

### **“Passé secularism” without religious revival?**

Scholars and observers from such secular bastions as the UK and Australia are detecting a rising spiritual interest, if not religious revival, while also acknowledging the advances of secularism. The growth of religious affiliation and participation in British cities, a search for authority and meaning among younger generations that has resulted in a self-spirituality and interest in the occult, a resurgence of religious interest among young Muslims, and a decline in “hard secularism,” together suggest, if not a “quiet revival,” then at least a new place for religion in the UK, according to Christopher Baker of Goldsmiths University. Baker presented a talk in early July on religious trends in the UK at an online seminar of the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation, which **RW** attended. There has been some controversy about claims of a “quiet revival” among young people in the UK, based on a survey last spring [see May **RW**]. But even as questions surround that study, Baker argues that there are other indicators of an uptick in spiritual and religious interest, even if the spheres of religion and secularism are both expanding. He said that a new visualization feature in the last census in the UK shows how growth in religious affiliation tracks growth in urban areas, not only in London, but in other British cities as well. In short, these cities are part of a “post-secular public sphere” in a world that is becoming “both more religious and more urban.”

Baker cited more anecdotal reports than hard data, such as journalistic accounts of young adults searching for meaning, yet feeling let down by religious leaders and showing more interest in the occult and neo-paganism than the churches. “Generation Z is trying to rebuild the world, having deconstructed it, and is looking for some point of reference and form of authority greater than ourselves,” he said. He cited research by Tariq Modood, finding that third-generation Muslims in the UK are reporting greater spiritual interest than their parents. There is also a new interest in making room for employees’ faith in the workplace, which is related to the growth of large companies in urban areas and the need to include the concerns and identities of a diverse workforce. In sum, Baker sees “hard secularism” declining, but also more divisiveness and backlash in the public sphere as some Christians apply their faith to politics.



Writing from an Australian context, sociologist Adam Possamai argues that Australia and the West in general are experiencing a churning similar to what Baker is referring to, which he calls the trend of “passé secularism.” In an article appearing in *Critical Research on Religion* (Vol. 13, No 2), Possamai writes that while there has undoubtedly been a trend of declining affiliation and attendance affecting religious institutions, religion has at the same time been making a comeback in public life and self-styled spirituality has gone mainstream. These two trends have been evident for decades and have been associated with what has been called “post-secularism,” but Possamai argues that he is seeing a different twist on these developments. Using Australia as his main case study, he writes that religious freedom and the culture wars are being used by evangelicals not only to protect themselves against discrimination (on issues like same-sex marriage, for example), but also to express their rights to discriminate against other religions (such as in its social service provisions).

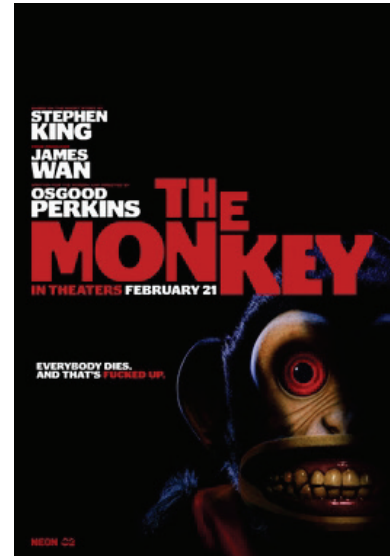
While “post-secularism” called for religious actors to enter the public square using the language of reason, religions now “bring their theological language more explicitly than before...[T]he change is about religion having developed new ways of being politically and legally savvy.” Meanwhile, Possamai writes that spirituality and mysticism have not so much undergone a resurgence as they have been democratized and are no longer seen as alternative or pejorative. All this means that, contrary to the forecasts of secularization theorists, secularism no longer is the central narrative and discourse in the public sphere. “Further, if religion is declining in the private sphere, it is partly replaced by spirituality, one that has been mainstreamed over the years.

For this reason, [Possamai] argues that despite a decrease in religious identification, we have moved towards a new phase, beyond post-secularism, to that of passé secularism.”

(*Critical Research on Religion*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/crr>)

## Movies on death take post-Christian turn

Movies with themes of death have mushroomed in just the last year, but unlike those of earlier decades, these films are in sharper conflict with Christian narratives and more likely to replace them with a “vague spirituality, nihilism and even existential humanism,” according to Joseph Holmes in *Religion Unplugged* (July 7). He adds that whereas in past decades, movies dealing with death were still framed within a Christian context, even by writers and producers who didn’t believe in these teachings but sought to appeal to a largely Judeo-Christian culture, there is far less cultural pressure to make such movies today with the increasing secularization of America. So far in 2025, there have been several movies about death, from *Presence*, *The Monkey*, *The Life of Chuck*, and *Death of a Unicorn*, to *Final Destination: Bloodlines*, *28 Years Later*, *Sinners*, and *Bring Her Back*. These films “not only deal with death but explicitly attempt to answer how we have the best life possible under its shadow.” The answers these movies give to death and dying usually concern death’s inevitability and the impossibility of cheating it.



