

2024 religion mirroring 2023 but casting its own shadow

Journalists and other observers seem to agree that religion in 2024 was more of the same from 2023—as seen in the slow-motion schism in the United Methodist Church and Israel’s war with Hamas and its repercussions for American Jews and Muslims. Even the Trump campaign and election were something of a replay of 2016 and 2020. But it’s also easy to tease out new developments that unfolded last year that will carry significant implications for 2025 and beyond, even if they draw on familiar themes. As in previous years, we cite last year’s issues of RW (and other publications) that have reported on these issues.

1) Trump’s election and campaign in 2024 were similar to previous years, but last year we saw a broadening of Trump’s appeal to religious conservatives in minority groups, including Latino, African American, and even Muslim and Hindu communities. Many observers and pundits have pointed out that the shift in minority and working-class support for Trump was due more to dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party and its nomination of Kamala Harris than an affinity with Trumpism. Nevertheless, Trump’s outreach to working-class ethnics included a religious dimension, being seen as friendlier to traditional values, such as on gender. Such a shift in working-class voting may be even more pronounced with a likely J.D. Vance run in 2028, which would include a more prominent moral-religious thrust. **(November RW)**

2) And yet the future of the religious right and even the more amorphous Christian nationalism, regardless of the Trump victory, was uncertain by the end of 2024. One clear indicator of a change afoot was the removal of the prolife plank in the Republican platform at the party’s national convention. Party operatives (and Trump himself) argued that this was a pragmatic move in the face of the Dobbs victory of 2018 and the subsequent loss of prolife measures at the state level. But other trends, most notably the secularizing forces among the younger generations—even among conservatives—and the growth of an anti-Christian and pagan elite in conservative circles, spell trouble for religious-right activism. Meanwhile, the religious left and even moderates put up much less organized religious resistance to Trumpism in 2024 than in 2016 and 2020 (though stringent immigration crackdowns may change that), suggesting diminishing fortunes for religious politics all around. **(November RW)**



3) Although the Synod on Synodality, concluded in October, disappointed those who had hoped for radical changes in the Roman Catholic Church, it was conceived as a step in an ongoing process of reform and has set the stage for potentially significant changes in the church's governance and pastoral approach, emphasizing greater inclusivity, transparency, and lay participation. While acknowledging that in "a synodal Church, the authority of the bishop, of the episcopal college, and of the bishop of Rome in regard to decision-taking is inviolable," several significant structural reforms were proposed for strengthening participatory bodies (pastoral councils and regular assemblies across all church levels) and for granting more authority to episcopal conferences. The final document emphasized that there are "no reasons to prevent women from taking on leadership roles in the Church," but the issue of women deacons was referred for further study. However, the full impact of these and other proposals will depend on their implementation in the coming years.

4) While, as indicated above, the schism in the United Methodist Church (the largest in a century) already made our review in 2023, last year was decisive in two respects. First, the church's General Conference repealed its 52-year-old declaration that the practice of homosexuality was "incompatible with Christian teaching," thus allowing for the ordination of gay people and marriage for same-sex couples, while providing more dissenters with the grounds for a clean break. Secondly, the schism is being felt more on an international level (especially in

Africa), even if the denomination is said to be taking a more decentralized approach. (**May RW; July RW**)

5) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's inauguration in January of the Ram temple in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh) marked the fulfillment of a goal of Hindu nationalists, who had led a campaign culminating in 1992 in the destruction by a large mob of a mosque built on the site of an earlier temple. It showed how far Hindu assertiveness has become mainstream in India, finding wide support beyond the ranks of activist groups in a country with an 80 percent Hindu population. The rise of Hindu nationalism has also translated into various legal measures, such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and had an impact on minorities. However, significant electoral losses suffered by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2024, including in areas considered as strongholds, and the need to build coalitions suggest potential limits to the party's growth, although its ideology still remains powerful and has permeated various institutions, including educational and cultural organizations. (**June RW; Associated Press, April 19**)

American “cultural Christians”: a new secular-religious hybrid?

The label “cultural Christian” has become a new way to position oneself between theism and a rejection of the value of Western culture and civilization that has its foundation in Christianity, according to the *Christian Science Monitor* (December 18). Sophie Hills reports that Elon Musk,



Source: TED Conference 2017 (Flickr).

a name usually associated with atheism, now calls himself a “cultural Christian” and is joining other prominent figures, such as scientist and atheist spokesman Richard Dawkins, who are using the phrase to describe themselves. She notes that the term seems to “exist almost exclusively online.” Many people call themselves cultural Jews or cultural Catholics, and in practice many people culturally value Christian traditions, such as by decorating Christmas trees or gathering with family on Easter, without attending church or believing in the Christian God. “As fewer Americans attend church, a space has opened between religion and spirituality. ‘Cultural Christian’ is one of the terms people are using to define themselves in that space.” According to Robert Royal, president of the Faith & Reason Institute, figures like Musk and Dawkins may be realizing that societal norms they value come from religious culture, prompting them to try to hold on to those norms without the religious basis for them.

