

Conflicts within and between European and American churches over populism, shifts in foreign policy

Relations within and between American and European churches are becoming frayed due to the growth of populism and challenges to the post-Cold War international order, according to two reports. The newsletter *Evangelical Focus* (February 18–19) reports on growing tensions both within European churches but especially between evangelicals in Europe and religious conservatives in the U.S. Two weeks before elections in Germany, more than 20 mainline Christian bodies in the Association of Christian Churches signed a call for churches to stand up for democracy in the face of growing support for a far-right party (the Alternative for Germany or AfD). The group, which includes Baptists and Mennonites, made a clear reference to the AfD in stating, “We continue to believe that extremism and above all ethnic nationalism are incompatible with Christianity.” The signatories emphasized the need for a fair refugee policy, a stronger Europe, and a sustainable policy for the protection of the environment. “This kind of positioning, which is not new, has been criticized during the election campaign by a conservative party heavyweight, the Bavarian Markus Söder, who, identifying himself as a Christian, has said that the churches should ‘go back to talking more about the fundamentals of the Christian faith’ and less about their political views,” the newsletter adds.

The more conservative German Evangelical Alliance, uniting mostly Christians from independent evangelical churches, called for evangelicals to avoid polarizing discourses and to be “bridge-builders and peace builders who believe that it is possible to bring opponents together in church, politics and society.” Acknowledging that some Christians would vote for the extreme right because of its supposed support for Christian values, co-chairman of the council Frank Heinrich urged that honest conversations should not be silenced, while encouraging Christians to “denounce situations in which minorities and fragile groups are attacked in an unjust and widespread manner.” But the main concern among European evangelicals is the “paradigm shift” in the way “Europe and the United States are rethinking their relationship at a forced pace... [E]vangelicals in the old continent are observing the changes with concern.” It is especially Ukrainian evangelicals who have expressed doubt that an agreement with Russia will bring

peace. With President Trump's shift in focus away from Ukraine, European evangelicals are concerned that American religious and political conservatives are cutting ties with their Ukrainian fellow believers.

In another article, the newsletter cites Ruslan Kukharchuk, a journalist and leader of the movement United Together for the Family, who says that there are reasons for the new U.S. administration to

seek the good of Ukraine. Kukharchuk adds that "Ukraine is the Bible Belt of Europe," because it is "home to the largest church communities in Europe (for example, Baptists and Greek Catholics). And there are even more Orthodox Christians in Ukraine than in Russia." With this reality in mind, he urges that "the United States and the conservative White House administration should truly stand up for Ukraine...Instead of seeking friendship with Russia, which is killing Christians in Ukraine, or China, which is banning its citizens from attending churches." More generally, the "growing coldness" between the U.S. and Europe "could also affect relations between Christians on either side of the Atlantic. It may be the case that European evangelicals, who have for so long depended on support from U.S. evangelical ministries and resources, must also face up to this new world." The article adds that European evangelicals "may need to increase their funding locally or see their ministries collapse if U.S. churches and ministries turn away from Europe."

In a lengthy article in *Commonweal* magazine (February 7), Massimo Faggioli looks at the divisions between Catholics in both Europe and the U.S. regarding the shift away from the post-Cold War order and the wave of populism and nationalism that have emerged in both places. European Catholics are visibly divided over these developments. Leading up to the elections in Germany last month, the German bishops issued a statement flatly declaring that "Ethno-nationalism and Christianity are Incompatible." Yet *Communio*, a key journal in post-Vatican II Catholic theology, featured on its website an editorial on immigration that argued that "A party [AfD] that still explicitly refers to the Christian view of humanity should not allow itself to be intimidated by some bishops and theologians and defamed as unchristian if, after careful consideration, it comes to the conclusion that migration policy needs a radical correction."



Ukrainian megachurch service.

Faggioli argues that “in many European countries, Catholics are far from being—or even trying to be—a firewall against the far right.” He adds that “Catholic cardinals are divided too, with some happier than others since last November’s U.S. election.” The German cardinal Gerhard Müller (prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith from 2012 to 2017) said he preferred Trump to Biden—“better a good Protestant than a bad Catholic”—and that “Trump will help the Church because it represents the values of natural law: inviolability of life, importance of marriage, religious freedom.”

As for Pope Francis, he has chosen bishops that are sure to rile up the Trump administration, particularly his appointment of the liberal Cardinal Robert McElroy as the archbishop of Washington D.C. Faggioli adds that “Trump himself seems more proactive regarding the Vatican this time around, but Francis appears to be more cautious on the general topic of Western democracy.” In contrast to many European and American liberals, Francis has not issued broadsides about the declining state of democracy, but he has often criticized populism and nationalism. Faggioli notes that American Catholics are as likely to be divided about the rapid shifts in world politics as their European counterparts, especially as most listen more to Catholic “influencers” than to their own bishops. He adds that the “Trump-Vance administration looks almost like a third Catholic presidency, but one in which the vice president (who converted to Catholicism in 2019) has far fewer qualms than John F. Kennedy or Joe Biden in stating the theological reasoning behind major policy changes. It’s a form of ‘theology of the laity’—but shorn of a connection to Vatican II and Catholic social thought, if not outright contradicting it.”

