

## **Zionism, charges of antisemitism dividing American right**

Antisemitism within the American right has become the most divisive and contested issue among conservatives today, drawing pro-Israel evangelicals and Jews into more antagonistic relationships with other segments of the movement. “For more than four decades, the alliance between evangelicals and pro-Israel conservatives has been an almost uniquely powerful force in American politics,” Jonathan Mahler writes in the *New York Times Magazine* (January 18), “shaping not only foreign policy but also domestic elections, with donations flowing freely every election cycle from pro-Israel Christian groups and individuals to pro-Israel Republican candidates.” Today, however, evangelicals, especially younger ones, have different views about Israel, as do non-evangelical Christians such as Catholics (and Eastern Orthodox). Along with many on the left, these conservative Christians became increasingly critical of Israel’s actions during the war with Hamas. They argue that “America is facing too many urgent crises at home—like the cost of living and illegal immigration—to justify sending billions of dollars a year to Israel,” Mahler writes.

While the Trump administration has maintained its pro-Israel stance, a growing number of conservative Christians have been embracing a “post-dispensationalist” (or “postmillennialist”) stance that discards Zionism and the role of Israel in biblical prophecy while imbibing a Christian nationalism that draws on Reformed and integralist Catholic thought. Charlie Kirk, who was evangelical and pro-Zionist, had exposed the faultlines over Zionism and antisemitism among young conservatives, convening a focus group on Israel last summer in hopes of reconciling the two sides. But now, even though Kirk’s Turning Point USA (TPUSA) burgeoned after his subsequent assassination last year, the Christian political organization and its related campus chapters have been experiencing the same conflict as that found in the wider conservative movement. “For many young conservatives, Kirk’s assassination was bitter confirmation of left-wing intolerance and a spur to deeper radicalization. Staring into an abyss of leadership, some of Kirk’s mourners flocked toward Jesus Christ; others were seduced by quite different forces, as antisemitism and conspiracism engulfed the right,” Simon van Zuylen-Wood writes in *New York magazine* (January 12). “A political moment that started with an



overwhelming show of unity devolved day by day into something more like civil war, ensnaring everyone from the vice-president down to TPUSA's campus leaders."

Van Zuylen-Wood writes that Kirk's absence is being felt at colleges, "where imitators and detractors alike have been rushing to fill the void." An example of such attempts is "One Conversation at a Time," a one-man show organized by 19-year-old Auburn University freshman and evangelical Christian Brilyn Hollyhand. Yet Hollyhand encountered a more hostile atmosphere than the one he had experienced at the pro-Israel Kirk meetings, as students attacked his support of Israel and his standard conservative views on immigration. "It does not take a great deal of internet research to deduce whose rhetoric all this echoes," van Zuylen-Wood writes. "The day after Kirk's murder, a Christian-nationalist pastor named Joel Webbon posted on X, 'You killed Charlie. Now you get Nick. Enjoy.'" Nick Fuentes and his "Groyper" followers' "brand of edgelord-flavored antisemitism" and far-right Christian nationalism have maintained their staying power among young people. Van Zuylen-Wood quotes another conservative campus leader, who acknowledged that, while no one wants the label, the Groypers "are, you know, I mean, they're a lot like me. They're a lot like any number of folks in our age group. They go into positions of power. They become leaders in chapters of the College Republicans."

## Rosary assuming symbolic role in MAGA movement

The MAGA movement, which has been known to adapt religious practices and devotions to their politics, is reviving but also refashioning the rosary, writes Matthew Walther in a critical article in the *Wall Street Journal* (January 8). “Social-media platforms are suddenly full of images of the rosary being treated with all the gravity of a fashion accessory and discussed in language that makes it sound like a cross between a MAGA hat and aromatherapy. Some call this evidence of a religious revival among younger Americans. To me, it suggests confusion about what religious devotion is,” Walther writes. It may have started with an online conversation about rosary beads between Megyn Kelly and the right-wing activist Jack Posobiec, who presented her with the rosary. Posobiec had just appeared at AmericaFest, a conservative political gathering in Phoenix, “brandishing a rosary above his head in defiance amid the strains of license-free hype music while KISS-style pyrotechnics exploded on stage behind him.” What one might call the “MAGA-fication of the rosary follows the logic of contemporary influencer culture. Instead of a quiet daily struggle carried on invisibly, what matters is the beads themselves and the emotions they supposedly generate. A devotional object is repurposed as ‘content’: a prop meant to signal political or cultural identity and vague attitudes such as defiance of one’s enemies. The rosary, in short, is becoming a brand,” Walther writes.