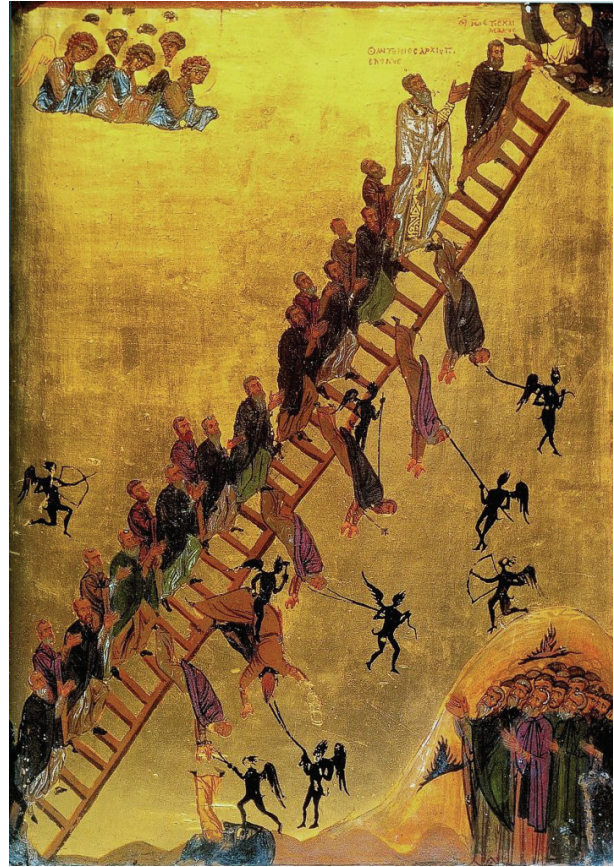
*Bring Her Back* follows a grieving mother who tries to bring back her dead daughter and nephew by killing other children and using their bodies as vessels. Holmes writes that “religion is typically looked upon badly in these films, as a form of denial of death that makes you feel better but ultimately is a bad coping mechanism. *The Monkey* constantly mocks religious people who claim to have the answers to death or downplay the question. Along with accepting the inevitability of death, recent films stress enjoying the life we have. *The Life of Chuck* and *The Monkey* make this point that in the face of death, the only response is to enjoy life now and not worry so much about tomorrow. Holmes thinks that some of these movies do hold out hope for a vague version of life after death. For example, *Death of a Unicorn* has both father and daughter having visions through the unicorns of an afterlife, where their wife and mother is alive. *Sinners* has the hero seeing a vision of his dead lover and their dead child as he’s about to die. But Holmes adds that “both of them affirm that most attempts in this life are to preserve it and that doing so can only corrupt.”

(*Religion Unplugged*, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/gospel-of-death-what-hollywoods-afterlife-looks-like-now?>)



## Deification revival in Catholicism and its ecumenical, devotional implications

In recent decades, the Catholic Church has undergone “a profound recovery of the theology of deification, also known as divinization,” that is having ecumenical repercussions, reports the *National Catholic Register* (July 16). Jonathan Liedl writes that this “ancient approach to the Christian life emphasizes that salvation isn’t merely about being freed from sin, but is more fundamentally about being united to God and sharing in his divine life.” Although never lost, teachings on deification, which is also called theosis, have been sidelined by more juridical approaches to salvation emphasizing concepts like expiation of guilt and deliverance from punishment. Theosis began its Catholic comeback in the 20th century, largely through a renewed interest in Patristic theology that was deepened by post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogue with Orthodox Christians. “Books on the topic, both academic and devotional, have surged since the mid-1990s, after St. John Paul II’s Catechism featured deification prominently. And at Catholic universities and seminaries today, *theosis* is all the rage, with one professor telling the Register he has a veritable ‘feeding frenzy on my hands,’” Liedl writes.



Paul Gavrilyuk, an Orthodox theologian teaching at the Catholic University of St. Thomas, says that as juridical language becomes secondary, the therapeutic or healing language of theosis comes to the fore. A big milestone in the revival of deification theology occurred last year, with the publication of an Oxford University handbook on the topic. Deification theology’s greatest potential impact may be in serving as common ground in ecumenical and church unity efforts between Catholics and Orthodox, which are said to be a priority of Pope Leo XIV. During a papal audience, Gavrilyuk took the opportunity to present the pope with a copy of *The Oxford Handbook of Deification* and to share with him plans for a next step in Catholic-Orthodox collaboration: a joint declaration on deification. The pontiff indicated his approval.

But Liedl adds that the likely impact of the deification revival will touch on “every aspect of the Christian life—from how Catholics pray and participate in the liturgy to how the church contends with emerging threats posed to human dignity.” Proponents say that deification shows them that Catholicism is not ultimately about rules and “being good,” but about participating in the Trinitarian life. Such beliefs are thought to enhance prayer life and participation in the

sacraments. The renewed concern with deification is also seen as challenging “a slate of contemporary practices, from attributing divine-like characteristics to AI to attempting to use cryogenics to preserve one’s genetic code indefinitely,” that run aground of Catholic teachings, Liedl adds.

