

Pope Leo XIV: maintaining Francis mode of papacy while taking unifying approach to church governance

Although he was seen as a favored candidate for the papacy, the election of Cardinal Robert Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV, as the first American pontiff in history still caught observers off guard. The singularity of the event has quelled, at least until the new pope writes his first encyclical, the usual antagonism and culture-warring between the Catholic left and right. As Matthew Walther writes in the *Free Press* (May 8), “Leo XIV’s views about a huge number of issues—ranging from the traditional Latin Mass to the possibility of relaxing the norm of clerical celibacy—are totally unknown. In the coming weeks, pundits will speculate about whether his elevation was meant as a less-than-subtle rebuke of Donald Trump, or more specifically of Vance. But these and many other questions can wait. The immediate truth, in all its strangeness, is worth savoring for a while: The election of an American pope—I still cannot believe I am typing those words—is almost a cosmic joke, one whose consequences are presently unknowable.” But some commentators are convinced that Pope Leo’s views are not unknown and that the direction of his papacy is fairly clear. In the liberal *National Catholic Reporter* (May 8), Sean Michael Winters writes that “for now we can only state, but state with certainty, that the cardinals have chosen someone committed to the reforms Pope Francis began. The new pope will chart his own path, to be sure, but we know the direction in which he is headed.”

Winters adds that as “the cardinals discussed the future of the church last week, the happy shadow of Francis loomed large. They wanted someone who shared his commitment to synodality [a collaborative approach to church decision-making] and focus on the world’s poor. With Prevost, a mild-mannered man, they also voted for fewer surprises and a steadier hand at the wheel of governance, someone with experience of the Vatican Curia but not a creature of that Curia.” Meanwhile, associate editor Jean-François Mayer provided **RW** with a translation of an analysis of Pope Leo XIV he wrote for the Swiss daily *Freiburger Nachrichten*. He writes that the “conclave made a choice of both continuity and appeasement. For the cardinals, the objective was to find a pastoral figure, and at the same time a pontiff capable of strengthening the unity of the church and bringing calm. Leo XIV is a man recognized for his thoughtful character, his



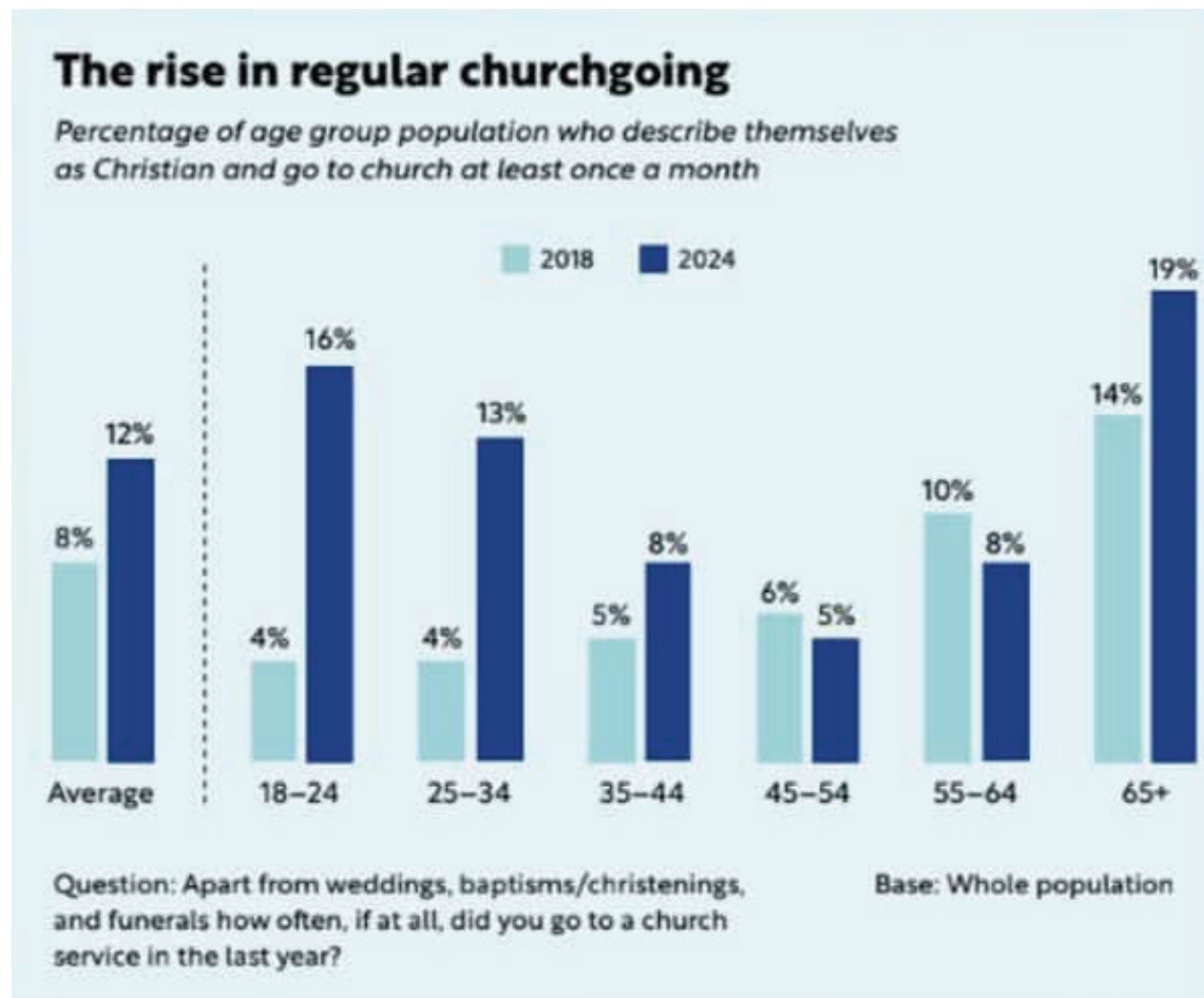
Source: Catholic Church England and Wales, © Mazur/cbcew.org.uk | Flickr.