He argues that traditional rosary practices are different than the MAGA portrayal, demanding “patience and self-abnegation. Its consolations tend to be quiet. To acquire them is the work of a lifetime...It isn’t an inducement to action, much less an expression of collective political will, but an act of surrender.” Walther writes that the use of the rosary as a “brand is a new style of conservative Christian politics. This ‘based’ political Christianity is premised on a tawdry, sensationalized understanding of religion and the



unmistakable decline of the Christian-inflected social conservatism that once found a home in the Republican Party. Its thrusting imperiousness isn’t confidence but an admission of defeat.” With Donald Trump and Republican leaders soft-peddling religious-right issues—from abortion to in vitro fertilization—Walther argues that as the movement has been losing “its ability to shape events, it [has begun] to overrate the importance of symbols. What matters is no longer the possibility of influencing national political life in concrete ways but the repurposing of religious impulses into something that can feel relevant in a theatrical, attention-driven culture.”



## Pope Leo brings conciliatory leadership and American-style management to Vatican

Pope Leo XIV has provided clues to how he governs the Vatican and Curia and manages international affairs, with his style differing in significant ways from Pope Francis, according to two reports. *Commonweal* magazine (January 8) reports that some of Leo's recent appointments are reversing some of Francis's reforms and applying American management practices to the Vatican. His appointment of the new president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM), Msgr. Thibault Verny, is seen as correcting the problems of the PCPM—especially the lack of clarity on its mission, writes Massimo Faggioli. In September, Leo appointed a new prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops: Archbishop Filippo Iannone from Naples, a canon lawyer who was deeply involved in expanding the procedures for investigating abuse. Leo's most visible change has been his strengthening of the Curia, trying to improve its morale, in contrast to Francis's critical stance towards this governing body. He is more concerned about the institutional mission of the Vatican dicasteries. "This reflects Leo's different understanding of the role of the Roman Curia as part of a Church theology that is more institutional, less movement-like, and less personal," Faggioli writes.

He adds that "Leo has introduced, in his gentle style, a different way to govern the Vatican—one that is more mindful of the need to work together with all those in the hierarchy. It may signal the beginning of what could be a profound change in the way the Curia works." Faggioli cites political scientist Thomas Reese who said, "It is time for American management practices in the Vatican. If an American pope cannot do that, we will have more scandals in the future." Pope Leo also appears to be departing from Francis's more activist style when it comes to international



peacebuilding and domestic issues, according to the online magazine *Arc* (January 13). “Pope Leo seems to be extending his consensus-based approach to intra-Catholic disputes into the realm of international relations. He will make the Roman Catholic Church a voice for peace but, unlike his predecessor, will leave it to others to figure out how to achieve that peace. Pope Leo likely hopes this will allow him to steer the church in a peaceful direction without upsetting potential critics. Based on early pushback to his efforts, however, Pope Leo may have to decide between Pope Francis’s forceful peacebuilding and a more conservative retrenchment,” Peter Henne writes.