(*Evangelical Focus*, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/>; *Commonweal*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/vance-trump-vatican-ii-francis-biden-faggioli>)

Right-wing “exvangelicals” discarding Jesus’s ethics while retaining the church?

First there were the progressive “exvangelicals” who gained prominence in popular books and academia for their accounts of abuse, hypocrisy, and politicization in the institutional church, along with their emphasis on how such tendencies clashed with the ethics of Jesus. Now, conservative ex-evangelicals are allegedly gaining attention, embracing politics while retaining their churchly settings and downplaying Jesus’s teachings. The latter scenario is based more on anecdotes than on hard data, but in his online magazine *Mere Orthodoxy* (January 31), Jake Meador sketches out this “sociologic” defining the post-Christian right. [See **RW**, Vol. 30, No. 2.] He does note that one of the surprising conclusions in the book, *The Great Dechurching*, is that there are more people who dechurch into a kind of right-wing political religion than into a left-wing political religion. Meador writes that “the left exvangelical trend has tapered off, from what I can tell. The reasons why are too complex to get into here, but having been active in Christian media throughout the 2010s I can recall a time when publishers were snapping up every talented and kinda jaded evangelical they could find to write a memoir. That no longer seems to be happening.”



The anti-institutional critiques that left ex-evangelicals leveled at the church “now seem to be more about broader problems across social institutions of many types. Moreover, in a time of weakened associational life, some churches have seen surprising growth and resurgence precisely because they offer the sort of belonging and membership that so many people today are longing to experience,” Meador writes. In contrast, the emerging right exvangelicals “start with right-wing politics circa 2025 and then come to Christianity after you’ve already committed to the political vision of the American right.” Whereas left exvangelicals tried to “keep a proxy of Jesus and dispense with the church,” the right exvangelicals keep a proxy of the church and dispense with or even condemn Christian moral norms. Humility and meekness and other teachings of the Sermon on the Mount are now considered “loser theology.” The Jesus retained in their conception of the faith is the judge of the Second Coming.

Meador writes that the logic behind evangelical disenchantment on the left starts with an over-identification of “wokeness” with the moral teachings of Scripture concerning the poor and the rights of women. “Once ‘wokeness’ is presupposed to basically be a shorthand for ‘Christian moral norms concerning the marginalized’ the church itself is seen as actually hostile to the teachings of Jesus and needs to be exposed for its corruption and abuse and rejected...But once that move is made it is hard to keep Christianity around for very long. So, the next step comes when what they say of ‘the church’ is now applied to ‘Christianity.’” A similar logic plays out with the right ex-evangelicals, beginning with an “absolutized condemnation of ‘wokeness’ which also tacitly repudiates many Christian ideas about the vulnerable. Once that occurs, ‘the

way of Jesus' begins to look rather dangerous and hostile to the agenda of greatness and personal exaltation now ascendant on the right. And, with time, what is said about specific Christian ideas will start to be applied to Christianity itself. Indeed, if the left can attack Christianity for being an enemy of justice and equity, the right can just as easily attack Christianity as being a slave morality that suppresses human innovation and excellence.”

(*Mere Orthodoxy*, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/two-types-of-exvangelicals>)

Wealthy elites spreading psychedelic ethic into American politics and religion

If there is a spiritual ethic of wealth today that is spreading beyond elites and the upper class, it would probably be the bohemian hedonism and spirituality of the psychedelic renaissance, writes Jules Evans in the Substack newsletter *Ecstatic Integration* (February 8). Evans reports on “the out-sized role played by a handful of very wealthy people, often associated with the Psychedelic Science Funders Collaborative. They have funded a lot of research, advocacy, the arts, the retreat centres and underground ceremonies. They attend Burning Man and that’s where you go to schmooze if you want to find funding for your psychedelic research program or start-up.” This spiritual elite includes “the tech founders and VCs like Elon Musk or his friend Antonio Gracias, a major psychedelic philanthropist currently bidding to take over Lykos. And then there are the psychedelic heirs to great fortunes—the Gettys, Rockefellers, Marses, Seagrams, Swifts, Mellons, Bronners, Kochs and so on. One sees a similar attraction to psychedelic culture among the English landed gentry—Lady Amanda Fielding, friends of EI Josh Dugdale and Anton Bilton, even Prince Harry. At least one big English country house now has its own medicine ceremony chapel, just as at least one HNW entrepreneur in the U.S. has set up his own psychedelic church on his ranch.”

What Evans calls the “post-exit existential crisis” among entrepreneurs, where they sell their start-up companies and search for meaning, or try to optimize themselves in their work, has resulted in widespread experimentation with psychedelics. “And because they’re type A strivers and ultra-competitive, they bring the grind mindset to spirituality and it becomes a form of competitive ego-death,” he adds. While first-generation wealth creators may be focused on building their legacy, their heirs have the time and money to engage more intensely in the spiritual search rather than having inherited wealth define their identities. Evans writes that as the “East Coast party-economy” of the wealthy has shifted to the West Coast and Silicon Valley, new spiritual hybrids have emerged, such as “shaman bros” who consult the spirits for their clients, often with business insights. “The shaman who caters to the VIP crowd could be an indigenous healer—a Colombian *taita* or Shipibo shaman or Mexican Huichol who has in the last two decades found themselves going from dirt-poor to suddenly flying around the world doing ceremonies for the richest people on Earth who, he discovers, have no end of ancestral trauma.”

