of Religion and Health, <https://link.springer.com/journal/10943>)*

### **Israel, Hamas, and AI’s religion problem?**

Israel’s failure to understand the threat posed by Hamas, leading up to the October 7 attack, has been attributed to many factors, but the role of artificial intelligence and the technology’s blind





Source: StartupHub.ai.

spot toward Palestinian Islamic jihadism should not be discounted, writes Ofira Seliktar in the foreign policy journal *Orbis* (Spring). Israel's leaders were of the view that Hamas had moderated in recent years, supporting the paradigm that it was a "rational group transitioning from its jihadist roots to a 'good governance' entity. This paradigm was so popular that over time it became the basis of the Gaza policy of 'peace through prosperity' that Israel, with the support of the United States, adopted," Seliktar writes. The paradigm also became firmly entrenched in the Israeli intelligence and security establishment, and ideas about the normalization of Gaza were espoused by experts affiliated with Ivy League schools and prestigious think tanks, such as the Carnegie Foundation for Peace, with "the algorithms trained to privileged sources of authority and quality embellish[ing] the 'good governance' qualities of Hamas." But the data about Hamas being fed into the AI systems was unbalanced or had other biases that tended to muddle search results, she argues.

Prior to the October massacre, the absence of critical data about Hamas's true character created a bias that led to its portrayal as a national resistance movement virtually on par with Fatah, the leading member of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Such major databases as LexisNexis, JSTOR, and Google Scholar made no link between Hamas as an Islamist group and the extremist Islamic State. But this connection could be found in its own "discursive universe of the more rhetorical variety," showing close associations between the military arm of Hamas, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the Al-Quds Brigades, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the early leader of the Islamic State. Subsequent brigade commanders have strengthened extremist Islamic

elements in the military and the calls for jihad against the Jews and Israel. The Religious Scholars Association of Palestine in Gaza brought together a hardline group of clerics who had close ties to Iran’s Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his anti-Semitic agenda. Even up until October 7, an official of the association, Saleh al-Raqab, was involved in indoctrinating the Hamas military and is said to have issued a fatwa prior to the attack. Seliktar notes that October 7 was the first catastrophic intelligence failure in which “AI protocols shaped the controlling paradigm.”

(*Orbis*, <https://www.fpri.org/orbis/>)

### **Fasting reinvented in post-Catholic Austria and France**

While the Catholic Church’s traditional prescriptions concerning bodily asceticism are largely ignored by the faithful, even in monasteries marked by “the progressive imposition of the prerogative of health over asceticism,” forms of voluntary reduction of consumption are appearing in secular society. This observation prompted sociologist Isabelle Jonveaux (University of Graz) to conduct research in Austria and France on fasting as a spiritual experience in settings where it does not implement a precept fixed by a religious institution. After a previous book about the evolution of bodily asceticism in monastic life, she presents the results of her new research in a book in French, *Une Culture de la Satiété* [*A Culture of Satiety*] (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, \$24.96). Jonveaux’s research focused on “holistic fasting,” introduced in Europe in the 1970s, initially in German-speaking countries, in the context of searching for a holistic experience of body, mind and spirit. Women are said to be in the vast majority in the practice of secular asceticism, which overlaps with the more pronounced interest of women in alternative eating behaviors that has been observed by other researchers.

The contemporary experience of fasting is readily presented as linked to traditions, including those of monasteries as well as other cultures. But secular fasting is the result of a personal process and is not associated with mortification: “The asceticism of fasting is associated with the search for bodily well-being.” Secular asceticism is not a glorification of poverty, notes Jonveaux, but a form of “positive sobriety” leading to a better quality of life through reduced consumption. Some fasting stays even take place in wellness or luxury hotels, while others are hosted by monasteries or accompany a hike. Fasting tends also to be combined with a concern for the environment, in parallel with a concern for “conscious” eating. Some organizers of fasting sessions recommend using local products for the herbal teas consumed. The author also cites the “car fast,” which appeared in 1997 and is recommended by both Catholic dioceses and Protestant churches for its ecological value.

Fasting is increasingly accompanied by temporary disconnection from new technologies (Internet, social networks, etc.), which is experienced as a mastery and liberation that enables inner listening—also in traditional religious contexts. In the fasting sessions observed by



Source: Jack Wassiliauskas | EyeEm (<https://www.self.com/story/intermittent-fasting>).

Jonveaux, there is a spiritual dimension, although “spiritual” is undefined. Through renunciation, “the individual learns to resist the appeals of consumer society.” It is a protest against the presentation of consumption as the path to happiness for individuals. More precisely, explains Jonveaux, “the forms of renunciation studied testify to a devaluation of the abundance enabled by consumption.” Faced with the feeling of an overabundance, the conviction emerges that true happiness lies elsewhere. And the “return of renunciation” also shows that “certain practices previously prescribed by the Church correspond to social expectations that individuals are seeking to reinvent in other ways.”

### **Protestant-Catholic tensions grows even in post-Catholic Europe**

There are growing tensions between Catholics and evangelicals in Europe, inflamed by remaining church-state disputes in areas where Catholicism is still dominant, reports *Christianity Today* (March). Concerns about growing secularism in Europe in recent years have led to more conciliatory attitudes and efforts between evangelical Protestants and Catholics. But although the Catholic Church no longer is the established state church in Italy, Spain and other majority-Catholic nations, Catholicism still enjoys legal privileges that are restricting the evangelical





A worship service in an evangelical church in Italy (source: *Church News Ireland*).

community, Ken Chitwood writes. The tensions are seen in evangelical churches not being recognized as such because they do not have the churchly architecture and other features of Catholic culture that have shaped the views of tax authorities. One prominent case in Italy is a dispute between a Baptist church in Rome and the Italian government over tax exemptions, with the government citing the church's lack of stained glass, statues, candles and a vaulted ceiling.