He cites Leo’s recent statement in response to the U.S. military intervention in Venezuela, which “likely left both its supporters and opponents unsatisfied,” calling for the “good of the beloved Venezuelan people,” “the sovereignty of the country,” and “special attention to the poorest.” While saying that the church desired peace, he neither supported an extra-legal strike by the U.S. nor issued denunciations. Henne observes that Leo has extended his mixed stance on intra-Catholic issues, such as his siding with conservatives on holding the Latin Mass while continuing Francis’s interfaith and ecumenical work, to international conflict. Back in May, the pope offered to “host or facilitate peace talks among countries at war,” while in October he said it wasn’t “very realistic” for the pontiff to mediate conflicts. He was likewise circumspect when asked to address Israeli settler violence in the West Bank, calling for those involved to “work together for justice for all peoples.” Henne speculates that the logic of Leo’s approach “subtly builds on Francis’s legacy while redirecting it. In place of Francis’s activism, Leo’s paradigm of engagement seems to be that of building consensus.” Leo’s initiatives have not sought to resolve still present internal Catholic or ecumenical conflicts and tensions. “And I suspect Pope Leo is okay with that. Rather than trying to force a resolution of the underlying conflict or provide a solution, he is creating the conditions for a consensus to emerge, just as he did during the conclave. This, I suspect, is the logic undergirding his peacebuilding.”

(*Commonweal*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/curia-massimo-leo-pope-vatican-faggioli-church-francis>; *Arc*, <https://arcmag.org/a-new-direction-in-vatican-diplomacy/>)

## CURRENT RESEARCH

- **The survey *Next Mormons 2*, conducted by Jana Riess and Benjamin Knoll, finds that among current LDS members the gender advantage in terms of women’s religiosity that was evident in 2016 has been largely erased.** In Riess’s blog for Religion News Service, *Flunking Sainthood* (January 15), she notes that today’s LDS women look “more like LDS men than different from them in terms of their religiosity. This is a major shift, and a surprise to us as researchers.” In the 2016 *Next Mormons* study, the researchers found that on multiple measures of belief and behavior, women were on average 9 points more religious than men. Another unexpected change they found, given the growth of nonaffiliation among recent generations, was that younger members were sometimes significantly religious on several measures. Riess reasons that this makes sense because as more young adults leave the church, “it becomes that much

more of a conscious commitment for those who want to stay.”

The survey shows generational continuity on outward measures of religiosity. Among Gen Zers in the U.S. who still identify as LDS, 68 percent say they’re in the pews attending church every week. This two-thirds figure is on par with the oldest members in the study. Younger members are also close to older generations on holding a temple recommend and serving on missions (with millennials holding the lead on this measure). Yet on other measures, there is clearer generational decline: only one in five Gen Zers do daily scripture readings, and daily prayer is down for every generation except the oldest. This was also the case for attending sacrament meetings, with only 31 percent of Gen Zers holding to this observance. Members of Generation Z also were less certain of their beliefs about the church (showing a nearly 30-percent drop compared to boomers and Silent generation members), and they showed lower rates of tithing (26 percent compared with 55 percent of boomers/Silent generation Mormons). In other words, these younger members seem to be picking and choosing when it comes to central matters of the faith, Riess concludes.

• **The optimistic, almost glowing, accounts of the effects of psychedelic drug use on religious belief have been exaggerated, with psychedelic users more likely to be unaffiliated and to leave the religions they grew up in than non-users, according to a study by psychologists.** In *Lucid News* (January 5), Don Lattin reports that the study, conducted by Swedish researcher Pehr Granqvist and Rabbi Aaron Cherniak, examined sociological data gathered over several decades from 22,000 people in the United Kingdom. Past studies of users of psychedelic drugs reported a high incidence of vivid spiritual experiences. Granqvist and Cherniak note that their finding of an association between people’s use of psychedelics and disaffiliation from their religion did not necessarily mean that



International Church of Cannabi" in Denver, CO  
(source: <https://secretdenver.com/international-church-of-cannabis-denver/>)



“psychedelic-induced mystical experiences caused people to leave their religion,” Lattin writes. The same trend was found among other users of illicit drugs, suggesting that the lifestyle and personalities of drug users may be driving such disaffiliation. Psychedelic use did not predict real-time changes in religiosity or spirituality, according to the researchers. “A critical finding of the study is that psychedelic use does not consistently increase religiosity or spirituality,” Cherniak said. “This result challenges romanticized views that psychedelics inevitably lead to mystical insight or religious awakening.” When psychedelic users report insights such as “we are all One,” they may be drawing on their existing spiritual beliefs and may already be part of the “spiritual but not religious” culture that holds to such a universalistic view. According to Cherniak, “Psychedelics might gently reorient the compass of meaning, but they do not build or destroy temples. Their impact on spirituality is personal, evolving, and never guaranteed.”