Royal says that Musk “has a kind of bellwether quality. I think he senses kind of a shift in the culture when he says he’s a cultural Christian.” The utilitarian nature of the new interest in and even conversions to Christianity among intellectuals and other elite people (such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali) is clear from Musk’s view that Christian beliefs “result in the greatest happiness” and his suggestion that the decline of religion is a driver of dropping birth rates. Arthur Farnsley II of Indiana University says he is “pretty sure that when a Christian calls somebody else a cultural Christian, they mean, ‘You feel like all this stuff is true and important; you just don’t want to make any commitment.’ It’s a low-level insult. But when someone smart calls themselves a cultural Christian, they mean, ‘I think this religion is an important part of Western civilization, and I like Western civilization. I just don’t believe the hard parts.’” In his 2012 ethnography of flea market dealers, *Flea Market Jesus*, Farnsley found that while most of these dealers were “folk Bible believers,” few attended church. They held religious beliefs because they were what their mothers and grandmothers taught them, were “what good people believe.” “That’s one way to be culturally Christian,” he adds.

Anti-natalism as a secular reaction to biotechnology?

The anti-natalist movement, which calls for humans to stop having children, involves many secular people and can be seen as a reaction to recent technologies of birth that have given humans greater control over matters of life and death, writes Jack Jiang in *Anthropology Today* (November/December). While anti-natalism is not a new movement or philosophy, it has been strengthened and globalized with the growth of secularism, concerns with climate change, and legal activism. Some anti-natalist activists have even brought “wrongful life” suits against their parents. The movement is particularly strong in Japan, which has already one of the lowest birthrates in the world. Japanese anti-natalists have adopted the metaphor of the “gacha”—a toy vending machine based on chance and gambling—to describe how chance dictates the circumstances of one’s birth. As one anti-natalist describes it, “This endless circle of death and reproduction—it doesn’t serve any purpose. There’s no divine reason for it.”