(*National Catholic Register*, <https://www.ncregister.com/news/theology-of-deification-east-west-pope-leo-xiv>)

## The “secret sauce” for the Republican Jewish vote and fundraising

The success and growth of Republican fundraising and activism among American Jews suggest a significant crack in the traditional Jewish-Democratic alliance, writes David Drucker in the conservative online magazine, *The Dispatch* (July 23). In a lengthy article on the growing fortunes and influence of the Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC), Drucker writes that the second administration of President Trump has been a boon for the 40-year old organization. Started under President Reagan, the group was first named the National Jewish Coalition out of fear of discouraging Jews from affiliating with a consortium for a minority within a minority. Today the RJC “occupies rarefied air within the GOP hierarchy that few other party-aligned organizations





can claim.” “A powerful organization in politics delivers one of two things: You either deliver money or you deliver votes—and super powerful organizations deliver both...We figured out the secret sauce,” said Matt Brooks, the RJC’s long-tenured chief executive officer. The goal of RJC’s first foray into the election cycle in 2000 was to donate more than \$100,000 to the Republican presidential nominee and GOP congressional candidates. Nearly a quarter century later, the RJC’s political action committee and super PAC spent \$20 million to elect Trump and Republicans running for Senate in key states—double the \$10 million invested by the group in 2020.

One sign of the RJC’s growing influence in the party is reflected in its annual leadership summit, which most recently drew 1,500 political hopefuls compared to about 250 in 2010. “The demand from Republicans running for office...has been so high that Brooks has had to stagger invitations to the annual conference,” Drucker notes. It has been the increasingly pro-Israel stance of Republicans and the reversal of that support among Democrats that have mainly driven the burgeoning alliance. While the RJC has taken stands against populist Republicans, “whose opinions on Israel, and U.S. aid to the Jewish state, range from insufficiently supportive to outright antagonistic,” the organization has prospered in the current administration, viewing Trump as the most pro-Israel president in American history. But Trump’s comments made during his campaign, where he laid blame on the Jewish community for voting Democratic and purportedly going against their own interests, concerned some Jewish leaders. “Trump during the 2024 campaign did not single out any other religious bloc for similar scolding—just Jews,” Drucker writes. Today, new threats to this coalition are coming from the new right, with anti-Semitism rising among popular podcasters, online influencers, and other media personalities.

At the same time, the RJC has developed close ties to the evangelical community. It was on Brooks’s recommendation that Trump nominated Mike Huckabee, the former Baptist minister and Arkansas governor, to serve as U.S. ambassador to Israel. “Although even conservative Jews sometimes view American evangelicals who enthusiastically support Israel warily, Brooks is convinced it’s all upside—for Jews in the U.S. and the Jewish state. So the RJC long ago made engagement with American evangelicals a strategic priority,” Drucker writes. There are data showing that performance among Jewish voters has been a historic success, due to the money and manpower invested by the RJC. Fox News exit polls indicated that Trump received 33 percent of the Jewish vote nationwide, while the nonpartisan Pew Research Center pegged Trump’s support among Jewish voters even higher, at 35 percent. “But to understand the real and consequential movement toward Trump by Jewish voters in 2024, you have to look under the hood, at the exit polls of battleground states and local precincts with significant populations of Jewish voters. That’s where Trump made his mark with a cohort usually elusive for Republicans,” Drucker concludes.

(*The Dispatch*, <https://thedispatch.com/article/republican-jewish-coalition-history-success/>)

## CURRENT RESEARCH

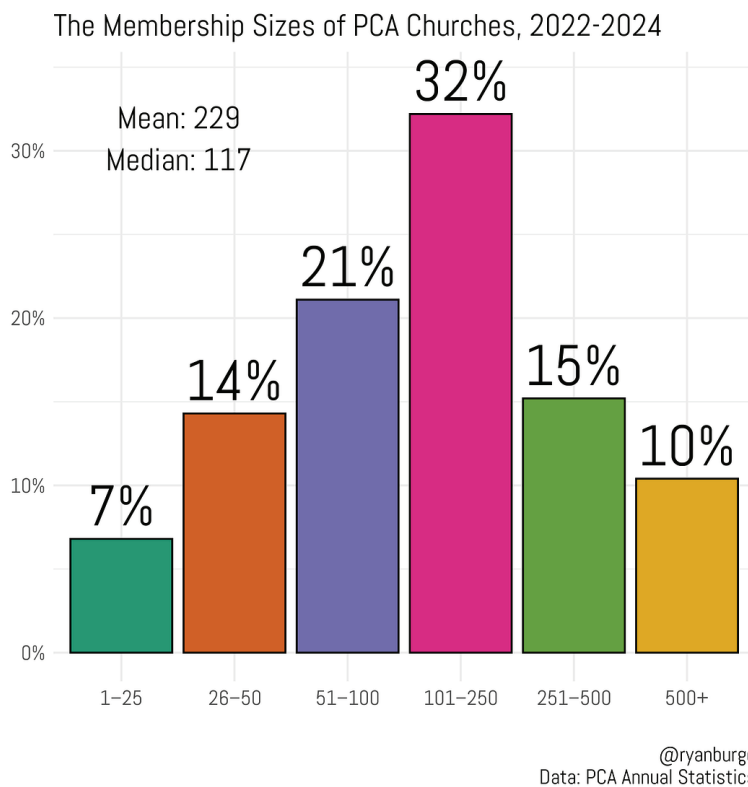
• **While the growing number of Christian yoga practitioners see mystical experiences as part of their practice, they don't necessarily see the Hindu-based bhakti yoga tradition to be relevant, a new survey finds.** Bhakti yoga based on the Bhagavad Gita has been the most prevalent form of yoga in the West, with practitioners of different faiths valuing its physical and meditative aspects that draw on Hindu elements. In a study published in the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* (Vol. 37, No. 37), Allyson Huval sought to find out how Christians deal with the spiritual teachings and practices of bhakti yoga, such as prayers to deities, hypothesizing that many apply Christian interpretations to these teachings. In a survey using a convenience sample of 358 practitioners of Christian yoga, she found 60 percent of her respondents agreeing to some extent that their practice was mystical and that Christian yoga in general is mystical. But 28 percent disagreed that Christian yoga is mystical and 24 percent disagreed that their own practice was mystical. The overwhelming majority agreed that meditation was central to their practice. While most of the leaders of Christian yoga organizations consider bhakti to be part of their practice of yoga, only 4 percent of the respondents either selected bhakti and/or jnana as a form of yoga that they practice. Huval concludes that practitioners of Christian yoga “skewed more in favor of their Christian devotion than their interest in their yoga practice.”