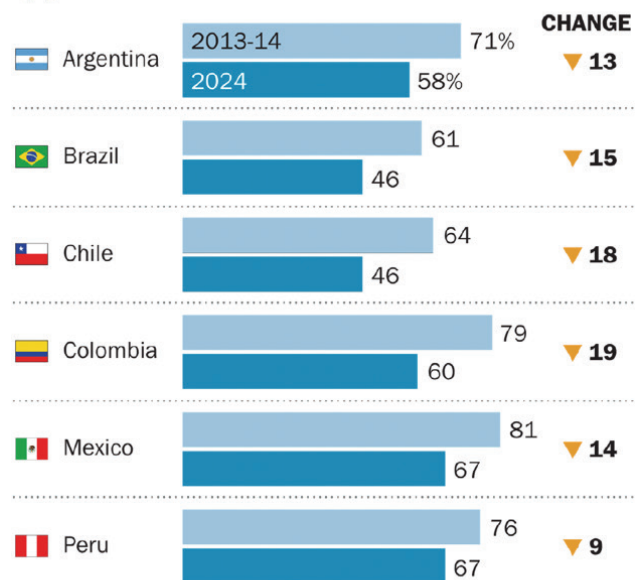
(*Lucid News*, <https://www.lucid.news/revealing-statistics-question-if-psychedelics-truly-impact-religious-beliefs/>)

● **A recent Pew survey finds Catholicism continuing its downward slide in Latin America as the proportion of the unaffiliated increases.** Conducted in 2024, the survey found the sharpest decline in Catholic adherence in Colombia, going from 79 percent in 2013–14 to 60 percent in 2024. The smallest decrease was seen in Peru, with Catholic affiliation dropping from 76 percent to 67 percent over those 10 years. But religious unaffiliation nearly doubled or saw even larger gains, with the unaffiliated growing from 8 percent to 15 percent of the overall Latin American population. Unaffiliation rates were largest in Chile and Colombia, with one-third of Chileans identifying as religiously unaffiliated, doubling the percentage of those who said the same a decade ago. Colombia also saw a 17-point increase in the religiously unaffiliated.

While Protestantism stayed steady in all the surveyed countries, the share of Protestants who were Pentecostal dropped. In Argentina, where 16 percent of adults identified as Protestant in 2024, only 54 percent of Protestants said they were Pentecostal in the 2024 survey, compared with 71 percent a decade earlier. Pew cautioned that the sample sizes of Protestants were small, creating large margins of error in all countries. As for religious beliefs, they remained relatively

### Catholic share of Latin American populations has fallen since 2013-14

% of adults in each country who identify as *Catholic*, by year



Note: All changes are statistically significant.

Source: Spring 2024 Global Attitudes Survey and 2013-14 “Religion in Latin America” survey.

“Catholicism Has Declined in Latin America Over the Past Decade”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

high despite the rise of unaffiliation. In fact, the religiously unaffiliated in Latin America had similar rates of belief and even practice to the Christians of Europe. “For example, similar percentages (46 percent and 47 percent) of the religiously unaffiliated in Brazil and Colombia said they pray daily, making them more likely to do so than Christians in any European country surveyed in 2024.” the Pew report found.

(This report can be downloaded at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2026/01/21/catholicism-has-declined-in-latin-america-over-the-past-decade/>)

● **By 2075, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is likely to overtake the U.S. as being the largest Christian country in the world, while Christian-Muslim relations will assume increasing importance, write Gina Zurlo and Todd Johnson in the *International Bulletin of Mission Research* (January).** These projections are part of the bulletin’s annual statistical overview of world Christianity, going back 42 years. This year’s overview builds on previous projections of the continued growth of Christianity in the global South but also the movement of Third World Christians to Western countries and the growth of Islam in the West. Zurlo and Johnson write that the “world is anticipated to remain a religious place, rising from 88.9 percent religious in 2025 to 93.1 percent religious in 2075. The non-religious population (atheists and agnostics) is anticipated to decline from 11 percent to seven percent.”