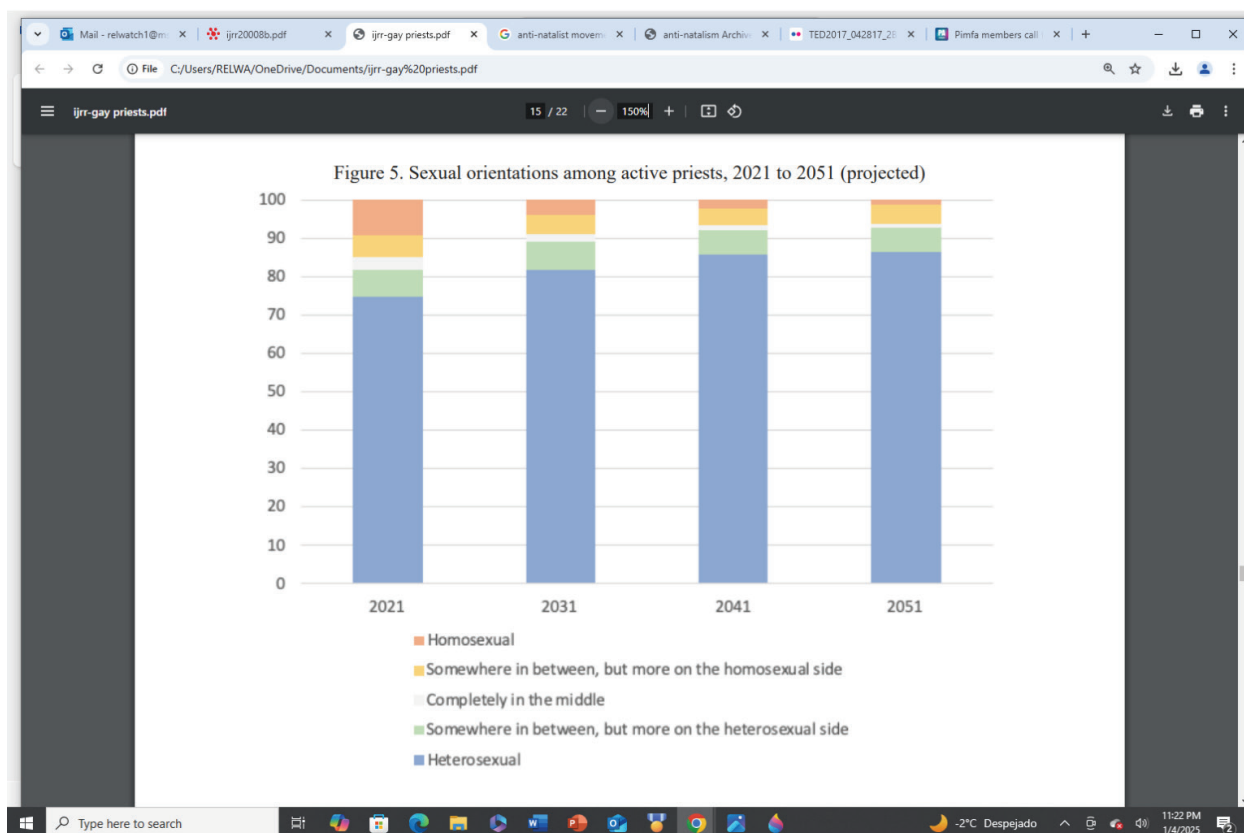


Some anti-natalists use the term “small gods” to describe the heightened responsibility attributed to parents “within a secular framework that views birth as a choice rather than predetermined event. This concept contrasts with traditional spiritual beliefs that often frame procreation as a divine act or a fulfillment of destiny,” Jiang writes. Unexpectedly, many anti-natalist activists, like their religious counterparts, oppose such technologies as IVF (with the Reddit group for female anti-natalists forbidding all pro-surrogacy content), genetic editing, and screening, believing that, like contraception and abortion, they extend control to parents at the expense of the unborn who have no choice to be born in the first place. Jiang concludes that secularism still “allows room for relations with the non-existent. Just as the living owe something to the departed, the unborn are becoming part of the moral universe.”

(*Anthropology Today*, <https://rai.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14678322>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

- **Homosexuality is becoming rarer in the American Catholic priesthood and can be expected to be cut in half over the next 20 years, according to a study published in the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* (20:8).** Homosexuality has been widely documented as being more prevalent in the Catholic priesthood than in the general population. Researchers Mark Regnerus, Brad Vermurlen, and Stephen Cranney analyzed data from surveys of Catholic priests in 2002 and 2020–21, finding that while the aggregate level of homosexuality in the U.S. priest population has remained unchanged since 2002, there has been a declining share of homosexual priests among recent successive cohorts. They found that homosexuality



Source: *IJRR*

increased (and heterosexuality decreased) up until the 1980s, but that since “then, priests who are strictly heterosexual have become more common with each successive cohort, reaching 88 percent among those ordained in 2010 or later.” By 2041, priests who self-identify as either entirely or mostly homosexual are expected to shrink to roughly 7 percent. These dynamics “reflect the Catholic Church’s increased success in implementing its stated institutional goals and policies,” the researchers conclude.

(*Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, <https://www.religjournal.com/pdf/ijrr20008b.pdf>)

• **While evangelicals have started many political parties in Latin America since the 1980s, those parties that have strong institutional support from churches, a broad platform, and eventually develop an autonomous internal structure may be best able to survive and thrive.** In a study published in the journal *Social Compass* (online in December), Bibiana Ortega (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana) estimates that at least 41 evangelical political parties have been created in Latin America in the last four decades. She focuses on Colombia, with its paradox of having the fewest evangelicals compared to most other Latin American countries (comprising about 12 percent of the population) yet also the highest number of evangelical political parties (EPP), totaling seven.



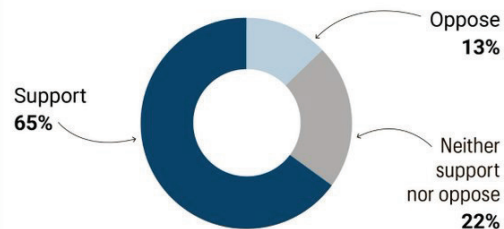
In analyzing party documents, interviews with officials, bills presented in congress, and press reports, Ortega finds that of the seven parties, only four were viable and showed endurance from 1990 to 2018, most particularly MIRA (the Independent Movement of Absolute Renovation), the longest lasting EPP in Latin America. From 2000 to 2007, MIRA received support from the prominent megachurch, the Church of God Ministry of Jesus Christ International, which is active in 46 countries. Becoming autonomous from 2007 on, the party has developed a broad program, from its first issue of religious freedom to the many others represented in the 1,182 bills it has presented, touching on justice, transit, foreign trade, and the agricultural sector, among many other issues. Ortega finds that megachurch support in a party's early stages is crucial for its endurance.