ability to synthesize, and his work ethic. He has demonstrated his capacity to lead various structures (diocese, religious order and dicastery) and he knows Rome, where he spent a total of 13 years of his life. This will be useful to him in managing the continuation of the multiple initiatives begun by Francis.”

Mayer adds that “Leo XIV shares Pope Francis’s social commitment and pastoral concerns, but his approach is likely to differ from the bold and disruptive style his predecessor willingly cultivated. The emphasis on unity and communion corresponds to what many bishops around the world were expecting. The arrival of Leo XIV could mark the beginning of a pontificate under the sign of stability. The first appearance of the new pope showed a man both approachable and benevolent, speaking with kindness and simplicity, without oratorical effects, who will be a pope in a different style than figures such as John Paul II or Francis. But in an entirely different way, he has the necessary qualities to become a unifying pontiff. It is also worth noting that those Italian cardinals who wished for the return of an Italian pope did not succeed. From the outset, by using Italian (and a little Spanish to address his former Peruvian diocese), this quadrilingual pope, who is the first North American sovereign pontiff, but with broadly international experience, presented himself in his role as Bishop of Rome and ‘Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church,’ to use one of the titles carried by the pope. His background does not strongly identify him with a national affiliation: he stands in line with the concrete affirmation of the universal character of the Catholic Church.”

Rumors of revival spread—and are doubted

There has been a spate of media reports about impending religious and spiritual revivals in Europe and the U.S., but it is not clear if these reported trends will prove to represent long-term shifts in religiosity or “blips” on the screen of continuing religious decline. A much-publicized Pew study in March showed a stabilization of decline in religious affiliation in the U.S., and other surveys since have even pointed to signs of revitalization. A recent survey entitled “The Quiet Revival,” commissioned by the Bible Society and conducted by YouGov, found that church attendance in England and Wales has actually increased by 50 percent over the past six years, and that young people between 18 and 24 years of age have the second highest rates of attendance, behind those who are 65 and over. The trend was found to be especially strong with young men in this group, with 21 percent saying they attended church at least once a month, compared with 12 percent of young women. The survey also showed that members of Generation Z are particularly drawn to Roman Catholicism, which accounts for a significant rise in the number of Catholics in England, almost closing the overall gap between those who identify as Catholic and those who identify as Anglican.



The survey found social activism to be a significant concern among the Gen Z respondents, especially among the more churchgoing ones, who reported higher rates of community and charity work compared to those who were not church members. But British sociologist David Voas questions the findings of the Quiet Revival survey. He told **RW** that churchgoing is down in all denominations by around 20 percent from pre-pandemic levels, and it is among the younger generations where church attendance has dropped off more strongly. “The authors of the Bible Society report try to defend their findings by arguing that the additional (invisible?) churchgoers are probably attending independent churches, but it’s implausible that the total churchgoing population could have grown by more than half while participation is declining in all the largest Christian organizations. I suppose it’s not impossible that young men are flocking to church, but my feeling is that such reports are entirely anecdotal (and probably matched by other churches where fewer and fewer young people are attending).” The puzzle is why the YouGov findings from 2018 and 2024 were so different. Voas suspects that it’s about “differential non-response, or to put it another way, the 2024 sample isn’t religiously representative of the population. Perhaps YouGov invited members of their web panel to complete a survey about religion and religious people were disproportionately likely to respond.”

Meanwhile, *The Pillar* (April 16), a Catholic newsletter, reports on baptism figures recorded during the Easter season in churches around the world, with several nations showing a growth of new Catholics. A record 17,800 catechumens will be baptized at this year’s Easter Vigil in France, including more than 7,400 young people aged 11 to 17. Luke Coppen writes that “France is arguably the country that is driving the growing discussion about a Catholic adult baptism ‘boom.’ The number of adult baptisms in Belgium is expected to rise to 536 this year, an almost 50 percent increase from 2024, when there were 362. Ten years ago, in 2015, there were 180 adult baptisms, meaning the number has almost tripled over the past decade. In Austria, about 240 adults are preparing to be baptized, up from roughly 130 people in 2024, an 85 percent year-on-year increase. In the Austrian Church, an adult is defined as anyone over the age of 14.” Coppen adds that in the Vienna archdiocese, “which has reported rising adult baptisms for almost a decade amid an influx of refugees, 118 adults will be baptized at the Easter Vigil, 50 more than in 2024.”

A church official in Vienna said that, “In the past, we primarily had baptism candidates between the ages of 20 and 40, but now the adolescent age group represents the largest group, with the majority of them being Austrian citizens.” Outside of the Catholic Church, there are also indicators of church revitalization, even in the secular precincts of Lutheran Scandinavia, such as Finland [see last month’s report on growth among young adults in Finland’s Evangelical Lutheran Church]. *Christian News* (April 21) cites the *Church of Norway News Service* (March 17) in reporting on Statistic Norway figures showing the number of participants in services has increased on average from 77 to 80 since 2015. As reflected in other church statistics, there is specific growth among young adults (again, more young men than women), with a three-fold increase within this demographic since 2015.