All this has led to a new philanthropy where the wealthy are funding new research, trials, retreat centers, or New Age arts and culture. Brian Muraresku, the author of *The Immortality Key*, which argued that most if not all religions were psychedelic-inspired, is one recipient of the new

philanthropy. His book was turned into an art installation funded by the Jurvetsons and Christiana Musk, before the Cohen Foundation donated \$200,000 to turn the book into a documentary. Evans adds that the new spiritual economy risks becoming exploitative, as it draws “grifters, high on charisma and low on ethics and expertise.” This elite spiritual culture may also be spreading to the masses. “West Coast HNW philanthropists are less into funding the Met or the Opera, they are disruptors and utopians, they want to change the world, heal humanity, invent AGI, get to Mars...And they have embraced psychedelics as a radical technology to upgrade humanity. Now, with Musk and Co’s embrace of the MAGA movement, we’re seeing the spread of Silicon Valley spiritual libertarianism into American public policy...According to one interpretation of the principles of Burning Man, you don’t need the state, you can create an anarcho-libertarian spiritual utopia of radical self-reliance (although another principle of Burning Man is ‘civic responsibility’).” Evans concludes that we are at a fork in the road regarding elite psychedelic spirituality: “Does the psychedelic elite support careful research, and the growth of systems of psychedelic healthcare with proper safety, oversight and ethics? Or does it try to shoehorn spiritual-libertarian bohemianism onto the unprepared masses.”

An in-depth report in *Reason* magazine (March) suggests that behind much of the research on psychedelics is a particular agenda seeking to spread a universal spirituality. “Perennial religion,” which teaches that there is a common mystical core behind all the world’s religious traditions, has been espoused by the leading psychedelic researchers, reports Travis Kitchens. He argues that the line between research and advocacy has been crossed, most notably in the 2015 Johns



Hopkins and NYU study on the effect of psychedelics on clergy and other religious professionals by psychologist Roland Griffiths. The release of the study is on permanent hiatus after a 2023 *New York Times* investigation into scientific misconduct. Matthew Johnson, a protégé of Griffiths, charged that the research lab was run more like a “new-age retreat center,” with spiritual literature recommended to the subjects, and that politically aligned funders sought to spread psychedelics to religious communities. Johnson and Kitchens both stress how Griffiths (who died in 2023) had an “ambitious plan to revitalize Christianity by incorporating a psychedelic sacrament.”

Griffiths’s views about the common psychedelic and mystical core of Christianity (and other religions) are shared by his colleague Rick Doblin, head of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), who says that psychedelic use is “a way to spiritualize people en masse but starting with people in religious traditions.” He adds that the studies proclaiming the psychotherapeutic benefits of psychedelics have all led up to the religious aims of the Johns Hopkins study. Brian Muraresku is actively proselytizing psychedelic religion, even promoting his book in the Vatican (which did host a conference featuring a talk on psychedelic science), and is involved with Ligare, a Christian missionary organization (started by Hunt Priest, a Hopkins study subject and pastor) that seeks to introduce various Christian communities to psychedelics. The religious campaign behind psychedelic research and advocacy has strongly divided researchers, with some fearing that scientific integrity is being sacrificed. Psychologist Ralph Hood of the University of Tennessee, said to be a supporter of the perennial approach to this research, denies that Griffiths infused spiritual beliefs into his research. Hood says that the spiritual dimension of psychedelic use is upsetting to the scientific and medical establishment, which may lead regulators to mischaracterize psychedelics as anti-depressants and destroy innovation.

(*Ecstatic Integration*, <https://www.ecstaticintegration.org/p/high-net-worth-spirituality-and-elite;>
Reason, <https://reason.com/>)