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

- **Britain's controversial assisted dying legislation is opposed in direct proportion to the degree of importance people attach to religion in their lives, according to two surveys reported in the newsletter *British Religion in Numbers* (November).** The first survey, conducted online by Focaldata among 5,033 Britons, found, as have previous surveys, a substantial majority—73 percent—in favor of assisted dying. The proportion was high even among the religious, at 68 percent, though the “nones” agreed by 82 percent. When caveats and counterarguments were introduced, such as by including children or the poor in assisted dying measures, no majorities were found to support these measures among either secular or religious respondents. The second survey was conducted online among 2,011 adults by More in Common. It asked if respondents would personally consider assisted dying themselves, and 55 percent said they would. But the proportions varied considerably according to the degree of importance respondents attached to religion in their lives, ranging from 35 percent of those for whom

Assisted dying is backed by the public, poll suggests

Britons are almost five times more likely to support than oppose it but nearly a quarter are undecided



The seven constituencies where fewer than half want to legalise assisted dying



According to a study drawing upon the polling of more than 17,000 people by the think tank More in Common
Graphic by The Times and Sunday Times

religion was very important to 66 percent of those for whom it was not important at all. While 65 percent of the whole sample endorsed changing the law to enable people to receive assistance in dying, only 41 percent of respondents who were very religious did so (compared to 76 percent of those for whom religion was not important at all). When asked if politicians should listen to religious leaders on the matter, just 14 percent agreed that they should (with 40 percent of the very religious agreeing).

(*British Religion in Numbers*, <https://www.brin.ac.uk/counting-religion-in-britain-november-2024/>)

Lithuanian Pagans find government recognition, but want more

Paganism in Lithuania and in much of Europe is receiving more recognition from governments, but still has some way to go toward receiving equal

treatment with other religions, writes Chas Clifton in his Pagan studies blog *Letter from Hardscrabble Creek* (December 14). The large Lithuanian Pagan movement Romuva, which was formally organized in the early 20th century, has recently received a higher level of official recognition after years of rejection by Lithuania's parliament. Romuva applied for official recognition in 2017, but at the time the parliament rejected the move. The organization later appealed to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which ruled in 2021 that by refusing official recognition, Lithuania's parliament violated the European Convention on Human Rights. Clifton notes that Lithuania's rulers abandoned Paganism in the 1200s and the country became majority Roman Catholic. "But if any European country did have a hidden 'Pagan survival,'" he writes, "it was Lithuania. Or the nearest thing to it." After the fall of communism, Lithuania established a hierarchy of "registered" religions, though some observers say this system may be on its way out.

The recent ruling means that Romuva has moved from being in the first tier (as a "registered" religious organization) to being in the second tier (as a "state-recognized" religious organization). This will permit the group to have its religious marriages automatically counted as state marriages without the need for a separate trip to the registry office. Clifton notes that the change in status for the religious organization is not so much a change in status for the religion; Lithuanians have freedom of religion and conscience and can practice their religions without registration. But registering as a religious organization provides the ability to act as a legal corporate entity (for example, to collect funds in an organization-owned bank account), as well as providing social and psychological legitimization. "One of the most important metrics for



Source: Wikimedia Commons

making the jump upwards is to have been registered as an organisation at level 1 for at least 25 years,” Clifton adds. Since Romuva reached that criterion long ago, its two-time refusal could credibly be seen as discrimination.

Nevertheless, a new government with a different composition of MPs was enough to move Romuva up a rung (the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ case for similar recognition is pending). But if Romuva seeks to move to the next rung of “traditional religion,” they may be entering murkier waters. The state only recognizes nine traditional religious communities (Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Jewish, Sunni Muslim, and Karaite), and Romuva will have to make the claim that they are “part of Lithuania’s historical, spiritual and social heritage.” Clifton writes that this will involve showing that Romuva is a continuing ancient tradition, and some scholars dispute that claim. Before the debate starts about connecting the archeological and historical dots to show the continuity between ancient Pagans and Romuva (which organizationally started only in the late 1960s), Clifton suspects that the “clock is ticking on these kinds of laws, anyhow. They are out of touch with the rest of EU law, and they regularly run afoul of the European Court of Human Rights. I would bet that Lithuania tosses out the whole ladder system long before Romuva manages to climb to the highest rung.”

(Letter from Hardscrabble Creek, <https://blog.chasclifton.com/>)

Pentecostal Roma men a “good catch” in Spain

The large Pentecostal movement among Spain’s Roma or Gitano population has created a marriage market where Christian Gitano men are considered a “good catch,” writes Antonio Montañés Jiménez in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (online in December). As in other European countries, Roma have converted in significant numbers to Pentecostalism in Spain, as reflected in the prominent Spanish Gitano Pentecostal movement, the Iglesia Evangélica Filadelfia. Jiménez researched Filadelfia churches in Madrid and found that, like in other Pentecostal churches, male converts tended to reject the machismo attitudes toward women and partying lifestyles of their secular counterparts, taking up more domestic and wife- and family-friendly roles.

In some contexts, such as Latin America, this domestication of Pentecostal men has often been interpreted as effeminate, resulting in the men’s loss of status among non-Pentecostal men. But in the case of the Gitano Pentecostals, the converts are looked up to as potential marriage partners and leaders in the community, with their churches supporting these roles and popularizing courting practices like roneos (“flirtations”). This is a recent urban phenomenon where young people fill the large squares and malls in the south of Madrid, discretely introducing themselves (face-to-face interactions being considered indecent), often with the help of social



Source: <https://www.begonyaplaza.com/>

media. Jiménez concludes that the older pattern of Gitano Pentecostal leaders encouraging endogamous marriages through parental arranged marriages and cousin marriage is giving way to courtship and marriage to unrelated spouses without parental control.