Circling back to the American case, political scientist Ryan Burge has voiced his doubts about a religious revival happening anytime soon. In his newsletter *Graphs About Religion* (April 7), Burge writes that “the overall decline in attendance at houses of worship has continued at a pretty steady pace since 2008. In that [2008] sample, 44 percent of folks attended less than once a year while 31 percent were attending religious services on a weekly basis. It’s been all downhill from there.” In survey data from 2024 he finds about a third of respondents saying that they never attended religious services—a 4-point increase since 2020 and a 14-point jump from 2008. Overall, 55 percent of American adults now attend a religious service less than once a year—an 11-point rise in 16 years. Burge notes that there is stability among Americans who are very religiously active. “Again, it was 31 percent weekly attenders in 2008 and it was still 28 percent by 2016...In the next eight years, it also dropped another three points. Today, a quarter of Americans are weekly attenders. Low-attenders bested high-attenders by 13 points in 2008. In the 2024 result it had ballooned to 30 points. There’s no evidence of any type of revival in this graph.” He does, however, conclude with the upbeat finding that Gen Z’s religious attendance is actually more robust compared to other generations. In 2024, 24 percent of Gen Z members were attending weekly—two points higher than Millennials and members of Gen X.

(*The Quiet Revival survey* is accessible at: <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/research/quiet-revival>; *The Pillar*, <https://www.pillarcatholic.com/p/adult-baptisms-whats-driving-the>)

Weddings incorporating alternative spirituality into ceremonies

While weddings have taken on a more secular character in recent years, there is a growing interest in integrating wellness and spirituality into marriage ceremonies, reports the *New York Times* (April 13). “For many couples, health and mindfulness are an integral part of their everyday lives, and they want their weddings to reflect these values. And with more event planners and venues catering to the needs of those who prioritize wellness, it’s easier to accomplish that,” writes Sarah Lyon. The article finds a wide range of spiritual practices and beliefs being incorporated into these wellness-based weddings, including tarot reading, meditation, yoga, journaling, and healing crystals. “I feel like weddings are just an extension of people’s energies,” said Kara Ladd-Blum, a Brooklyn-based “conscious marketing consultant.” On the morning



of her wedding, she joined her spiritual mentor and engaged in a solo healing session, which she described as a “self-love ritual.”

“It definitely has weaved its way into weddings and events,” says Ali Phillips, a Chicago event planner. She estimates that about three-quarters of the weddings she has planned each year contained a wellness element. At the Ocean Edge Resort and Golf Club in Brewster, Massachusetts, wedding groups can enjoy acupuncture and beach yoga sessions. At Canyon Ranch Woodside in California, couples and their guests can sign up for spiritual growth sessions and botanical tea making. Another resort in Lenox, Mass., specifically offers a mindful weddings program including spa treatments and guided meditation. “There’s even an anniversary ‘reflection visit’ for couples,” Lyon writes, “where they can participate in a sacred stone ceremony, hike or work out in a nature ropes course.” The U.S is not the only place seeing the growth of alternative spiritual weddings. In Ireland, only one-third of weddings were performed in a Catholic church in 2023, compared to 91.4 percent of Irish marriages in 1994, according to an *Irish Times* report cited by *America* magazine (May). In contrast, one-quarter of the total wedding ceremonies in 2023 fell under the category of “New Age and other religions.” One “solemnizer,” an individual licensed to perform marriages, says that the Catholic liturgy does “not meet people where they are...[not allowing] a broader understanding of the divine indwelling.”

Psychedelic churches entering the legal religious market

The “booming psychedelic church scene in the U.S. could be about to shift from the underground into the legal overground,” reports Jules Evans in the Substack newsletter *Ecstatic Integration* (April 8). There are anywhere up to 500 psychedelic churches in the U.S., of which “roughly 97 percent operate illegally and more or less un-transparently.” But the gradual shift to legality could be seen in several recent cases, in a pattern that is expected to be followed by other similar churches. The Celestial Heart Church, an ayahuasca church founded in California by Kai Karel, is reportedly about to settle with the DEA over its right to practice using ayahuasca, according to one of its lawyers, Sean McAllister. This victory follows a similar settlement last year between the DEA and another ayahuasca church, the Church of the Eagle and Condor, represented by the same legal team. McAllister says that other suits are already taking place, with a federal court in Utah ruling in favor of a mushroom church in February, and a new case coming in Florida. Evans notes that before these legal victories, only two other psychedelic churches had successfully sued the DEA in the early 2000s.