But ecumenical activities have also become a source of division within European evangelicalism itself. When Thomas Schirmacher of the World Evangelical Alliance participated in an ecumenical prayer vigil in St. Peter's Square, he was met with a strong rebuke by the Italian and Spanish branches of the Evangelical Alliance. Schirmacher was accused of compromising the evangelical stance against the papacy and crossing a historic line between Protestants and Catholics. Underlying this contention is the problem for evangelicals of distinguishing themselves from Catholics to gain recognition as Christian or even a religion. Even though fewer people identify with Catholicism, it has set the terms for religion in places like Spain, Italy, and Ireland, making evangelism efforts difficult for evangelicals. Bob Wilson, a church planter in Ireland finds it difficult to convince people, largely former and inactive Catholics, that he is a minister and part of a legitimate church because Catholicism has set the cultural framework for religion. "In the past, when everybody went to church, everyone went to the Roman Catholic Church. Now, when nobody goes to church, nobody goes to any church," he says.

(*Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/>)



## Post-zero Covid China sees upsurge in spiritual seeking among young

Younger generations are increasingly turning to the supernatural to weather bad economic times in post-zero Covid China—from engaging in birth-chart readings, horoscopes and hexagrams to personalized advice from a psychic master—“all mediated, in true 21st-century fashion, by an app,” writes Aaron Sarin in the online publication *Quillette* (March 26), a publication covering free speech issues. One recent Chinese survey found that 80 percent of respondents under the age of 30 are exploring mysticism, generally in the form of astrology and tarot. “It’s a market ripe for exploitation, and sure enough, the hucksters and mountebanks are already swarming. They can smell the yuan. Last year, China’s online spiritual services market reached an estimated ¥6.68 billion,” Sarin writes. He traces the revival of divination and fortune to “uniquely desperate circumstances of young people as the number of university graduates continues to rise faster than the number of appropriate job vacancies.” Faced with financial pressures and competition around finding a partner (with 30 million more men than women) and having children (the cost of raising a single child being 6.3 times higher than China’s GDP per capita), young adults are either dropping out of society or taking to the “well-trodden avenues of the mind: those marked religion, superstition, spirituality.”

Even those who have dropped out are relocating to areas like Dali, China’s southwest “hippie town” frequented by artists, dissidents and digital nomads, where so-called alternative lifestyles



Source: Michael Chen (*Beyond Science*).

are common and esoteric religion abounds: tantra yoga retreats, pranayama therapy, and shamanic dance healing. During the first half of 2023, according to one survey, 34 percent of respondents in their mid-20s quit their jobs in the consumer Internet sector or reported that they were making plans to do so. Places like Dali are overrun with such seekers and nomads. While the Communist Party sometimes intervenes in the town, shutting down bookshops selling works on pacifism and philosophy, the target is vague. Officials and the state media have noticed an “odd change” in the nation’s mood since the end of the “zero Covid” period, typified by the unintentional joke that “young people are becoming the main force in lighting the joss sticks in temples.” While the major faiths, especially Christianity, are seen as dangerous because of government restrictions, “smaller folk religions are safer—the Party sees no potential insurrection there. And so, such groups proliferate,” Sarin writes.

Some venerate and worship Mother Chen, slayer of the White Snake Demon, who sends the rain to drought-stricken villages, while others venerate Mazu, guardian of the sea. In the southeast, devotees parade giant effigies of “Wandering Gods” through the streets to curry the deities’ favor and protection. But most young Chinese who feel the pull of religion and spirituality eschew group identities. While surveys show that few Chinese belong to a formal religion such as Buddhism (4 percent), a large share holds to belief in the Buddha (33 percent). In short, “identity is dangerous; open practice is safer; belief behind closed doors is safest,” Sarin writes. Even those who claim to be atheists and have a “belief in science” can, at the same time, hold beliefs in ghosts, reincarnation, astrology, and feng shui. All of this spiritual variety is “reflective of the nation’s general direction. While Chinese society has never been the homogenous mass the CCP describes, it is true that a majority of citizens were, until recently, connected to one another by a strident nationalism that focuses on the Party and its achievements. This connecting element has now been severely undermined. The result is a growing diversity and atomization. Sections of society are breaking off and drifting in different directions,” Sarin concludes.

*(Quillette, <https://quillette.com/>)*

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

**Emet Classical Academy** is the first Jewish classical school, seeking to “make sense of the West in a Jewish way.” Most classical schools that have been established in recent years have backgrounds in Catholic and Protestant worlds, stressing engagement in foundational texts for Western civilization, learning Latin and Greek, and character formation. Emet, located in New York City, is set to open to 5th through 12th grades in the fall of 2024. Founder Eric Cohen started the school in the belief that Jewish students should be in conversation with classical learning while maintaining “Jewish exceptionalism.” Cohen said that the school has already attracted parents and students disenchanted with secular and public schools “mugged by a culture gone crazy, with intersectional and anti-Semitic” influence and teaching, as well as a concern about a degradation of academic standards. Emet (meaning “truth” in

Hebrew) will teach Latin as well as Hebrew and may partner with classical Christian schools, but the school is meant for Jews, accepting students from across the spectrum of Judaism. Like other classical schools, Emet will be low-tech, prohibiting tablets and stressing cursive writing, and will encourage deep reading of both Jewish and classical texts. Cohen said that the school seeks to be not just



Source: Emet Classical Academy.

“countercultural,” but aims to produce leaders who will fight for Western values in society. (Source: *Irrefutably Jewish-Unorthodox Podcast*, March 12)