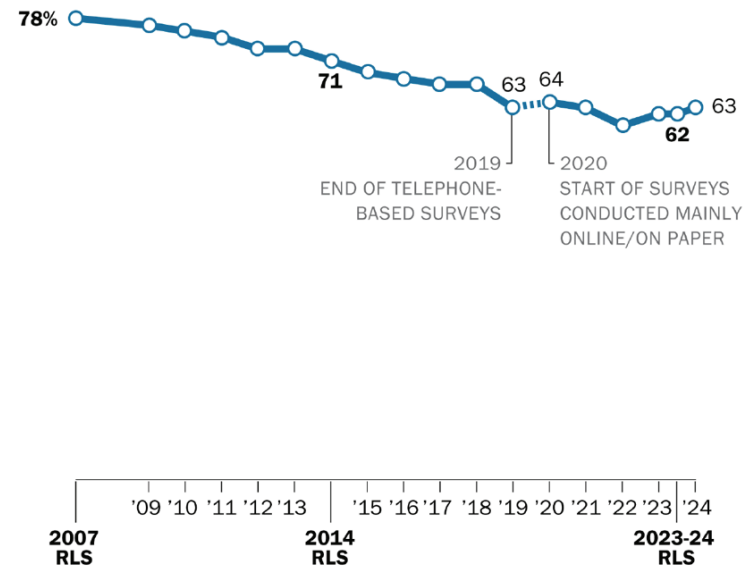
CURRENT RESEARCH

- **Both in the U.S. and the UK, surveys on religion are showing some stability, even an uptick in spiritual and religious interest and involvement in the case of the latter.** The Pew Research Center’s latest Religious Landscape Study (RLS) found that after many years of decline, the share of Americans who identify as Christians shows signs of leveling off at slightly above 6-in-10. The study, conducted among 36,908 U.S. adults, is the third such survey in 17 years. The first RLS in 2007 found that 78 percent of U.S. adults identified as Christians, but that number moved steadily downward in smaller surveys each year. While the latest RLS finds that only 62 percent of U.S. adults identify as Christians, over the last five years other surveys have indicated that the Christian share of the adult population has remained relatively stable, ranging between 60 percent and 64 percent. The largest subgroups of Christians in the United States remain Protestants, who now comprise 40 percent of U.S. adults, and Catholics, now comprising

19 percent. People who identify with all other Christian groups (including the Orthodox churches, Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah’s Witnesses) total about 3 percent of U.S. adults. The share of those claiming a non-Christian religion has been increasing, although it is still in the single digits. Making up 29 percent of the U.S. adult population, the Pew report notes that the size of the religiously unaffiliated subpopulation has plateaued in recent years after a long period of sustained growth. Other measures on religious practice and spirituality also show a pattern of recent stability, such as in the share of Americans who say they pray daily (44 percent), report congregational attendance (33 percent), and say they believe in God or a universal spirit (83 percent).

After years of decline, the Christian share of the U.S. population stabilizes

% of U.S. adults who identify as Christian



Note: The 2007, 2014 and 2023-24 data comes from Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Studies. Other estimates come from the Center’s random-digit-dial telephone surveys (until 2019), and from the Center’s annual National Public Opinion Reference Survey (since 2020).
 Source: Religious Landscape Study of U.S. adults conducted July 17, 2023-March 4, 2024.
 PEW RESEARCH CENTER

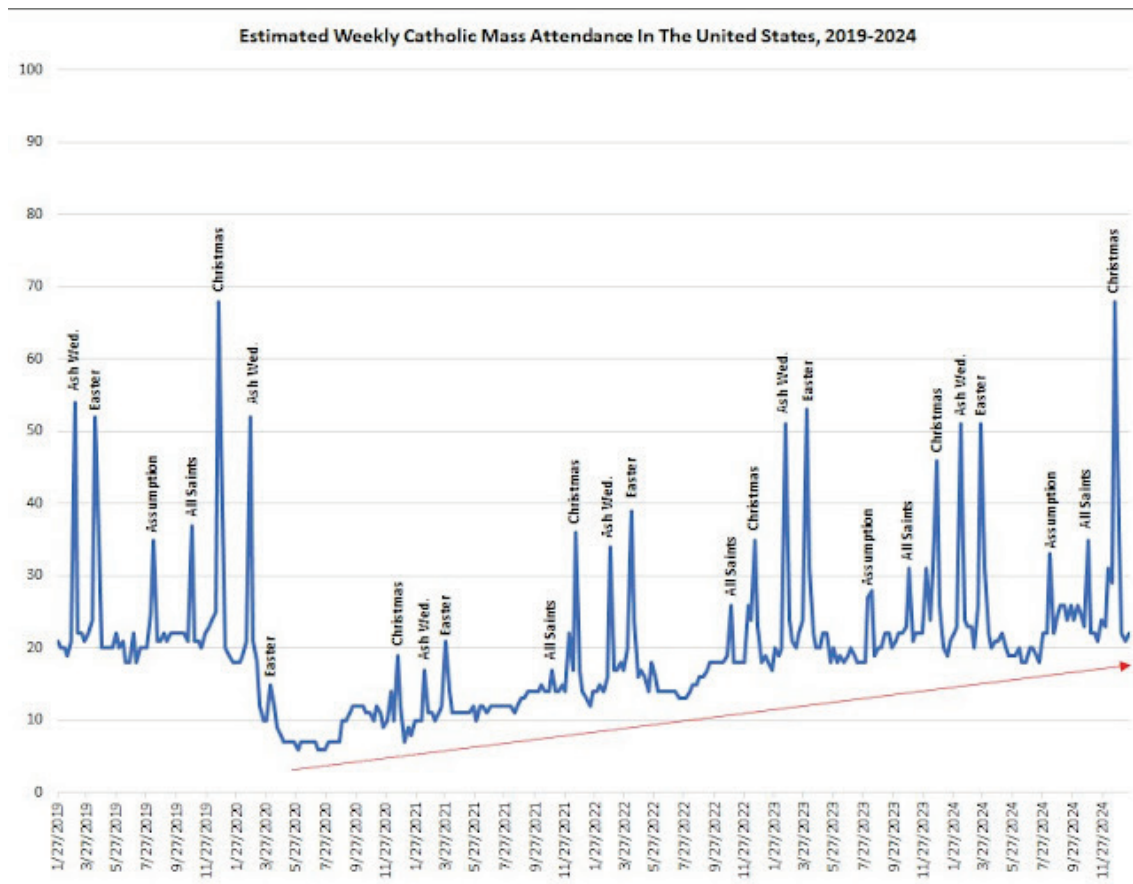
While non-affiliation rates among American young adults remain high, a recent study in the UK finds a growth of spiritual interest, if not religious affiliation. The newsletter *British Religion in Numbers* (February 3) cites a OnePoll survey of 10,000 adults finding that a “religious revival may already be underway.” That unusual claim for the UK was made by the poll’s commissioner Christopher Gasson for his book, *The Devils’ Gospels: Finding God in Four Great Atheist Books*. The poll found that young people are both more spiritual and more religious than older people, and have also become “more spiritual and more religious in the past five years.” Atheism was found to be more popular among people in their 40s and 50s than among younger people. Yet both younger and older Britons were highly pessimistic about the prospects for religion. Respondents were categorized into four groups: non-believers (30 percent); uncommitted (40 percent), or those who consider themselves religious or spiritual but do not commit to a specific belief system; religious (17 percent), or participants who are involved in religious institutions; and spiritual (70 percent), comprising those participants who to “varying degrees seek a connection with the universe, nature, or a higher power.” But the activities cited as “spiritual” included anything from getting involved in higher causes to following a sports team or fandom, leading editor Clive Field to quip that “it is no wonder that 70 percent of the population is classified by Gasson as ‘spiritual.’”