Catholic church in the Democratic Republic of Congo.



The demographers add that “Globally, if current trends continue, by 2075, the world will be 36 percent Christian and 33 percent Muslim, pointing to a future in which Islam will eventually become the world’s largest religion.” While conversion patterns and missionary activity, which would impact the conversions from Islam to Christianity, are harder to predict, Zurlo and Johnson argue that “establishing positive relations between Christians and Muslims has perhaps never been as important as it is today.” Meanwhile, the fastest Christian change from 2025 to 2075 is projected to occur in Bangladesh, Iran, Algeria, The Gambia, Burkina Faso, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The projected growth of Christians in the latter country to 326 million by 2075 will make it a larger Christian country than the U.S

(*International Bulletin for Mission Research*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ibm>)

• **Sales of the Bible in Britain soared last year, totaling £6.3 million, a rise of 27.7 percent from the previous year and more than double the figure from 2020, according to the Christian publisher SPCK Group.** The best-selling Bible translation in 2025 was the English Standard Version (ESV). The magazine *Premier Christian News* quotes Sam Richardson, CEO of SPCK Group, saying that the sales are “evidence



of a significant cultural shift regarding matters of faith and religion in this country. As we face worldwide political and social change, including the after-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, global wars, the rise of AI, and a growing mental health crisis, individuals are re-engaging with questions of meaning and spirituality.”

## A baptismal renewal in French Catholicism?

After 60 years of continuous decline, French Catholicism is experiencing a notable if modest rebound in adult baptisms, though only time will reveal whether it represents lasting change or another fleeting “flux” in French Catholicism’s cyclical history, writes historian Guillaume Cuchet in the journal *Etudes* (January). While the rise from 4,468 baptisms in 2020 to 10,000 in 2025, with 42 percent of those baptized at Easter 2025 being aged 18–25, was reported by many media, Cuchet urges prudence in interpreting this trend. The movement is recent, possibly triggered by Covid-19 (which he thinks functioned as a “detonator” returning people to essentials) or the 2019 Notre-Dame fire. France has seen similar “rebounds” before that ultimately failed to reverse statistical decline. There’s a significant “evaporation rate” among neophytes, as new converts lack supporting social structures like families, communities, or local traditions.

Cuchet ventures that the phenomenon may reflect a broader religious revival among youth benefiting all faiths, advising that comparisons with conversions to Islam and evangelical Protestantism be conducted. He identifies three main explanatory factors for the increase in adult

Catholic baptisms— which by far do not compensate for the massive prior decline in infant baptisms. Among people of Catholic descent, but unbaptized, there is a phenomenon of spiritual re-rooting, characterized by a quest for values, culture, tradition, and lineage. Extra-European Christian immigration



brings new energy and diversifies the Church's image beyond its bourgeois associations. And Islam's growing presence creates at the same time an identitarian Christian reaction and a mimetic emulation of Islamic fervor among some youth.

(*Etudes*, <https://www.revue-etudes.com/>)

## Generation Z in Ireland outpacing millennials in spiritual interest

Members of Generation Z in Ireland are more open and interested in religion than their millennial counterparts, according to a report in the *Irish Independent* newspaper (January 17). Laura Lynott writes that especially among young people undergoing crises, such as their parents' illnesses and death, adopting or returning to the Catholic faith is seen as a source of solace and community. She cites a recent poll taken in the Irish Republic finding that Gen Z is more open to religion than those in the millennial generation. Similarly, Amárach research on behalf of the Iona Institute in October found that 18-to-24-year-olds in Northern Ireland were more likely to pray and read or watch religious content than 25-to-34-year-olds. Bishop Finton Gavin of the diocese of Cork and Ross told Lynott that he has "seen the same pattern" in his outreach work with young adults. "They are searching for a sense of community and want to be challenged. Many are making a decision to go against popular culture," he said. "Years ago I would laugh at a fella praying.