(*Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs/vol37/iss1/32/>)



● **At a time when other evangelical bodies are declining, the conservative Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) has maintained its membership and even shown some growth, which may be a result of the denomination’s retention of members through infant baptism.**

In his newsletter *Graphs about Religion* (July 31), Ryan Burge reports that the 400,000-member denomination, with less than 1,700 churches, is growing at a steady pace, adding 1.5 to 2 percent to its membership rolls each year. Burge analyzes PCA denominational statistics, specifically looking at church reports from 2022, 2023, or 2024. (The data reflected an unusually high compliance rate, with nearly 90 percent of all the churches in the database furnishing information in 2022 or later.) He found that roughly 75 percent of PCA churches have 250 or fewer members (not attenders), a distribution of church sizes that is close to the national average—“a few very small, a few very large, but a whole bunch in the middle of the range.” It is large churches that are driving growth in the denomination, with many in the other sizes staying relatively stagnant. “In fact, 42 percent of all the reporting churches say that they have lost more than 10 members or gained no more than 10 members,” Burge writes. “However, the silver lining is this: about the same percentage (41 percent) have reported a gain that is between 11 and 50 new members.”



He finds that once a church has a membership beyond 50, growth is much more likely than stagnation or decline. The robust baptism data from the PCA shows how the denomination has been able to retain membership, even if that retention is not spread evenly among the churches. While nearly half of PCA churches conducted less than 3 infant baptisms last year, 45 percent conducted at least a half dozen. Burge also calculated the total church income of each PCA congregation (which includes not only offerings but such sources as endowments and rental income). In eliminating the 1 percent of outliers, he

found that for every additional member in a PCA church, the total income rises by about \$3,500. As might be expected, larger churches have bigger income streams. Yet these large churches don’t always follow that pattern. “Some churches are membership rich and cash poor; others are in the exact opposite scenario.” For instance, First Presbyterian in Chattanooga, TN, reports 1,185 members with an income of \$7.75 million, while Spanish River Presbyterian in Boca Raton, FL, has 1,314 members but only an income of \$1.7 million.



## Women deacons in Orthodoxy—hidden yet active?

Deaconesses are active, growing, and playing key roles in Orthodox parishes, yet they aren't very visible or publicly acknowledged, writes Andreas Westergren in the Belgian journal *Exchange* (online in July). With some fanfare, a deaconess was ordained in an Orthodox church in Africa last year, with observers noting its rare occurrence [see Vol. 39, No. 7 **RW**]. Historically, and in theory, Eastern and Oriental Orthodoxy (which rejects the council of Chalcedon) does allow for deaconesses in a limited way, and advocates of greater roles for women in Roman Catholicism have held up Orthodoxy as a model for such a change. Westergren (of Lund University) conducted ethnographic research in three Swedish Syriac Orthodox parishes, which are in the Oriental branch of Orthodoxy. These parishes, numbering 48 in the country, stand at the center of community life and family-based networks for this ethnic and immigrant group. He found that the revival of women's choirs in these parishes formed the context for diaconal ministries and were where ordained women deacons were found. While male deacons in the parishes are publicly called "deacons" and serve at the altar along with priests (where there is a fluid boundary between them, since a priest is required to be a deacon first), the deaconess is considered more of a "helper" in the liturgy from the choir.

The terms for deacons and these female liturgy helpers are similar in the Syriac language ("samoso" for deacon and "samesto" for women liturgy helpers), but there are more levels and terms for deacons (such as chanter and subdeacon) that are not used for women. Westergren adds that "there definitely are deaconesses in these parishes. The only question is what they are. What



Ordination of deaconesses and deacons in Syriac Orthodox Church.

seems evident is that their function is primarily liturgical and not ‘diaconal’ in the modern sense. For both women and men, the diaconate is a priestly, liturgical office that prepares a few men for the priesthood, but nevertheless is not a simple stepping stone, because it serves its own rationale, and it is possible to stay a deacon.” Recent surveys find that there have been just as many ordinations of women as men in Syriac parishes, even though the term “deaconess” is disputed by some and women deaconesses cannot serve at or even approach the altar, even though non-deacon men can do so.