(The Pew’s RLS report can be downloaded from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/>)

2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/; the UK report can be downloaded from: https://thedevilsgospels.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/The-Devils-Gospels-Report_final.pdf).

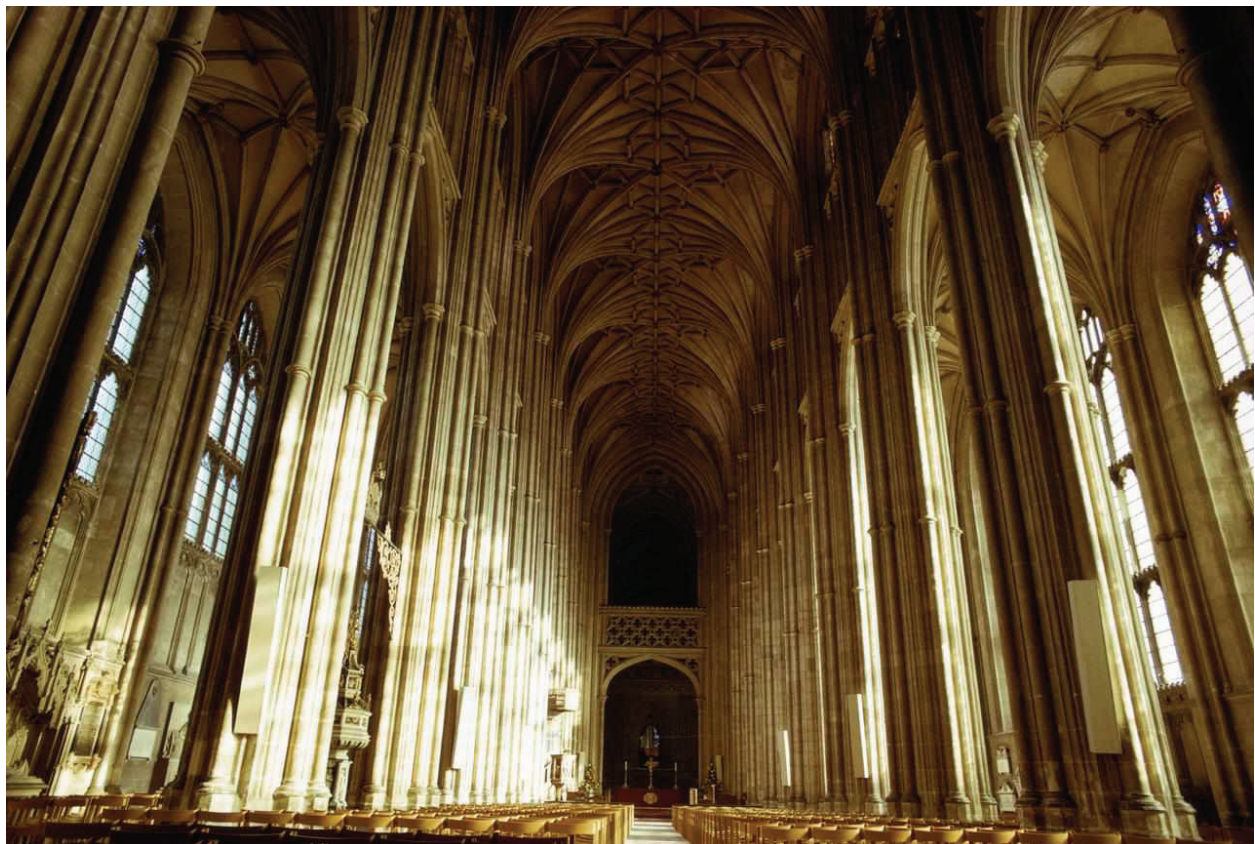
● **A report from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) finds that in-person Sunday Mass attendance at Catholic churches in the U.S. is back to pre-pandemic levels.** Although just under one quarter of the nation’s Catholics are in the pews on a regular weekly basis, the study finds that Sunday Mass attendance in person has risen to 24 percent since the declared end of the Covid-19 pandemic in May 2023. That rate has held steady through the first week of 2025. From the start of the pandemic lockdowns in March 2020 to May 2023, attendance had averaged 15 percent. Prior to the pandemic, the average attendance was 24.4 percent. Attendance figures recently released by the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, have backed up this rebound trend. The CARA study relied on data from the center’s various national surveys, along with Google Trends queries that “allow you to see variations in how frequently people are searching for [certain terms that] would correlate with Mass attendance...It’s not a direct measurement, but it’s a proxy,” said Mark Gray, author of the report. He also noted that the dip in data does not account for those who relied on livestreamed and televised liturgies during the pandemic lockdowns.