“This latest result shows the DEA’s willingness to settle rather than go to court, if they think they will lose,” Evans writes. “On the other hand, if they think they can win, they have been prepared to go to court against psychedelic churches, as they did against ayahuasca church Soul Quest (which has now gone bankrupt after it was sued by the family of a participant who died during an ayahuasca ceremony).” The DEA’s criteria for going to court include a number of factors, such as how secure a church’s supply of controlled substances is, how good their safety

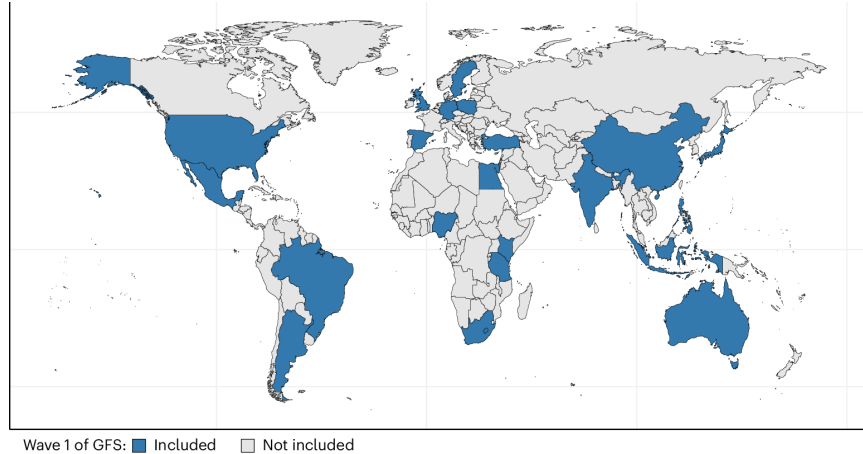


protocols are, whether “they seem like a genuine church or just a business, and so on.” Evans adds that there’s now a template that other churches can follow to pressure the DEA to settle and grant them an exemption to engage in psychedelic practices. Psychedelic churches have also tried to petition the DEA to get legal exemption through the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), but this has been a long and difficult process, with many churches remaining in limbo. “Now, some churches seem intent on forcing the DEA to act through lawsuits. This approach seems to be working. And perhaps it will in turn push the DEA into being more active in the petition process as well,” Evans concludes.

CURRENT RESEARCH

- A major new study finds a strong association between religious identity and human flourishing.** The Global Flourishing Study (GFS) study, a longitudinal survey across 22 countries, was conducted by Baylor University and Harvard University, with its initial findings presented at a recent conference at the Gallup world headquarters in Washington, which RW attended online. Employing a 10-point scale, the study found a 0.81-point gap in composite flourishing between those who attended religious services at least weekly and those who never attended. Regular attenders were also significantly more likely to report volunteering, showing love and care to others, and having a higher sense of meaning and purpose, among other aspects of a good life. That religious service attendance in particular is a powerful predictor of health and well-being was seen in Indonesia, which had the highest scores in the GFS for many aspects of flourishing while being a highly religious society, with 98 percent of the population identifying as either Muslim or Christian and 75 percent attending religious services at least

weekly. Countries with lower religious attendance, such as those in northern Europe, even when they have higher GDP per capita, often have lower “composite flourishing” scores, which cover such domains as self-rated happiness, health, meaning, character, relationships, and financial security.



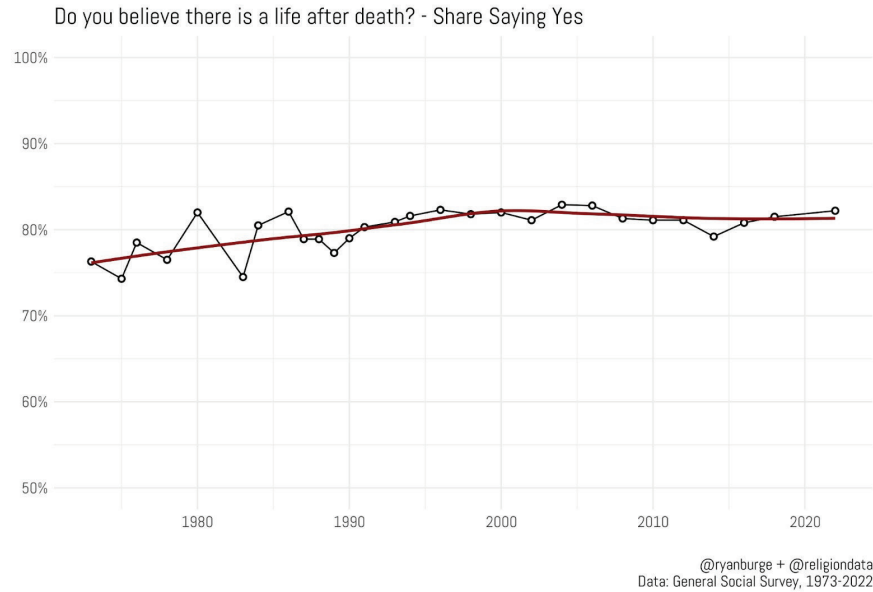
Even after factoring in self-rated financial security, more religious middle- and low-income countries, such as Indonesia, Mexico, Kenya, and Tanzania (where GDP per capita in 2023 was \$1,211), have higher average composite flourishing scores than less religious affluent countries, such as the U.S., Sweden, Germany, and Japan. However, the researchers note that, this early in the study, it is difficult to assign a causal role to religious involvement in accounting for flourishing. For instance, while Turkey and Indonesia are both overwhelmingly Muslim countries, the former had the second-lowest mean score for composite flourishing. In Tanzania, 73 percent of Christians (half of whom are Roman Catholic) said they had had “a life-changing religious experience,” whereas in deeply Catholic Poland, only 9 percent of Christians reported the same.