Women are ordained collectively in choirs while men are ordained separately, and it is within these choirs that Westergren sees women playing a diaconal “brokering” role between the priest and the parish. Since children can also partake as deacons, women in the choirs provide them with instruction and opportunities and resources to enter the priesthood. “Whether they are male or female, the deacons serve as a middle ground between lay and priestly status, and between family and congregation.” Younger generations, particularly young women, criticize the remaining gender imbalance, with some leaving the church. Westergren concludes that even in such a secular environment as Sweden, “it is clear that both the altar servants and the choir serve as means to integrate the younger generation into the traditions of the church.”

(*Exchange*, <https://brill.com/view/journals/exch/>)

## Progressive change in Old Catholic movement making for new divisions

The Old Catholic movement is experiencing new divisions over its continued liberalization, writes William Tighe in the magazine *Touchstone* (Summer). Old Catholics broke away from the Roman Catholic Church over such doctrines as papal infallibility in the late 19th century and saw themselves as a bridge to Anglicans and Eastern Orthodoxy. When these churches were excommunicated from Rome, this led to the formation of such groups as the U.S.- and Canadian-based Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC) and the Old Catholic churches of Germany, Poland (known as the Polish Catholic Church), Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands, with their center and bishop’s see based in Utrecht. Only numbering around 50,000 to 60,000 members, the churches opposed such liberal reforms as women’s ordination and LGBTQ ordinations until the late 1990s.



Old Catholic priest Maria Kubin

In recent years, as the churches have embraced these progressive changes, with each of the Anglican and then Old Catholic churches practicing women's ordination (except for the Polish Catholic Church) and gradually supporting LGBTQ rights, the PNCC has cut ties with them, resulting in its own expulsion by Old Catholic bishops in 2003. In 2023, the Austrian Old Catholic Church was the first to elect a woman bishop, Maria Kubin, a psychotherapist and former Roman Catholic—an action that led the PNCC to break ties even with its Polish counterpart for maintaining unity with other Old Catholics (even though it did not practice such innovations). Tighe notes that last May, the Swiss Old Catholics were the first to elect a practicing gay priest to be their bishop, an action that solidifies the liberal identity that Old Catholics have been gravitating to for decades.

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

## **New wave of anti-Christian aggression felt in the Middle East**

Christians in the Middle East are coming under renewed aggression, according to reports, whether from secular, Muslim, or Jewish authorities. *Commonweal* magazine (July 28) provides a running account of recent violent incidents. The latest wave of mass violence began in late June, when an extremist Islamic suicide bomber opposed to the new Syrian leadership opened fire and then bombed worshippers at St. Elias Greek Orthodox Church outside Damascus, killing 38 of them. In mid-July, Jewish settlers from Taybeh, the oldest Christian village in the West Bank, set fire to the fifth-century Greek Orthodox church of St. George. Calls for help from the parish priest and church members were ignored by the Israeli authorities, leading to protests from Orthodox and Catholic leaders, and even objections from the evangelical U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee. A day after the violence at Taybeh, a mob attacked and burned St. Michael Melkite Greek Catholic Church in the southern Syrian town of al-Sura al-Kabira. It is still unclear who was behind the attack on the church. Al-Sura is in an area where clashes between the Syrian military and Druze militias have become increasingly frequent in a cycle of acts of retribution. On July 17, an Israeli Defense Force (IDF) weapon struck Holy Family Catholic Church in Gaza, killing three people and wounding nine others. The IDF attributed the incident to errant mortar rounds that misfired in the direction of the church.

The blog *Public Orthodoxy* (July 23) focuses on the settler attacks in Taybeh, noting that the ancient Christian town and its Church of St. George have been subject to decades of encroachments from Jewish settlers. Mae Elise Cannon and Christopher Huth note that the attacks on the town, which is under the control of both the Palestinian Authority and the IDF, “increase the risk of further erasure of Palestinian life, and are emblematic of the broader pattern of homogenization of the Holy Land, whose religious pluralism is being increasingly erased.” The Christian population of Palestine is dwindling, with Christians making up just around 1 percent of the population in the Palestinian territories, a decline from roughly 10 percent in 1948. While some of this decline has usually been attributed to Muslim growth and discrimination, the authors point to “targeted violence by Israeli settlers, discriminatory policies, and the





West Bank town of Taybeh

confiscation of Christian-owned land.” They argue that beyond the settlements, the Christian community within the Old City of Jerusalem, such as the ancient Armenian Quarter, is “under existential threat. A controversial land deal and legal proceedings could strip the Armenian Patriarchate of 25 percent of its land.” In the online magazine *The Conversation* (August 1), criminologist Arie Perliger attributes the growing violence against Palestinian communities to the growth of settler militias made of religious Zionists who are seeking to fill the void left by the IDF as it fights on other fronts.