(*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, <https://rai.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9655.14234?af=R>)

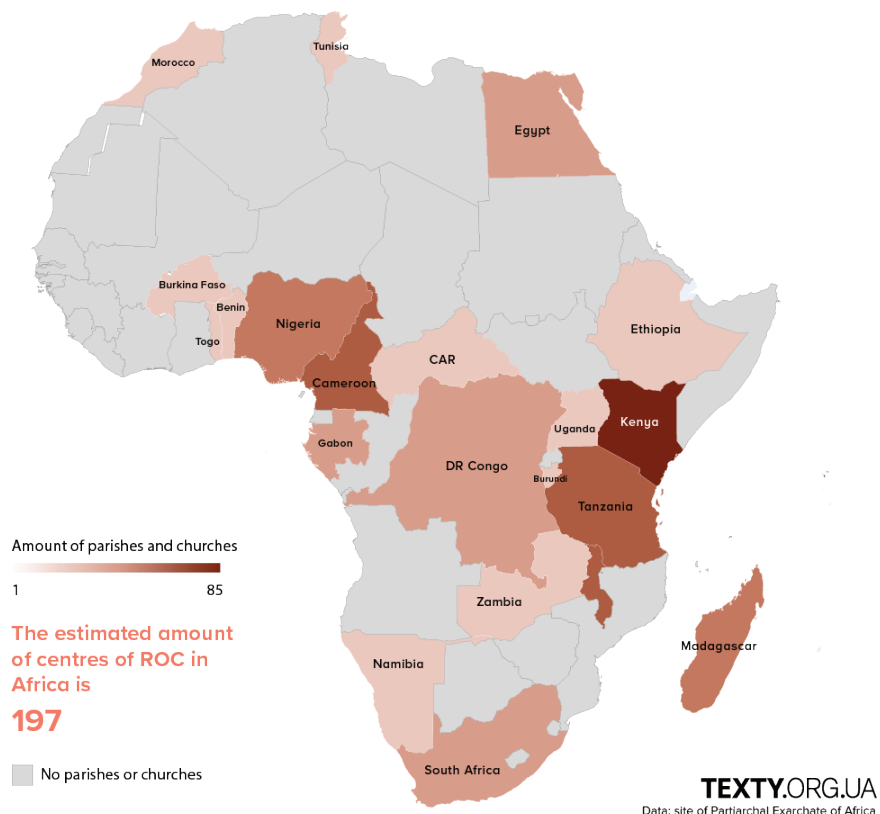
Russian Orthodox global South strategy helping the state more than the church?

While some have seen the Russian Orthodox Church's new outreach to Africa and other regions of the global South as a partnership with the Russian state to extend its influence in these countries, that partnership is far from an equal one for the church, writes Mikhail Suslov in the journal *Religions* (December 11). The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) caught the rest of the Orthodox world off guard when it established new alliances with African and Asian churches in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Analysts argued that the ROC was compensating for the loss of its church in Ukraine while also seeking a new paradigm as a global Orthodox church.

This was seen most clearly in Africa in 2020 when the Moscow Patriarchate (MP) of the ROC established the Exarchate of Africa in competition with the Patriarchate of Alexandria, with the former claiming that Alexandria was schismatic because it recognized the legitimacy of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in its break from the MP. So far, the new exarchate has shown some growth, now including 300 Orthodox communities and 230 priests, estimated to be about one-fifth of the Patriarchate of Alexandria's flock. By 2023, the exarchate was present in 23 countries, with the majority of its

Russian Orthodox Church in Africa

Parishes and churches under the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa



clerics serving in Kenya, although Uganda has been called the “spiritual hub of the Russian Orthodox Church in Africa,” with plans to open a large gold-domed church, a cultural center, and schools.

But Suslov observes that such elaborate plans for Uganda do not match the sparse ROC presence in that country and that they are more likely the result of personal connections between Ugandan leaders and the Russian political regime. Foreign affairs experts have argued that the ROC’s presence in African countries follows in the footsteps of Russian mercenaries, pro-Russian trade policies, Russian military activity, and opposition to UN resolutions against Russia in those countries. But Suslov shows that there is in fact no African country where the ROC’s presence overlaps with all those aspects of Russian power. Furthermore, while Russia has an interest in building ties with Muslim countries, the ROC can serve little purpose in that regard. Russia and Vladimir Putin have also tried to gain support in Africa by arguing that Russian interests are opposed to colonialism, unlike Western countries, and support social justice in the developing world. The ROC has likewise adopted this anticolonial discourse, while adding its traditional values message to the agenda. Russia is indeed interested in how the ROC can serve its soft-power strategy in the world, and the church itself is claiming a global identity with the fracturing of the “Russian World.” But Suslov concludes that while the ROC is trying to “catch the tailwind of anti-colonial discourses and thereby remain relevant [in] the Russian ideological arena,...there are significant limitations [on] the practical political utility of the ROC for the state.”