(Results and analyses of the first wave of the GFS study are freely accessible from the journal Nature: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s44220-025-00423-5>)

● **Belief in life after death has remained one of the most resilient beliefs, even in secularized countries, and it seems to be increasing in the U.S.** In his Substack newsletter *Graphs about Religion* (April 17), Ryan Burge analyzes five decades of data on belief in the afterlife from the General Social Survey. Seeing no dramatic upward or downward movement of the trend line, he finds that “belief in an afterlife is incredibly robust...and almost completely unchanged over the entire time series. In that first data collection in 1973, about 76 percent of folks believed in something beyond this life. But by 1990, that figure had crept up to just about 80 percent and it continued to rise very slowly from there.” From 2000 to 2022, “the estimates are all basically the same. Even today, the share of Americans who believe in life after death is 82 percent.” Burge finds it striking that there are not many differences in belief in an afterlife among the most and least educated in the sample. This was as true in 1973 as it is in 2025. Actually, when controlling for other factors, “an educated person was more likely to believe that there was life after death than someone with less education.”

While there is a noticeable drop in belief in an afterlife among those born in the 1960s compared to previous decades, the next three cohorts don’t show a consistent trajectory. For each of those groups, belief in life after death is about 83 percent. People born in the 1980s are just as likely to

believe in life after death as people 30 or 40 years earlier. In considering the 20 percent of Americans who don't believe in an afterlife, Burge notes that as time has passed the share of the non-affiliated ("nones") who believe in an afterlife actually rose. By 2000, it was at least 60 percent, and it has remained at that level over the last two decades. He argues that the nones from decades ago were more "hardcore" in their secularism, whereas today they are less committed to secular beliefs. Many of them may have been turned off from organized religion because of its political involvement, yet they seem to have retained their spirituality.



● A new study reports that while Seventh-day Adventism (SDA) continues to grow fast in sub-Saharan Africa, it is experiencing new tensions and dilemmas over attracting converts who are involved in businesses that go against the church's health teachings. At a recent conference of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture, Triana Yentzen



Seventh Day Adventist Church in Zambia.

presented a paper on how the SDA church is growing in a region where the tobacco, coffee, and tea industries are economically central. Using church data from 1991 to 2021, Yentzen compared opportunity costs with membership rates. “Opportunity costs” are the time, money, and other resources that are given up when a course of action, such as church membership in this case, is chosen. When opportunity costs were positive, net gains in church membership were reduced by 10 percent. Yentzen found there was up to a 20 percent loss in SDA membership due to higher opportunity costs. She found that when there were high opportunity costs, there were fewer messages on health in sermons and an increased consumption of alcohol and tobacco in the churches. Yet the reduction of these messages on health also caused members to feel less satisfaction with the church.

Women leaders find central role in indigenous missions

Women are often at the forefront of indigenous mission and church-planting efforts in Asia and Africa, write Gina Zurlo and Dave Coles in the journal *Missiology* (53:2). Many indigenous missionary efforts today are described as church-planting or disciple-making movements rather than Christian, and they operate below the radar and even underground due to religious restrictions, nationalisms, governmental favoritism, and social hostilities. Because of their unofficial status, these mission groups and congregations are not counted in many surveys of Christianity in their countries. Also because of their outsider status, Zurlo and Coles find a



Woman leading Bible study in Asia.

disproportionate number of women in prominent leadership positions, whereas formal denominations may prohibit this practice. Although there are differences in counts of these church plants and how reliable such counts are, “reliable verification exists for hundreds of them at least, which include disciples from Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist backgrounds.”

“One of the most thorough assessments reports of 1,035 ‘rapidly multiplying groups that have surpassed four generations of church planting in multiple streams,’ which together comprise 74 million Christians,” the authors write. They cite the example of one mission leader, “Ruth,” who has planted 18 generations of indigenous churches in East Africa, which means that the churches she has started have started their own churches and so on for 18 generations of reproduction. As a businesswoman, she connects with people through agriculture and moneylending, working with both oral and written cultures, and starting Bible studies. By developing congregations through such meetings and then running monthly training sessions, 80 Christian leaders to date have been trained to guide these indigenous churches. While such women-led mass indigenous movements are not new, such as among the Dalits (“untouchables”) in India, their institutionalization has historically limited women’s leadership. But Zurlo and Coles argue that current examples suggest that these church plants may buck the institutional trend, especially in Pentecostal environments that stress the priesthood of all believers. For instance, in Iran, high governmental restrictions and social hostilities against religion have had a “major role in catalyzing women-led movements.”

While the culture of sex segregation obviously plays a role in the prominence of such women leaders, they have been instrumental in the high conversion rate of Iranians in recent years, especially young people looking for alternatives to Islam. The same can be said for the prominent role of women in indigenous missionary efforts in Thai villages, where 72 percent of the leaders are women, many in their 50s and 60s with low levels of education, leading a network of rural churches. Often men are the initial facilitators for these women to move into leadership positions, but then the female leaders recruit more females into these roles. Zurlo and Coles find that these women are able to balance traditional gender roles while paving the way for new leadership roles. For example, in one Indian movement, 60 percent of the affiliates are women and 80 to 90 percent of the leaders are women who are serving in new leadership positions, such as offering prayer for villagers.