(*Commonweal*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/amar-christians-middle-east-israel-syria-gaza-pizzaballa>; *Public Orthodoxy*, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2025/07/23/taybeh-under-attack/>; *The Conversation*, <https://religionnews.com/2025/08/01/the-quiet-war-whats-fueling-israels-surge-of-settler-violence-and-the-lack-of-state-response/>)

### **New Islamic endowments emerging for funerals, other charitable purposes**

Traditional Islamic *waqf* (endowment) principles are being adapted with modern technology to provide communal assistance for end-of-life expenses and other charitable purposes, reports Sharene Lee in *Salaam Gateway* (July 14). Historically, *waqf* institutions played a crucial role in

Islamic societies, funding much of the educational, healthcare, and social infrastructure—including funeral arrangements. The article explores the modern revival of *waqf* through digital platforms and mutual protection models, such as online micro-endowments and *tabarru*-based funds, which pool contributions for communal support. (*Tabarru* refers to voluntary, charitable donations, but the term is



used today in Islamic insurance and finance for contributions to a common fund that helps members in need.) They are not necessarily all *waqf* in name, but reflect the same principles confronted with new situations. Lee writes that today, with families living far apart, “support networks are usually non-existent or stretched past their breaking point. What was once instinctive must now be rebuilt with intent and new tools.”

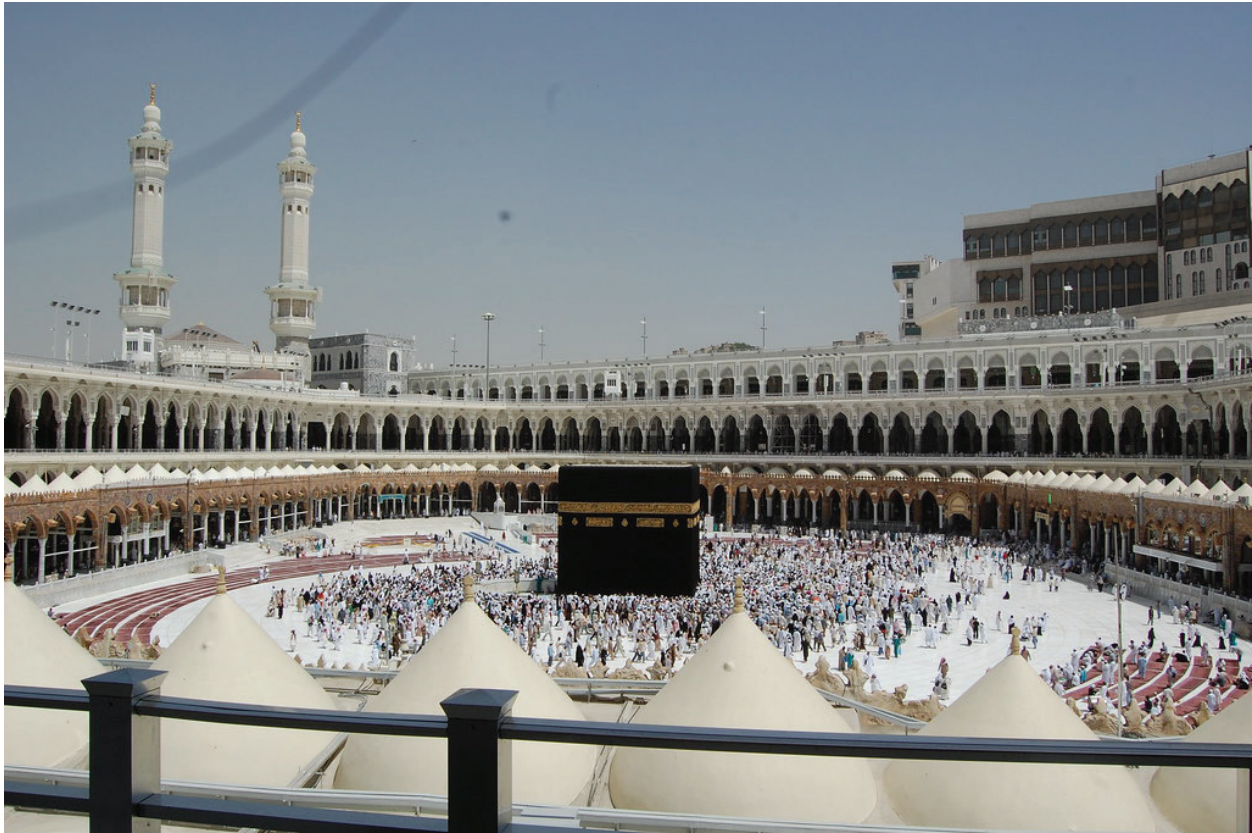
Initiatives include platforms like Waqf World in Indonesia and a national platform by Saudi Arabia’s General Authority for Awqaf, focusing on education, housing, and funeral care. Funds relying on voluntary contributions for mutual support are to be found in Islamic cooperatives in Malaysia and Indonesia, and blockchain experiments in Turkey. The LifeDAO (TLD), with offices in the United States and Singapore, launched a Life Protection Benefit—a global mutual fund aligned with *waqf* principles—to support members’ loved ones upon death. Mutual protection models are quietly gaining ground and may open a way to re-normalize communal responsibility through “building systems that are borderless but grounded, digital but human, accessible yet intentional.”