(*Religions*, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/15/12/1517>)

Maintaining secular Jewish identity amidst Judaeophobia in Israel

There is a fear of Judaism in Israeli culture, rooted in the concern that the Jewish religion will threaten and potentially eliminate secular Israeli identity, writes Gideon Katz (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Sede-Boker, Israel) in *Israel Affairs* (30:4). Katz adopts a phenomenological approach to analyze Israeli literary works, including essays, critiques, and dystopian novels, to understand the consciousness and experiences of the secular sector.

The fear manifests as concern that secularism is merely a temporary historical episode that will be supplanted by religious Judaism. With the rise of religious political parties and secular Jews turning to religion, dystopian novels from the 1980s onward depict Israel transforming into a dark, violent theocracy. They present secular identity as fragile and vulnerable to religious takeover. The anxieties expressed in these dystopian novels are echoed in other forms of cultural discourse, such as newspaper columns and academic studies. Katz explains that secular intellectuals view Judaism as integral to Israeli identity yet also threatening to it. The fear reflects a broader tension between “Israeliness” (modern secular identity) and traditional Judaism, with roots that predate the founding of the State of Israel.

Katz argues that the identity crisis experienced by secular Israelis has both metaphysical and cultural causes. The metaphysical cause is rooted in the limitations of secularism as a basis for



collective identity and social meaning-making. The cultural cause is linked to the specific context of Israeli culture and its historical relationship with Judaism. Katz contends that the dominant conception of Judaism as a national culture in Israeli secularism has led to an alienation from the religious foundations of Judaism. He suggests that overcoming this fear requires developing new ways of engaging with Jewish tradition that are neither purely secular nor traditionally religious, avoiding both isolationism and messianic nationalism. Katz calls for moving beyond the Ashkenazi-dominated secular-religious divide—the legacy of the secular Zionist rebellion among the Jews of Europe—and opening to the less dichotomous approach of Mizrahi Jews (with ancestral origins in the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Asia), with its “continuous, intimate, and flexible connection to the religious tradition.”

(*Israel Affairs*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/fisa20/current>)

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria: can jihadists in power really change?

After the rapid fall of the Assad regime, the jihadist organization Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has quickly become the key player in Syria and is evolving towards an ideological refocusing that is “at once Sunni, Islamic, conservative and revolutionary,” according to Swiss researcher Patrick Haenni (European University Institute in Florence, Italy) in an interview with *Orient XXI* (December 23). Haenni has been a frequent visitor to the HTS’s headquarters in Idlib since 2019 and has had several in-depth conversations with its leader over the years. While nobody can predict how HTS will evolve now that it is in a position of power, and it remains to be seen how it will manage to find the human resources for running the country and ensuring its security (with other armed factions in the country), its case offers important insights about what it takes for a jihadist, radical movement to turn possibly into something else. Originally leading a branch of Al Qaeda, HTS commanders had started engaging in ideological mainstreaming as early as 2017. “HTS is not a movement which has transformed itself as a result of a vast doctrinal revision or deradicalization as some Egyptian or Libyan groups have done,” Haenni explains. “Rather, it has undergone a journey of deradicalization for several years via a succession of tactical adaptations to a new geostrategic or local environment.” After breaking with Al Qaeda, HTS adopted the

Shafi'i school of jurisprudence, which was closer to the Sufism of the local populations. In its stronghold of Idlib, it also left in place the lower-level clerics from the local communities.

According to Haenni's observations, Salafism has thus become partly diluted through interaction with the local population. At the same time, there has been no real ideological



updating, if only to avoid antagonizing the group's most conservative members, who are suspicious about the developments. HTS therefore remains rather vague about its views. "Some define themselves as Sunni conservatives, others as Islamist revolutionaries, still others as political jihadists." Reading Haenni's analyses, one can identify some key factors that may help a jihadist movement make significant adjustments. Its leaders must be willing to prioritize practical governance over ideological purity. It needs to turn away from global jihad back to local roots, to local cultural and religious practices, while working with existing social structures rather than trying to overturn them. It has to create governance structures that extend beyond military control, incorporating technical expertise and building institutions that can deliver basic services (as HTS actually managed to do in Idlib during its rule there). It must show its ability to govern diverse populations and move from persecution to protection of religious minorities. It should be willing to work with regional powers (like Turkey in HTS's case). It has to grant space for multiple interpretations rather than enforcing rigid orthodoxy, while controlling more radical armed groups and ensuring security. It now remains to be seen if HTS will continue on such paths and how it will manage the shift from Idlib to Damascus.