But more and more young men, in particular, are getting into it.” He admitted that there is still a “stigma around the church due to the past,” referring to the child abuse scandals that have shaken the church since the 1990s.

## Muslim experiment in democracy failing?

The prospects for Muslim democracies, which just over a decade ago seemed bright, have grown dimmer as key Islamic countries said to be on the cusp of democratic reform have fallen short of that goal, according to a study in the *Journal of Democracy* (January). In the early 2000s, “many scholars observed a pragmatist turn in Islamist politics. They sought to identify and explain how and why Islamist parties and movements were becoming involved in electoral politics, overhauling their thinking, and embracing moderation,” write political scientists Ramazan Kilinc, Turan Kayaoglu, and Etga Ugur. Considering the cases of Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, the authors argue that the optimism about their democratization in the manner of the Christian-democratic movements of postwar Europe was premature. Turkey made democratic progress than slid into authoritarianism; Tunisia’s Ennahda and Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood “either withdrew from power under duress or struggled to survive democratic breakdowns”; while even the more successful case of Morocco’s PJD fell in 2021 as the party saw its ability to govern, claim the reformist label, and remain popular undermined by the need to compromise with the monarchy and secular parties.

Kilinc, Kayaoglu, and Ugur write that ideological flexibility and political pragmatism were not enough for Islamist parties to thrive and survive in the absence of a normative commitment to democratic principles. When it came to facing “make-or-break, back-to-the-wall challenges, both





Islamist parties and their opponents proved ready to ignore democratic practices beyond elections, to weaponize laws, to delegitimize critics, to seize frail state institutions rather than let them act as checks on power, and to reject internal reformists in favor of in-house hardliners,” the authors argue. But even with a democratic normative commitment and pragmatism, these parties will have to struggle with a strong secular-authoritarian political culture, competition with other parties, and schisms. Democratic Muslim parties will also need to draw in regional and international (especially Western) assistance, linkages, and pressures, while also avoiding a resurgent populism that fuses religious and nationalist rhetoric and gives “Islamists and others ideological cover and strategic models that place power consolidation ahead of democratic accountability,” the authors conclude.

(*Journal of Democracy*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/55735>)

### Political polarization in Armenia spreads to Armenian Apostolic Church

The conflict between the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Catholicos Karekin II, and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has intensified, with an opposition now also forming within the church, consisting of young parish priests, believers, and several hierarchs eager to reform the church, reports Harutyun G. Harutyunyan (State University of Yerevan, Armenia) in an article in *Nachrichtendienst Östliche Kirchen* (January 15 and January 30). But contradictory interpretations from other sources describe these developments as a move “to nationalize



Armenia's faith, to transform an independent moral authority into a branch of the state," writes Ara Nazarian (Armenian National Committee of America) in *Public Orthodoxy* (January 29).

By late January, 10 bishops had been arrested or were being prosecuted for various reasons, including calls some made to their clergy to take part into antigovernment protests (*Azatutyun*, February 1). Pashinyan and his party have been pointing to Russian influence on Karekin II, who has been in office since 1999. After a phase of public confrontation on social media, clergy members also spoke out, complaining about abuses among the church leadership and demanding reforms. The first and most well-known of these clergy, Father Aram Asatryan, criticized the church leadership's dependency on political and financial interests and called for transparent leadership systems.

Other priests stressed the urgent need for labor law and canon law protection mechanisms for clergy, since the Armenian Church still does not have a universal constitution, but rather the church leadership makes decisions according to its own preferences. In reaction to the criticism, Asatryan—and subsequently other priests—were removed from office by the church leadership and laicized, while Pashinyan expressed his support for Asatryan. Ten bishops finally demanded the voluntary resignation of Catholicos Karekin II. The Catholicos did not respond, and all accusations were rejected by the Supreme Spiritual Council. On January 4, Pashinyan met with the opposition bishops to establish a "Coordination Council for the Reform of the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church." Karekin II responded with harsh disciplinary measures, removing bishops from office without convening disciplinary commissions. In contrast, Nazarian claims that Pashinyan's government has engaged in an attempt to transform the church into a state-controlled entity under the guise of reforming it. The state is accused of using its apparatus to punish an independent institution that criticizes its policies. These conflicting views on the current crisis show that Armenia and its church have reached a turning point. Whatever the final outcome of the power struggle will be, it will likely have deep consequences, considering the pivotal role of the Armenian Church for national identity.