(*Salaam Gateway*, <https://salaamgateway.com/story/a-modern-revival-of-waqf-for-funeral-support>)

## Saudi Arabia embraces economics of pilgrimage

Saudi Arabia is transforming religious tourism into a significant economic driver through its Vision 2030 plan, aiming to diversify the economy, reports Muhammad Ali Bandial in *Salaam Gateway* (June 27). In 2024, over 18.5 million pilgrims visited the kingdom (16.9 million for Umrah and 1.61 million for Hajj), and the goal is to welcome 30 million Umrah pilgrims





annually by 2030—since Umrah can be done at any time of the year, in contrast with Hajj. Religious tourism contributes approximately \$12 billion annually to Saudi Arabia’s economy, making up nearly 20 percent of the non-oil economy and around 7 percent of the total GDP. The sector supported over 936,000 jobs in 2023, with that number projected to rise to 1.6 million by 2030. Saudi Arabia has significantly modernized its religious tourism infrastructure, with advancements like e-visa registrations, climate-controlled tents, and real-time crowd monitoring. Efforts to extend stays and integrate cultural and leisure activities aim to boost visitor spending and reduce seasonality. To maximize economic benefits, Saudi Arabia encourages pilgrims to extend stays by combining religious rites with visits to cultural destinations like Jeddah’s Al-Balad, Taif, or the Red Sea coast. This “Umrah plus” strategy aims to increase average stays from five to nine nights and boost per capita spending beyond \$1,000.

(*Salaam Gateway*, <https://salaamgateway.com/story/how-saudi-arabia-is-turning-religious-tourism-into-a-growth-engine>)

### **Hindu heritage cities in India challenge religious pluralism**

Amidst India’s temple revival, cities are being redesigned to reflect Hindu heritage and nationalist ideas, writes Huzaifa Riyaz in *Jacobin* magazine (Summer). The city of Ayodhya, the centerpiece of the temple revival, is also a model of this attempt by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) “to reshape public space in line with Hindu nationalist ideology. What appears as



heritage restoration is in fact the construction of a singular religious identity at the expense of the pluralism that once defined Indian cities,” Riyaz writes. In Ayodhya, the Ram Path is a pilgrimage in infrastructure. From the moment a visitor enters, they are immersed in an architecture of devotion, saffron banners, LED-lit arches, sculptures from Hindu epics, and curated “heritage” facades. The urban space is choreographed like a temple procession, reinforcing one message: this is the sacred heart of the nation, and you are



Ayodhya, India

walking through its myth. While Ayodhya is seen as a new “Hindu civilizational capital,” other cities, such as Varanasi and Ujjain, have also become showcases for this new kind of “sacred landscape,” Riyaz writes. These cities are drawing many tourists, which is part of state efforts to join religious tourism and economic growth.

The facelifts that these cities undergo, usually in states run by the Hindu nationalist BJP, are intended to monumentalize Hindu religious sites while removing the urban clutter that is seen as conflicting with these urban visions. “Temples are magnified, processional routes widened, and symbolic architecture installed. Simultaneously, Muslim shrines, Dalit neighborhoods, and mixed-use communities are marginalized. The message is clear: the city belongs to one tradition, one identity.” Riyaz argues that these developments signal a shift in how cities function. “Traditionally, cities are places of diversity, negotiation, and memory. In India’s temple towns, they are becoming tools of civilizational assertion. Tourism boards, real estate developers, and religious trusts align with state governments to push a single narrative.” Under the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Smart Cities Mission promised to modernize India’s urban core through digitization, efficiency, and “world-class” amenities. Yet beneath this technocratic language lies a political blueprint. These cities are not only being upgraded; they are being rewritten to reflect the priorities of a Hindu nationalist state and a neoliberal economy,” Riyaz writes.

(*Jacobin*, <https://jacobin.com/2025/07/india-hindutva-modi-urban-infrastructure>)

## Findings & Footnotes

■ Despite its secular origins, AI deeply intertwines with religious narratives, practices, and meaning-making processes, according to an introductory article in a special thematic issue of the journal *Religion* (July) on this topic. In the introduction to the issue, which offers several case studies on the intersections between this new technology and religion, Boris Rähme (Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Trento, Italy) and Inken Prohl (Heidelberg University, Germany) develop the concept of “formations analogous to religion” as a framework for analyzing AI’s religious and cultural implications. This concept describes hybrid phenomena that combine both religious and secular elements while constituting something new. The authors argue that AI’s cultural significance is heavily mediated through religious language and symbolism. Tech leaders like Sam Altman refer to AGI (artificial general intelligence) as a “magic intelligence in the sky.” Such religious rhetoric serves both promotional and mystifying functions.



Rähme and Prohl identify three key points of convergence in current AI-religion scholarship: the mystification of AI in narratives and discourses, which can obscure ethical issues and reinforce power imbalances; the integration of AI into religious practices, which can lead to novel formations analogous to religion; and the re-enchantment of the digitally suffused world via AI’s perceived autonomy and agency, which creates new modes of human heteronomy. The article synthesizes existing scholarship by looking at two issues within the AI-religion intersection: how religious actors engage with AI technologies, and how AI itself becomes an object of religious meaning-making. AI’s integration into religious practices is illustrated by the adoption of AI-based technologies by some religious institutions (e.g., chatbots and humanoid robots, particularly in Japan, for use in religious settings), AI-enhanced religious apps (e.g., mindfulness, Bible study, or spiritual optimization apps), and other uses.