(The CARA study is reported on its blog: <https://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2025/02/mass-attendance-is-up.html>)



● **A survey of worldwide Anglican churches finds that among those embracing same-sex blessings and same-sex marriages, the losses of clergy or congregations over these decisions have not been as large as expected, with smaller dioceses better able to deal with church divisions over these controversial measures.** The survey, conducted by Andrew Village (York St. John University) and published in the *Journal of Anglican Studies* (online in February), asked key informers (bishops or chief executive officers) in 62 dioceses of the Anglican Communion about the impact of same-sex blessings and marriages in both their churches and the wider society. First, Village finds that the relatively small number of losses of congregations and clergy were complicated by concurrent losses during Covid as well as the longer pattern of decline in these churches.

When same-sex blessings (SSB) were allowed before same-sex marriages (SSM), the impact of the latter on dioceses was smaller, since those who were opposed to same-sex issues had already left. “On that basis, the Church of England’s decision to allow SSB but not SSM may have been an unnecessary and unhelpful fudge,” Village writes. As might be expected, allowing SSB or SSM did improve the church’s standing in society, especially for the Church of England, as opposed to adopting a more countercultural position. Finally, the survey finds that those areas with smaller dioceses found the moves to adopt SSB and SSM easier since they provided room for more deliberation and “listening” in informal settings that prioritized church unity, New



Zealand being one such example. In contrast, changes made in large synodical contexts, while necessary on a legal basis, were seen as a “poor way to make decisions” and foster church unity..

(*Journal for Anglican Studies*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-anglican-studies>)

● **A study of the effects of the war in Ukraine on civilians finds an increase in religiosity, especially among those not already religious, although greater exposure to the war does not necessarily increase faith.** The longitudinal study, conducted by Danyil Karakai and Ruslana Moskotina of the



Taras Shevchenko University of Kiev and published in the journal *Social Compass* (online in February), was fielded in two waves among 595 individuals before and after the Russian invasion in 2022. The researchers cite the “existential security” thesis, which holds that people who feel in danger or deprived (such as during war) will fall back on religion, finding, however, that respondents only became slightly more religious after the invasion. But they did not find that greater personal exposure to the war increased religiosity. Religiosity increased more among people who were not very religious before the war. But in the case of Ukraine, there may have been a baseline of religiosity through an enduring Christian culture that those who were nominally religious could use to increase their faith. The effect of war exposure on the absolute change in religiosity was more pronounced among religious people. “This supports the hypothesis that the inhumane events of the war could undermine the worldview of people whose lives were centered on God.”

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

● **The view that agnostics are atheists in the making may not be far off, according to a recent study of atheism and agnosticism in European countries.** The study, conducted by Moise Karim and Vassilis Saroglou and reported in the journal *Social Compass* (online in February), analyzed European Values Study data from 18 countries in Europe (1999–2017) and found that while agnostics differ from atheists in terms of psychological characteristics, the



growth of secularism on the continent may be closing the gap between these two groups. They found that within two decades, from 1999 to the late 2010s, “among the nonbelievers, the proportion of agnostics decreased in favor of atheists...[T]he effect seemed to hold for all age groups...In no country a robust opposite effect, that is agnostics’ ratio increasing, was observed.” They also found that the more a country becomes secular, the lower the proportion of agnostics it has. Cautioning that the findings may apply to northern and southern European countries but not necessarily to other contexts, Karim and Saroglou propose that in more religious countries, those who distance themselves from faith will avoid the social risk of opposing a belief in God or transcendence and “thus become or remain ‘only’ agnostic, not atheist. In contrast, in more secular societies where nonbelief becomes well accepted and even normative, more people clearly affirm atheism and reject religion and spiritual faith.”

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

- **Although Hungary has undergone significant secularization, religion still serves as an important marker of social status and class, according to a study published in the current issue of *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* (17:1).** Going back to Max Weber, it has been a standard view in sociology that there is an “elective affinity” or complex interaction between various kinds of religiosity and different social statuses and lifestyles. Author Dávid Kollár (Budapest Metropolitan University) notes that this classic position has recently been challenged by the view that social status has a causative role in shaping religious preferences. Kollár applies Weber’s framework, arguing that the relationship between social status and religion doesn’t move in one direction. In a survey of 1,000 Hungarians that measured church attendance, participation in religious rites, beliefs, and values, significant associations were found between social status and “distinct clusters of religiosity.” Kollár found that among the poor, celebrations and festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, were the main way that religiosity

was expressed. This kind of religiosity may be the most accessible for those without much theological literacy.