### **Alawites and their traditions come out of closet in post-Asad Syria**

The return of Alawite celebrations in public life in Syria suggests that the adherents of this syncretistic Islamic sect are gaining new confidence in their identity since the fall of the Bashar al-Asad regime, even as persecution has intensified, according to the *Public Orthodoxy* website (January 7). Fadi Abu-Deeb reports that this year many Alawites who live in Christian towns and villages in western Syria celebrated the Day of Barbara with their Christian neighbors on December 3, while also holding independent celebrations on December 16, following the Julian calendar, in other villages and towns where Christians' presence is minimal or non-existent. Like Christians, they celebrate by dancing around fire and by boiling wheat. Alawites have also adapted other Christian traditions and festivals throughout their history, even as they have been viewed as an "esoteric Islamic sect that [has] kept its teachings secretive from outsiders while displaying a somewhat mainstream Islamic countenance."





Source: Vehbi Koca / Alamy

Following the fall of Bashar al-Asad’s regime on December 8, 2024, sectarian conflicts in Syria took a new turn, with the Alawite community becoming the target of persecution. Yet this new phase of persecution is “accompanied by an unprecedented rise in their religious and cultural self-exploration. For many in the educated new generation, it is a time for self-discovery and for treading new roads of thinking about self and identity,” Abu-Deeb writes. Asad and his leadership pressed for acceptance by the mainstream Muslim society and discouraged the public practice of Alawite rituals and feasts that might betray Christian, Gnostic, Neo-Platonic, or pre-Christian Syrian religiosities. The author notes that Alawites are not uniform in all their teachings and rituals, as they lack a “church” or an establishment of orthodoxy like in Sunni Islam. Individual worship and eclectic convictions are central to their cornucopia of teachings, equivocal esoteric texts, and worldviews. But Abu-Deeb concludes that they also “shared spiritual and geographical spaces with Levantine Christians in a way that generates in many Alawites today a powerful sense of necessity to explore and recover elements of an ancient Levantine tradition that may also unravel hidden parts of the ancient Levantine Christian heritage.”

(*Public Orthodoxy*, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2026/01/07/syrian-alawites/>)



## Finding & Footnotes

■ The current issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* (Vol. 11, No. 2), marking its 10th anniversary issue, is devoted to recent research on AI and religion. The introduction notes that AI has impacted religious practice and devotion, not to mention religious imagery, to a similar degree to its influence in other spheres of society. The editorial adds that this impact “is exemplified in the ‘use’ of and research on the reception of authoritative and respected religious figures for chatbot purposes. Two such examples include Watermelon, a Dutch company which developed and enabled a digital Jesus, JesusPT, for individuals to chat with via WhatsApp (launched in April 2023, with a global coverage, using a GPT-4 version at the time). More recently, the company launched the same possibility creating a virtual Pope Francis to whom one can direct questions and get answers back in real time (2025). As digital avatars adopt the likeness and voices of revered figures, they challenge traditional notions of mediation and embodiment in religious practice.”

The issue features articles on the chatbot phenomenon, a study of AI’s role in religion, spirituality and psycho-spiritual healing, and an analysis of how this techno religion relates to the debates about secularization and the disenchantment of the world. Rizwan Virk of Arizona State University argues that AI concepts such as virtual reality and simulation (the idea that that this world is not the final reality) are serving as “metaphors” for the spiritual life and that “it might help to bolster those who are wavering or likely to dismiss religion altogether to take some of these spiritual concepts more seriously, hinting even for scientists and atheists that it is possible there is something beyond the physical world.” This issue can be downloaded at: <https://rerc-journal.tsd.ac.uk/index.php/religiousexp>