AI as an object of religious meaning-making is found in discourses about AI as the path to mankind’s salvation, narratives closely aligned with posthumanist and transhumanist thought, or the perception of AI as a source of knowledge, creativity, and even meaning-making (with the development of generative AI). According to the authors, the intersection of AI and religion represents a particularly timely area of inquiry, fundamentally challenging established sociological concepts and raising profound questions about human agency and societal accountability. AI directly challenges Max Weber’s concept of the “disenchantment of the world.” One can also observe the erosion of human autonomy through “chosen” delegation. Humans elect to delegate complex decision-making to opaque systems. While this choice may appear rational for efficiency or convenience, it carries profound long-term consequences for human agency and critical thinking. For more information about this issue of *Religion*, visit: <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rrel20>

■ The current issue of the *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* (Vol. 18, No. 2) devotes over 100 pages to the Order of Nine Angels (ONA), a violent occult neo-Nazi group whose murky development defies easy summary (either by **RW** or probably even AI). The difficulty of knowing how the group started and where it is headed is integral to its occult nature, even though ONA did go mainstream and public in 2020 and then again in 2023 during trials of its followers engaged in terrorism. With few complete studies of the group, author Andrew Palella characterizes it as drawing on occult neo-Nazism, but also Satanist and extremist Islamic concepts and practices, including training in armed warfare, in its drive to destroy Western society. This amalgam came together during the 1970s under its founder David Myatt, who is said to also go under the name Anton Long (which Myatt denies). Myatt claims he has no connection with ONA, but by conducting a textual analysis of his translations of occult texts and the writings of Long, Palella argues that they are one and the same person.



Most articles on ONA cite its terrorist and “neo-fascist” identity that aligns it with a host of other extremist, neo-fascist groups. Rather than being based in anti-Semitism like other neo-Nazi groups, ONA condemns Israel, the U.S., and the West in general for leading a “de-evolutionary” path away from elite cultural, racial, and spiritual progress (called the “Galactic Imperium”). The author argues that the spiritual and occult components are essential in trying to make sense of ONA’s intended and self-consciously “labyrinthine” trajectory. He writes that ONA’s violent aspects are at its “obscured inner-core,” masked by other esoteric teachings, fiction, poetry, and artwork found in its 10,000-page *Labrynthos Mythologicus*. Myatt has moved in and out of extremist Islam and even the far right, allegedly now rejecting violence, but the “mythos and politics of the Order of Nine Angels lives on with or without him,” Palella writes. The vast output of the ONA continues to initiate followers into what is called the esoteric “Seven-Fold-Sinister Way,” whose final destination can result in lone-wolf terrorist and criminal actions, evident in recent violent incidents in Canada, the UK, and Russia. The ONA was implicated in a failed plot to destroy Maryland’s economic infrastructure in 2023. Whatever its organizational fate, Palella concludes that ONA is “not a centrally organized group or network but rather a unique and extremist modern esoteric tradition, and a virulently reproducing idea could never be designated as such.” For more information on this article, visit: <https://msupress.org/journals/journal-for-the-study-of-radicalism/>

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

Supposedly “the healthiest human on the planet” and “the most biologically measured person in history,” **Bryan Johnson** now intends to sell his startup, Blueprint (launched in 2021), and to focus on



founding a new **Don't Die** religion. After selling his web payments company, Braintree, for \$800 million in 2013, Johnson split both from his wife and his lifelong Latter-day Saints faith. The 47-year-old millionaire spends \$2 million annually on extreme biohacking to slow and even reverse aging. For that purpose, Johnson follows an extremely strict routine involving taking over 50 vitamins and minerals daily, rigorous exercise and sleep schedules, as well as constant monitoring of biomarkers, among other things. He has been the subject of a Netflix documentary, *Don't Die: The Man Who Wants to Live Forever*. He had first announced his religion in an interview with *MIT Technology Review*, explaining that he plans to expand beyond his personal biohacking into an organized spiritual practice, compatible with existing religions and structured like support groups (such as Alcoholics Anonymous). The new religion will include opening rituals, mantras, and sessions where people apologize to their bodies for harmful behaviors. The religion's central tenet treats the human body as divine and requiring reverence and care, which reframes the relationship between mind and body and elevates physical existence to a sacred status.

Johnson is convinced that "there's going to be a shift toward religion in the coming years," with AI's progress creating "additional questions on who we are." Positioning his movement as humanity's response to existential AI risks, in a recent *Wired* magazine interview he elaborated that he views AI as an existential turning point for humanity, bringing us to an "event horizon" where super-intelligent AI will fundamentally transform or potentially threaten human existence. His longevity efforts and ideological framework are designed to help humans navigate this transition by prioritizing survival above traditional concerns like wealth or status. Beyond personal longevity, Johnson envisions a preparation for humanity's transition into what he calls "computational systems"—essentially digital immortality through AI. It is clear that Johnson sees himself not just as a longevity enthusiast, but as a civilizational



architect trying to establish the ideological framework for humanity's next evolutionary phase, comparing himself to figures such as Jesus, Muhammad, Confucius, and Marx. Unlike typical entrepreneurs thinking in decades, Johnson is explicitly focused on how he'll be remembered in the 25th century—as someone who helped humanity navigate the critical transition period of the early 21st century, when AI emerged and death became optional. (Source: *Wired* magazine, July 21; *MIT Technology Review*, May; *The Guardian*, January 2)