(*Orient XXI*, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-an-ideological-conversion-under-the-microscope>,7876)

Gradual conversion for Balik-Islam people in the Philippines

In the case of Christian converts to Islam in the Philippines, religious conversion does not always involve a complete transformation or separation from previous religious and social ties, a recent study finds. The research by Asuna Yoshizawa (Rikkyo University, Tokyo, Japan), published in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* (online December 13), consisted of participant observations and in-depth interviews to examine the experiences of Balik-Islam individuals

(Christian converts to Islam) in Iligan City in the southern Philippines, with a focus on their everyday religious practices and relationships with Christians. Yoshizawa does not claim that the findings necessarily apply to all Balik-Islam communities in the Philippines, but that they do provide useful insights about what the complexity of conversion can be. The Balik-Islam movement began in the 1970s and has grown steadily since then, comprising an estimated 220,000 individuals as of 2011. It is reported to have continued growing, although it remains a minority group among Muslims. The Philippines' population numbers around 115 million people, with Christians comprising approximately 90 percent, and most Muslims, who make up 5 percent of the population, are born into the religion. Yoshizawa describes what looks like a population of seekers.

She found the main factor driving conversion to Islam among Balik-Islam individuals to be the search for a “true religion” that provides salvation. Overseas work experience in Muslim countries, marriage to Muslims, and influence from Muslim friends and employers were also found to be factors. Many converts had previously moved between different Christian denominations before converting to Islam. According to Yoshizawa, “conversion from one religion to another is relatively common in the Philippines; it is not rare for people to experience conversion several times in their life.” There is also a form of Islamic missionary work (*da'wa*) which aims to make Islam accessible and understandable to Christians and emphasizes continuity between Christianity and Islam rather than stark differences, using Christian concepts and biblical references to legitimize Islam.

While converting to Islam by saying the *shahada* is relatively straightforward, maintaining Islamic practices can prove challenging, with converts navigating complex relationships with Christian family members. Close to Muslim-majority areas, Iligan City offers a mixed environment, with Catholics as well as a wide variety of Christian denominations living side by side with Muslims, and such a setting is conducive to more fluid religious boundaries. There is also less influence from the Middle East than in the capital, Manila, where some Muslims, moreover, live in separate residential communities. Many converts struggle with daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, Islamic dress codes, and other requirements. Mixed religious rituals (like funerals) sometimes occur due to family pressure. Some converts stop practicing and are



A Filipino Muslim man (source: SIM Central and South East Asia | Flickr).

called “Balik-Christian” (returnees to Christianity, temporarily or permanently). Yoshizawa’s study contributes to understanding the various shades of conversion by illustrating how it can involve ongoing negotiation between religious beliefs and social relationships, with religious change being a continuing journey. Religious boundaries sometimes appear more fluid and gradual than absolute. Her concept of conversion as a “winding pathway” offers a new framework for understanding religious change.

(*Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/cicm20>)

Daoism incapacitated by China’s Sinicization policies

“Daoists, as much as devotees of all other religions in China, are severely affected by the Sinicization policies,” writes Karine Martin in the newsletter *Bitter Winter* (December 19–20). In an adaptation from her forthcoming book, Martin reports that the increasing restrictions against religions, started in 2018, have widened to target religious schooling and the times, locations and number of attendees at religious celebrations. Unlike before, any major event or festival now not only has to be registered for approval, but all participants have to provide identification to government officials. Along other lines, clergy are required to attend indoctrination courses on a regular basis, severely limiting the time they can spend on the upkeep of their institutions and/or their personal cultivation practice. Also, in 2023, the Chinese government released a draft regulation that, if passed, would penalize those who wear clothes in public that “hurt the Chinese people’s feelings,” including vestments or religious robes. Along similar lines, contact with foreigners is actively discouraged and can lead to repercussions, and religious media and communications are strictly censored. To comply with the regulations, religious organizations tend to hold workshops and training courses to set the agenda for their adaptation.

In late 2023, regulations were also changed at the communist-approved Council of the Chinese Daoist Association (CDA) to state that all Daoist clergy must “love the motherland, support the leadership of the CCP, support the socialist system, abide by the constitution, laws, regulations, and rules, practice core socialist values, adhere to the directions of sinicization, and preserve national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony, and