For the lower-middle class group, religiosity was expressed more by religious practices and attachment to religious institutions. “For the lower-middle class, which has achieved a degree of financial stability, but still faces limited opportunities, the predictability and continuity offered by institutionalized religion may be particularly appealing,” Kollár writes. By contrast, “capital-strong” middle classes and skilled workers value religion for its ethical and moral values and less for its coping benefits related to material hardships. Kollár finds that it is members of the upper-middle class that are the most rejecting of religion and the main bearers of secularization, having been most affected by the modernizing currents in education, technology, and urbanization. Yet the upper class, influenced by the same currents, showed an elective affinity for external religious forms, such as festivals and baptism, suggesting “that religion may play a significant role as a cultural tradition and status marker,” serving as a means of social distinction.



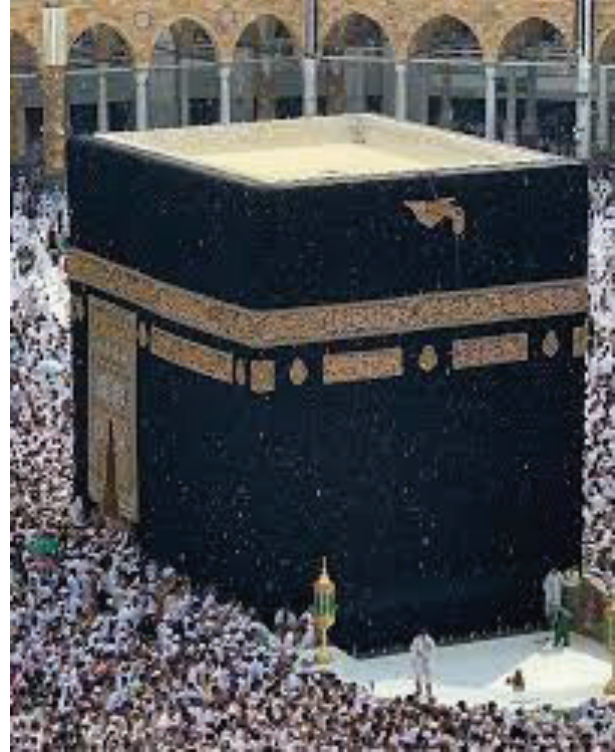
The Votive Church of Szeged, Hungary.

(*Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, <https://rascee.net/index.php/rascee/article/view/214>)

Trends among Arab Muslims point beyond revival versus secularization

Rather than showing either continued religious revival or straightforward secularization, Arab Muslim societies from 2010 to 2022 exhibited trends toward religious polarization, since both highly religious and non-religious populations grew simultaneously at the expense of moderately religious individuals, with significant variations across countries, demographics, and time periods. In a study reported in the *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* (online February 21), Arman Azedi (American University, Washington, DC) makes use of recent data from the Arab Barometer, finding no consistent region-wide decrease in personal religiosity from

2010 to 2022. Instead, he identifies three distinct periods of fluctuation: (1) the mid-2010s decline (2012–2019), when personal religiosity decreased across 9 of the 11 countries studied (a decline that was largely confined to men and youth, with women and older generations maintaining their existing levels of religiosity); (2) the Covid-19 surge (2020–early 2021), which triggered a sharp resurgence in religious commitments across all countries where data was available (aligning with psychological research showing that people often turn to religion to cope with crises and disruptions); and (3) the post-Covid decline (late 2021–2022), when, with the easing of pandemic restrictions, religiosity began to decline again (but this time more comprehensively across demographic groups).



By 2022, however, aggregate levels of religiosity had not yet reached the lows seen during the mid-2010s. Over the entire period, the “somewhat religious” middle category dropped 9.2 percentage points from 56.7 percent to 47.5 percent, while the “religious” category increased in most countries (by 6.9 percentage points, from 35.1 percent to 42 percent) and the “not religious” category registered a small increase of 2.4 percentage points (from 8.2 percent to 10.6 percent). Country variations are significant, though, with Libya showing the clearest evidence of religious decline, defined as people leaving both “religious” and “somewhat religious” categories to join the “not religious” category. Algeria, Jordan, and Sudan experienced rising religiosity. Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, and Tunisia showed evidence of polarization, with both “religious” and “not religious” categories growing at the expense of the middle group. Palestine showed no significant changes during the study period. Interestingly, the study found that trends in personal religiosity did not align with fluctuations in support for political Islam. For instance, Libya experienced declining personal religiosity but rising support for political Islam. Algeria was the only country where both personal religiosity and support for political Islam increased consistently. Overall, the study challenges simplistic narratives about either continued Islamic revival or straightforward secularization in Arab societies, revealing a complex picture of polarization, demographic differences, and contextual fluctuations influenced by regional and global events. For example, the mid-2010s religious decline was possibly connected to negative reactions toward ISIS and disillusionment with Islamist political movements.

(*International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/COS>; *Arab Barometer*, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/>)

Successful new religious movements take Judaizing turn in Israel?