(*Missiology*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/MIS>)

Prosperity Gospel goes global

Regardless of one’s moral stance toward Prosperity theology, its global impact cannot be dismissed as it continues to grow in influence, including within centers of political power, writes Simon Coleman (University of Toronto) in the bulletin of the *Observatoire International du Religieux* (April). A cultural logic of material and institutional growth is central to Prosperity theology, with a constant emphasis on expansion, crowd sizes, and financial accumulation. The movement blurs boundaries between religious and business practices, creating hybrid forms that



celebrate both spiritual and material success. As Prosperity teachings spread globally, they take on local characteristics and adaptations, from the “limited prosperity” in economically challenged regions to other variations influenced by local cultural understandings. The movement has grown beyond purely religious domains to exercise political influence in several countries. While American roots remain influential, Prosperity networks now flow in multiple directions, including South-to-South connections, not just North-to-South.

Such flows range from the Brazilian Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, with its Lusophone sphere of influence comprising more than 100 countries, to the Harvest Ministry, an independent Fijian Pentecostal church. Harvest “articulates its own vision for reaching out to the world, including fields ranging from Papua New Guinea (proximate) to East Africa (distant),” while pushing together “the saving of souls by Fijian missionaries and the opening up of markets for Fijian businesses.” The Prosperity Gospel, with its “seed faith” doctrine, promotes a positive, agentive spiritual self, promising material and health benefits through giving. This has resonated with working- and middle-class adherents. The movement’s adaptability and appeal lie in its ability to inspire hope and agency in diverse contexts.

(Bulletin of the Observatoire International du Religieux, <https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/bulletin/between-spirituality-and-speculation-materiality-mobility-and-prosperity-in-pentecostal-networks-english-version/>)

LDS in Spain takes on cosmopolitan character through immigration

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) continues to expand and grow more international in Spain, reports the *Salt Lake Tribune* (May 2). The church has grown more among immigrants than among native Spanish people, Mark Eddington writes. It was the late filmmaker Jose Maria Oliveira, a Latter-day Saint since 1966, who played a significant role in the church's gaining of recognition and membership in Spain, which has become the largest LDS country in Europe after the UK, with 68,000 members. Eddington cites independent researcher Matt Martinich (who tracks the church's growth and retention around the world for the site ldschurchgrowth.blogspot.com) as showing that the faith has been enjoying its most rapid European growth in decades. Membership in Spain, for instance, grew by 3.85 percent last year, the highest uptick since 2007. Martinich said most of today's converts in Spain originally hail from Latin American and African countries, with Latin Americans making up about 80 percent of the members in some congregations. "Unlike some of the negative stuff you might read about the church shrinking in Europe, that is definitely not true in Spain," Martinich said. "Instead, the church in Spain is becoming much more cosmopolitan and more based on immigrants than the native population." As Maria Brimhall, Jose Oliveira's daughter, said, "When you attend church in Spain, you see most members are from Latin [American] countries like Ecuador and Venezuela."



LDS temple in Madrid (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/collection/madrid-spain-temple-images?lang=eng>).

Chinese evangelical churches diverse and growing in France

Chinese evangelical Protestant churches are expanding in France, congregations originating from several Chinese Christian diaspora groups that shared the same faith without being homogeneous. Writing in the French ecumenical studies journal *Istina* (January–June), Eric Pires Antunes (Psalt College in Paris) reports that there are now 50 Chinese evangelical churches in France, with more than 40 of them in the Paris area. They share a strong sense of mission, even though they are a minority within the larger Chinese diaspora in France. Chinese Christians in France started gathering together in 1958 and later organized a church. However, the Chinese Protestant churches active in the country today are not the outcome of the growth of that initial group, but developed from successive mergers of different groups from the Chinese diaspora. Interestingly, only three churches are clearly Pentecostal. While the place of the Holy Spirit and the expectation that miracles may occur is strong, this does not derive from a specific theological orientation but from the inherited experience of persecution and mission in hostile environments. Most of the churches identify with an international missionary network, the Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelism (CCCOWE).



Chinese evangelical outreach in France.

Chinese Christian immigrants had cultural differences and spoke different Chinese dialects, but the shared Chinese script as well as the fact that most of the immigrants were fluent in Mandarin provided a shared foundation. Some churches prefer to gather on the basis of specific dialects as a natural channel for communication and prayer, but most continue using Mandarin as their language for public meetings, thus making them accessible to Chinese people of any provenience. Second-generation members often tend over time to prefer switching to French as the language of worship, which means that most churches have Chinese-speaking and French-speaking groups, sometimes worshipping in quite different ways (with the French-speaking branch closer to modern, Western forms of evangelical worship). Non-Chinese preachers are often welcome in the French-speaking Chinese congregations. The faithful of Chinese churches in France often spend entire Sundays together in various activities. Some churches have made great efforts to preserve Chinese language and culture, even operating their own schools for teaching Chinese to young people. They have also opened these schools to non-members and non-Chinese, which is seen as a way of doing “soft” missionary work. Antunes also observes an emphasis on proper academic theological training for ministers.

(*Istina*, <https://istina.eu/>)

Ukraine war holds implications for Protestants

Ukrainian Protestants are grappling with their historical commitment to pacifism in the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of their country, which has forced them to reassess their beliefs amid the violence, reports David Kirichenko in the *Kyiv Post* (April 13). “Protestants make up around 2–4 percent of Ukraine’s population, but their influence, especially in central and western regions, has grown through missionary work, youth programs, and humanitarian aid. Many of these churches have long emphasized peace, reconciliation, and service, making the pivot to wartime roles uncomfortable for some.” According to another journalist and expert on religion in Ukraine, Eddie Priymak, conservative denominations still tend to cling to their pacifist stance, but larger groups, such as Pentecostals, Baptists, and Seventh-day Adventists, have been reconsidering their views. One can now attend seminars on just-war theory at some churches. The historical and spiritual dimension of Russia’s war against Ukraine also represents a sensitive issue, with the Russian Orthodox Church aspiring to a monopoly on religion. Protestant communities have been targeted by Russian forces, with religious sites destroyed and believers facing persecution.