Source: Victor Wong | Flickr

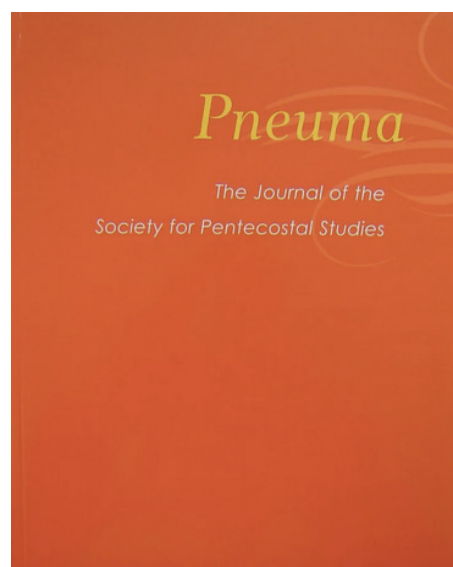
social stability.” Martin adds that, more specifically, the rules require that Daoists wear appropriate dress and exhibit correct behavior, “study and implement Xi Jinping Thought and the communist party’s policy on religious work.” All activities, publications, and teachings must be in strict adherence to government policies and are tightly censored, “essentially making Daoism—as much as all other religions—into an organ of state doctrine.” As for the everyday impact of Sinicization on Daoism, Martin visited more than one hundred Daoist temples and found many of them in a “state of decline and disarray. There were no devotees, much fewer clergy, and minimal activities. Buildings were in disrepair, and there was very little renovation or construction. The overall atmosphere was one of desolation and despair.”

She adds that the government has made the permit process for any kind of religious building activity so difficult that neither new temples are developed nor existing ones expanded. She gives the example of one Daoist temple that was ready to hold an opening ceremony but again had to file a whole series of complicated forms with different departments that also involved providing the names of everyone attending. The ceremony was held but was radically censored and neither pictures nor descriptions appeared online. This complements the official policy that only allows four Daoist temples in Shaanxi province to have an online presence. Even for them, every single post must obtain approval through a formal authorization process. As a result, temple websites—so strongly developed just a decade ago—now only speak about Xi Jinping’s thought and ways of complying with government guidelines. Not only temples but also tombs are subject to suppression. When the driving force behind the local Daoist revival, Master Feng Xingzhao, passed away at one of the temples he had reconstructed, there was no official announcement, but thousands of people came to attend his funeral, “lining the roads three deep and causing the main highway to be closed to regular traffic.”

(*Bitter Winter*, <https://bitterwinter.org/daoism-under-sinicization-3-the-fate-of-monastic-daoism/>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ The current issue of *Pneuma* (46), the journal of Pentecostal studies, is devoted to higher education in Pentecostalism, a movement where tensions over higher learning persist despite institutional progress. While Pentecostalism has a reputation of discouraging higher education, denominations and even congregations in this tradition developed many Bible schools, seminaries, and most recently colleges and universities. Preparation for ministry has been a key concern for these different kinds of institutions, but the move to full-fledged universities (think Oral Roberts University and Regent University) is a leading trend, reflecting Pentecostal and charismatic rising social mobility. These schools can now be found globally in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Australia, and



Europe, although it is in Africa (particularly Nigeria) where these institutions are growing strong, while this is less the case in Asia and Latin America, and hardly at all in Europe.

Contributor Allan Anderson notes that many of the same issues facing U.S.-based missions in the developing world are being experienced by Pentecostal colleges and universities in these regions. These schools have inherited a pre-millennial and conservative orientation that does not address ethnic and racial tensions and other social issues. The tension between academic freedom and theological freedom has often meant “relying on foreign academics to retain doctrinal purity.” The other concern with establishing Pentecostal colleges and universities is that they are exporting the dominant Reformed ethos, which is heavy on the intellect but less so on experiential learning. The watchwords in these new Pentecostal and charismatic colleges and universities are “head, heart, and hands,” pressing for a more holistic approach to education. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://brill.com/view/journals/pneu/pneu-overview.xml?language=en>

■ Chinese students returning to China after study and Christian conversion in the U.S. and other Western countries have been facing a rise in nationalism and new pressures and restrictions on churches. The evangelical *ChinaSource Quarterly* devotes its December issue to evangelical returnees to China, noting that the total number of student returnees to China has grown sharply since Covid, reaching over one million in 2021. There are no clear statistics on how many of these returnees are Christian, with a conservative estimate being five percent, but the trend of conversions to evangelical Christianity among Chinese students studying abroad has been taking place for decades. However, these evangelical returnees are no longer replenishing and reviving their churches as much as yielding to pressures to keep their faith private.

The authors of one article, writing under pseudonyms, note that both Covid and the restrictive religious environment have led to the returnees’ reliance on online tools and resources and a tendency to stay away from the churches. This avoidance of the Chinese church is particularly apparent when returnees first return home and are uncertain and unfamiliar with the changed environment. But the first two years back are the most critical for these new Christians (and most of them are young in the faith) in terms of being able to adapt and keep their Christian commitments. Churches themselves have shifted from more open, public institutions to a new small-group, community-based approach, which makes them unfamiliar to returnees who converted to the faith through large-scale gatherings in formal church buildings overseas. To read this issue, visit: <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinasource-quarterlies/journey-back-to-china/>