While never very large in number, new religious movements in Israel are becoming more accepted by the general public due to these movements' acceptance of Zionist ideology and involvement in the country's settlement ethos and military, as well as their emphasis on education and success. Writing in the journal *Politics and Religion* (online in February), Guy Ben-Porat and Boaz Huss note that the persistence of new religious movements (NRMs) in Israel is curious since they initially faced considerable opposition, being branded as dangerous and foreign "cults" by the Jewish state and the Orthodox Jewish monopoly. The researchers conducted interviews with NRM activists and members, particularly from the Anthroposophy movement and the Emin Society, two veteran NRMs in Israel, and analyzed the media attention such groups have attracted. Both Emin and Anthroposophy are esoteric and occult movements that have been particularly successful in Israel. When Emin was criticized and investigated by anti-cultists and the government for being a cult and foreign (it had originally come from England in the 1970s), the group was quick to point out its contributions to Israeli society, such as its establishment of a settlement in an era of "demographic engineering" by Zionists.



Waldorf school students in Israel.

The Anthroposophists were not subject to investigations, though their group was also labeled a cult, and they have found more success than Emin in Israel today. They were also part of the settlement project and, more importantly, provided education for the upper-middle class within the Waldorf school system, now spread across Israel with more than 30 schools and 100 kindergartens. Waldorf alumni have been found to be very active in the Israeli military, community service, and academic studies. Thus, the Anthroposophy movement's neoliberal values and concepts of "good citizenship" were an important factor in its acceptance and success. Ben-Porat and Huss conclude that the subsiding of opposition to these and other NRMs in recent years is due to the way these groups have legitimized themselves through "Judaization" in their involvement in the settlement projects, as well as adapted to Israeli society as it underwent liberalization and individualization.

(*Politics and Religion*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/politics-and-religion>)

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

1) Following the publication of the **Nairobi-Cairo Proposals: Renewing the Instruments of the Anglican Communion** last December by the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO), Anglicans are discussing the possibility of moving toward a polycentric model, highlighting "the growing influence of the global South in the Communion," with the Church of England "less central to its common life." The Nairobi-Cairo Proposals aim to renew the Anglican Communion by redefining its membership and restructuring its Instruments of Communion to foster a more decentralized, inclusive, and collaborative fellowship that accommodates theological diversity while maintaining historic ties to the See of Canterbury. The proposals will be on the agenda of the next meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in Belfast in June 2026. Acknowledging fractures within the Communion and attempting at the same time to save it, the new model would no longer describe the 42 churches of the Anglican Communion as being "in communion with the see of Canterbury" but would stress their shared inheritance and "historic connection" with Canterbury, while the



churches of the Communion would “seek independently to foster the highest degree of communion possible one with another.”

Decentralized leadership would be stressed by the fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury would no longer automatically convene and chair all meetings of the Instruments, and leadership roles could rotate among international figures, reflecting the global diversity of the Communion. The document positions the Communion as an aspirational fellowship seeking “the highest degree of communion possible.” The debate is ongoing. Insofar as it is possible to summarize responses from various quarters of the Anglican Communion at this point, the reception is obviously a diverse one. On the conservative side, while seeing merits in a rotating leadership, the chairman of the Primates Council of the Global Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans (Gafcon), Archbishop Laurent Mbanda (Rwanda), does not see promises of renewal, but rather a path to potential doctrinal dilution. From the liberal and progressive camp, the plan’s flexibility is welcomed. The emphasis on autonomy and a less Canterbury-centric structure aligns with their push for local expressions of faith. From moderates, reactions seem to be rather positive. Some comments also appear to reflect institutional optimism about adapting the Communion to modern realities. The proposals for a reimagined Anglican Communion are broadly seen as a pragmatic attempt to hold the Communion together, but their reception is polarized. (Source: *Church Times*, February 14, December 6, 2024; the *Nairobi-Cairo Proposals*, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/ecumenism/iascufo/the-nairobi-cairo-proposals.aspx>)

2) Buddhist monks in the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan have started testing **BuddhaBot Plus**, an AI tool originally developed in Japan and offering life advice grounded in Buddhism to address declining youth interest in the religion. BuddhaBot Plus is an upgraded version of the original BuddhaBot, which was created in 2021 using Japanese translations of Buddhist texts. The tool was created at Kyoto University under the guidance of religious studies scholar Seiji Kumagai, who was looking for ways of sharing the teachings of Buddhist philosophy with youth or lonely people who visit temples less frequently. In Japan, hundreds of temples close every year due to a lack of worshipers and income. Forecasts show that by 2040, a third of the country’s 80,000 temples will have closed. More surprisingly, Bhutanese monks felt that AI could also prove useful in their mountainous country, where 83 percent of the population identifies as Buddhist. An English version was developed at their request.



Over the next three years, a few hundred monks and nuns of the Zhung Dratshang, Bhutan's Central Monastic Body, will have access to BuddhaBot Plus, according to journalist Craig C. Lewis. The purpose is not only to see how it works and to test its accuracy but also to adjust it to the local environment and possibly enrich it with contents of the monastics' own. If successful, BuddhaBot Plus will gradually be promoted to a wider audience, with the full rollout expected by 2027. Due to its use of English, it may even be offered to an international audience, but it is possible that a fee will be charged as it expands. BuddhaBot Plus offers a modern approach to accessing and interacting with Buddhist teachings. However, according to remarks made by Kumagai, the potential impact goes beyond religious education, "since AI-generated interpretations of Buddhist thought could introduce new philosophical perspectives." (Source: *France Info*, February 5; *Asia News*, February 14; *Buddhistdoor Global*, February 17; *DSA*, February 3)