In this context, many Ukrainian Protestants feel compelled to defend their homeland, believing that the choice is now between silence and survival. As the war continues, the moral implications of taking up arms is challenging the foundations of their faith, leading to deeper reflections on violence and defense. Overall, this spiritual crisis highlights the profound impact of war on religious beliefs and practices within Ukraine's Protestant community. Meanwhile, the developments around Ukraine have led to a different kind of attitude shift among American Protestants. Historically, American evangelicals had played an important role in the growth and



Ukrainian evangelical leaders.

development of Ukrainian evangelicalism. This had continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with crucial help from the U.S. for church planting. Though initially supportive of Ukrainian evangelicals, a number of American evangelicals are now listening to the arguments of influential personalities who adopt Russian narratives, and are aligning with Donald Trump's "America First" agenda, leading to a perception of abandonment among their Ukrainian counterparts, writes Priymak in the *Kyiv Post* (April 6). Historical ties between U.S. evangelicals and Ukrainian religious communities are being strained as Trump's rhetoric and policies increasingly favor a non-supportive stance towards Ukraine.

China and Islamists in alliance for the short term?

The recent terrorist attacks by Islamic jihadists against tourists in Kashmir and the threats by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to pursue them and their backers in Pakistan have revealed an emerging marriage between radical Islam and communism, reports the *Washington Free Beacon* (April 26). "Pakistan is the classic example of this nexus," Mike Watson writes. "Its intelligence services allegedly supported the Taliban and many of the terrorist groups that attacked India in Kashmir for decades. This Easter marked the 10th anniversary of Pakistan signing up for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is one of the foundations of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative. As Islamabad sees it, jihadists are just as useful for fighting



India as the communists are for economic development.” China is attracting other Islamist partners too. Chinese companies have been caught sending Yemen’s Houthis dual-use equipment, and last week the U.S. State Department accused a Chinese satellite company of helping the Houthis find targets. Another area where Islamist and anti-Israel sentiment is meeting with Chinese interests is the Maldives, one of ISIS’s most fertile recruiting grounds, which now welcomes China’s military assistance.

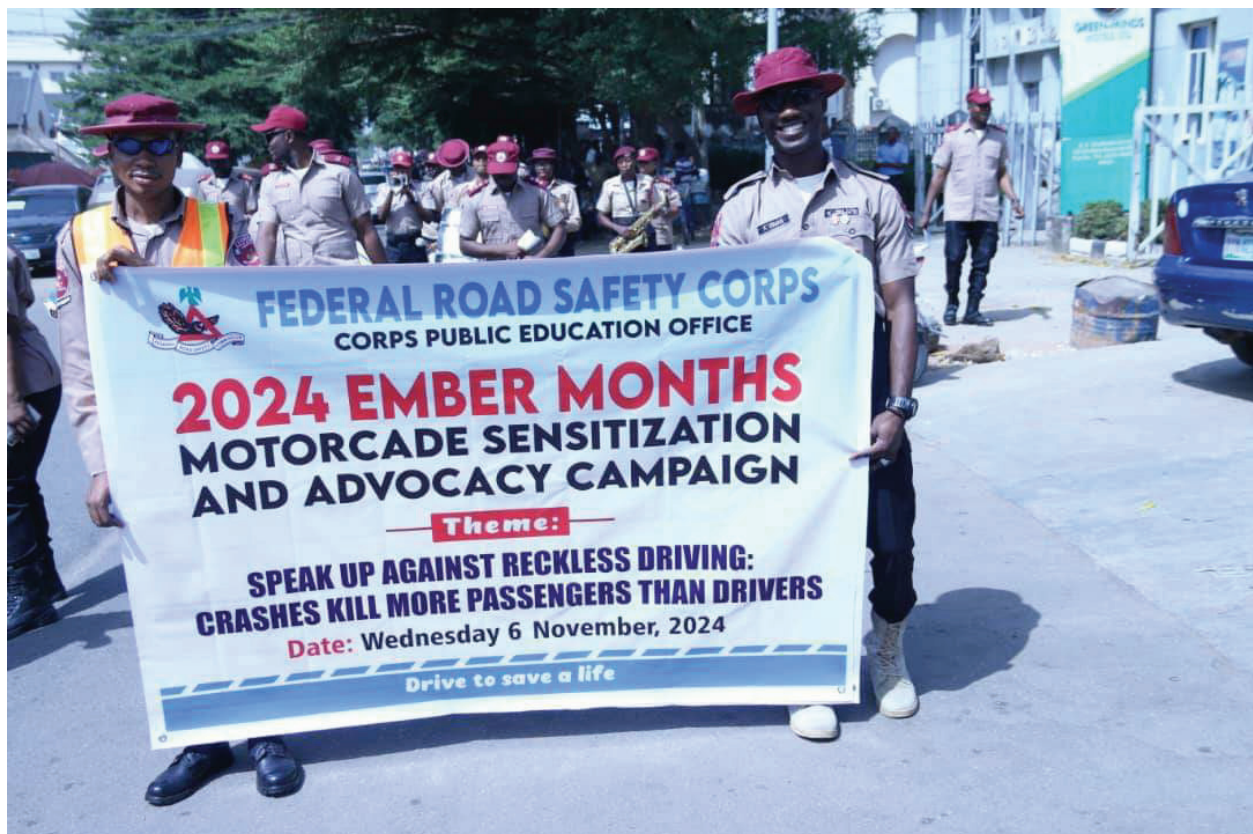
Watson adds that Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, Bangladesh’s “chief adviser,” recently pointed out in China that India’s northeastern region—much of which China claims—can only reach the ocean through Bangladesh. “This opens up a huge possibility,” Yunus said, “so this could be an extension of the Chinese economy.” Watson notes that during the Cold War, the communists and Islamists were usually at each other’s throats. Muslims from all over—including a young Osama bin Laden—flocked to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, who dreamed of militarily dominating the Middle East and imposing atheistic dictatorships. Beijing seems to have a different game plan, sharing common enemies with Islamists, such as India. The Gulf monarchies’ interests have also changed from funding many of the anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan to cultivating friendships with China. But Watson speculates that “this marriage will probably end in divorce. Muslim groups that feel more threatened by communism, such as Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama, are wary of China. To the extent that China succeeds in its ambitions to dominate Asia, it will trigger fears of onrushing atheism and persecution. Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban already occasionally attack Chinese citizens abroad.” At the same time,