■ The prominent role of the pope in the Roman Catholic Church has raised major issues for traditionalist Catholics, whose principles should lead them to be the most fervent supporters of the papal institution, but who are highly critical of the post-Vatican II turn of Roman Catholicism. A small book by Magnus Lundberg (Uppsala University) offers a scholarly overview in English of how traditionalist Catholics have grappled with the question of papal legitimacy during the decades immediately after Vatican II. *Is the Pope Catholic? Traditionalist Variations on a Theme* (2026) centers on discussions from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s about whether John XXIII and Paul VI were antipopes. Lundberg mentions that “some



people believe that the real break from traditional Catholic doctrine only came with Francis's pontificate," but those later developments follow similar arguments and are not discussed in the volume. The book's central contribution lies in its typology of traditionalist positions, ranging from the relatively moderate to the radically schismatic.

Despite harsh rhetoric, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (founder of the Society of St. Pius X) never explicitly declared the Holy See vacant. This ambiguity created space for more radical positions, including various sedevacantist theories holding that all post-Pius XII popes have been antipopes and the Holy See has been vacant since 1958. Conspiracy theories represent "a consistent feature of the traditionalist variations" studied by the author, providing alternative explanations for apparent papal heresies

while potentially preserving papal legitimacy. Indeed, Lundberg's concluding analysis situates these movements within a broader conspiracy theory culture, drawing on Michael Barkun's framework of "systemic conspiracies." He argues that traditionalists weaponize historically Catholic forms of anti-Masonry, antisemitism, and anti-communism against contemporary Catholicism itself. The book can be downloaded in PDF format from Lundberg's website at the URL: <https://magnuslundberg.net/2026/01/13/new-book-on-catholic-traditionalists-and-the-papacy/> (with the link at the end of the introduction to the book).



Magnus Lundberg

## Finding & Footnotes

Founded in 2019, the **South Philadelphia Shtiebel** has "become a closely watched experiment in American Judaism—an urban congregation built from scratch in a neighborhood where no new synagogue had taken root in decades, and where most religious institutions had long since retreated to the suburbs." The congregation is an anomaly among Orthodox synagogues, probably among American synagogues in general for its hybrid style, blending progressive and traditional elements. It is Orthodox but led by a woman; its seating is divided between genders like traditional synagogues—but not just between men and women but also non-binary people. The congregation is aligned with the DIY attitude of how people now choose institutions: voluntarily, relationally, and on their own terms. Its growth to about 175 people attending Shabbat service has not been accidental but is said to reflect a series of choices—about space, ritual, leadership and belonging—made deliberately by its founder. Rabbi Dasi Fruchter, coming from a modern Orthodox background, has welcomed LGBTQ people, with about 15 percent of the congregation now identifying as such. But she sees such a welcome as less about adapting Orthodoxy to an ideology than giving those who have gravitated to the congregation access to traditional Jewish practices and observance of halacha. When asked if non-binary members could lead services and have other ritual roles, Fruchter refused, saying it would violate Jewish law.





The synagogue finds its unity in its vigorous music tradition, where women are encouraged to sing, unlike in other Orthodox congregations. The dues requirement of other synagogues is waived at South Philadelphia Shtiebel to encourage participation and new attenders. With its “NPR-style [funding] model,” the congregation appears robust from the outside, but still operates like a lean startup on the inside. During the week, “the sense of belonging migrates online.” The Shtiebel uses Slack, the messaging platform, as its connective tissue: organizing meal trains, coordinating who will read the Torah at services, sharing names of ailing people, checking in on each other, offering extra seats at Shabbat tables. The synagogue is intentionally apolitical and is careful about keeping partisan politics out of communal spaces. Congregants span the ideological spectrum. The congregation prioritizes what one member called “joyful Judaism” over the culture wars that have fractured so many other institutions. “These sorts of shuls are often born on the decay of mainstream Conservative shuls, which are not growing or are hemorrhaging,” says Villanova law professor Chaim Saiman. “There’s a market for a community with liberal sensibilities but whose liturgy and Shabbat and kosher practices are more traditional.” (Source: *Forward*, January 28)