many of the Gulf states are trying to deradicalize Islam and cut off funding for the more harmful strands of the faith.

(*Washington Free Beacon*, <https://freebeacon.com/national-security/a-communist-islamist-axis-puts-india-and-america-in-its-crosshairs/>)

“Ember months” in Nigeria taking on Pentecostal fervor

The belief in Nigeria that there are months of the year particularly marked by demonic forces has been influenced by a combination of Pentecostal and indigenous African beliefs, writes Nduka Udeagha in the *Journal of Religion in Africa* (online in April). What are called the “ember months,” marking the end of the year, are associated with disastrous occurrences and demonic forces, bringing about general fear and unease among Nigerians. The belief was originally influenced by the indigenous religion of the Yoruba people, where the calendar was based on this tribe’s belief in the movement of celestial bodies, such as the sun and the moon, and their effect on agriculture and other aspects of social life. These beliefs were imposed on the Gregorian calendar, where the last four months of the year were named after numbers rather than Roman gods and events, with their etymological ending in “ember” in Nigerian. The belief that the ember months were a time of jinxes and misfortune involved beliefs in a supreme deity, ancestors, spirits, divinities, and forces, the latter three of which can be evil as well as good.



The introduction and growth of Pentecostalism, but especially African Initiated Churches (AIC), led to interpretations that these spiritual entities had malign intents and purposes. Udeagha writes that recent spiritual warfare teachings from prominent Pentecostal churches and evangelists (such as Daniel Chika Okpara of the Shining Light Christian Center in Lagos, Apostle Joshua Selman of Eternity Network International, and Pastor David Ogbueli of Dominion City) have focused on the ember months as a time to seek special protection and ministry against evil spirits. Udeagha writes that these churches have intensified a fear of the ember months among Nigerians, who already saw them as full of dangerous occurrences, from car accidents to untimely deaths. Social media has only spread and popularized the linkages between such occurrences and spiritual forces, providing often vivid and lurid video feeds of misfortunes, along with advice and information on remedies, special prayers, and vigils to ward off these influences. Udeagha concludes that more attention should be given to how the popularization of the ember months shapes security concerns and key spheres of Nigerian social life, particularly the way Pentecostalism intersects and conflicts with Islam in the country.

(*Journal of Religion in Africa*, <https://brill.com/view/journals/jra/>)

Filipino new religious movements feeling political influence and heat

New religious movements in the Philippines are having an impact on politics, but they are also likely to feel the repercussions of this contentious election year, writes Yuchen Ma in the online journal *Religions* (April 7). While the Philippines is still a strongly Catholic country, new religious movements (NRMs), often based in Christianity (unlike other countries), have risen to include about 10 percent of the population. The most prominent of such movements in the Philippines remains the Iglesia ni Cristo (INC), which holds strict anti-Catholic and millennialist teachings, the Kingdom of Jesus Christ (KOJC), and the Jesus is Lord Church Worldwide. Ma also includes the charismatic El Shaddai movement in the Catholic Church as an NRM because of its structure that is independent from the hierarchical church. The focus of NRMs on mainly religious issues was broadened after the EDSA Revolution in 1986, when more institutional space was given for marginal religious groups to participate in politics and society, as seen in the recent activism among these groups on everything from anti-bureaucracy efforts to anti-gay rights.

NRMs have formed political parties and promoted their members for congressional and government positions. Yet recent developments may challenge their political position. Conflicts within the INC have exposed the fragility of the denomination's administration, leading to the "erosion of its political and social influence." NRMs may also become implicated in political corruption and conflicts through their activism. The KOJC's founder Apollo Quiboloy has come under attacks in the Philippines and the U.S., first for his support of former President Rodrigo Duterte, who was recently arrested under charges of murder, and then for being charged himself with human trafficking before turning himself in for arrest in late 2024. Ma concludes that as the 2025 midterm election approaches and as the conflict between the Duterte and Marcos families



Apollo Quiboloy, leader of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ movement.

intensifies, the Quiboloy case could create a “chilling effect” on the political engagement of other NRMs and their agendas, exacerbating “power imbalances between competing political factions.”

(*Religions*, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/16/4/471>)