

Christian left intensifies activism after Minneapolis

Resistance to the Trump administration, especially over its policy and actions on immigration, has injected new vitality into the religious left, although the staying power of such activism remains to be seen, according to reports. In the online newsletter *Sightings* (February 26), Richard Amesbury reports that “[r]eligious leaders, some in clerical collars or vestments, have been unmistakable presences in demonstrations following the killings of Renée Good and Alex Pretti by federal agents in Minneapolis. Around one hundred clergy were arrested demonstrating against ICE deportations at Minnesota’s largest airport. Churches have functioned as spaces for reflection, organizing, and resistance.” During the standoff with authorities, mainline churches sprang into action, coordinating efforts to deliver groceries to immigrant families afraid to leave their homes. Amesbury writes that while conservative Christians remain in the spotlight during the Trump era, “progressive Christianity is reemerging into public view, as Christians from a variety of denominations contest the political capture of their faith by the far right.”

He argues that such a reemergence of religious-left activism is partly due to a backlash among a segment of churchgoers who have seen their congregations become more religiously and socially conservative, culminating in the rise of Donald Trump. While “religious disaffiliation does not transfer automatically into progressive activism,” Amesbury adds that the growth of the religious left may be due to the remaining affiliated people (a population which has stabilized in recent years) deciding to resist the rightward tilt in American religion. “In other words, there is a conflict going on among those who still identify as Christian over what that label is going to mean. Does it mean white Christian nationalism? Or does Christianity require care for the poor, immigrants, and the environment? Like much of the surrounding culture, Christianity is increasingly politically divided...These tensions are not new, but Trump’s immigration crackdown has exacerbated them.”

“What the leveling off of Christian disidentification suggests is that those who remain—whatever their politics—are in it to win it,” Amesbury concludes. “Like their conservative counterparts, progressive Christians are digging in for a struggle over the faith.” Meanwhile, the online publication *Vox* (February 10) argues that the appointment of Pope Leo has likewise energized

the Catholic left. In an interview, writer and activist Christopher Hale says that “Leo is working with a pipeline of Francis-era priests and bishops that he is very familiar with, and everyone who’s been named an archbishop and a bishop was on his desk before he was elected pope.” While the pope is trying to separate himself from the culture wars, not wanting to be “weaponized by the right or the left... [w]hen he does speak, it’s hard now for bishops and priests in the U.S. to ignore him, or say he doesn’t understand the U.S. And immigration, and mass deportations, are one issue where he has spoken up again



and again.” This was seen last October, when Leo told the American bishops that they needed to speak with one voice on the immigration issue, resulting in the strongest statement on a social issue in years. “The responsiveness of U.S bishops has gone up extraordinarily in the past year, and especially with conservative bishops. They have spoken out in ways that I don’t think they would have during the Francis pontificate.” [A more recent bishops’ statement has opposed changes to birthright citizenship.]

(*Sightings*, <https://martycenter.org/sightings/are-we-witnessing-the-re-emergence-of-a-christian-left>)

LDS women influencers driving new Mormon moment?

America is “in the middle of a second Mormon moment,” this time led by a cadre of women influencers and reality TV stars, some of whom are ex-members of the Latter-day Saints, reports *New York* magazine (February 9). The first wave of attention to Mormonism was fostered more than a decade ago by the presidential campaign of Mitt Romney, the Broadway musical *Book of Mormon*, and the TV drama series about polygamy, *Big Love*. Bridget Read writes that the 2024 flagship reality show, *The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives*, preceded by *Real Housewives of Salt Lake City*, has led the way for a variety of LDS-influenced media productions and marketing efforts that portray Mormonism as entrepreneurial and mainstream rather than a fringe religious movement. Often led by women, these influencers come from both practicing and ex-Mormon backgrounds; four of the nine cast members of *Secret Lives* are ex-Mormons, including its leading star, Jessi Draper. “These Mormon and ex-Mormon women, the makeup and clothes they wear, the red-light therapy masks and blenders and blankets they use, and the protein powders, supplements, and sodas they drink have found an enthusiastic audience across the rest of country.” While the LDS “mommy blogger” and influencer phenomenon has been around for a while, it was during Covid that family content extended beyond a niche audience.

It was also in 2020 that contested racial protests led producers to look for more non-controversial family content, and the LDS-oriented women were not only willing and waiting but also increasingly networking with each other, often posting content on TikTok. Read writes that these women, often mothers, were readily accepted by American viewers, as they broke the stereotypes of long-haired LDS girls associated with the compound of fundamentalist Warren Jeffs. Their faith, as



Photo of cast of *Secret Lives of Mormon Housewives*.

portrayed on these shows and other media, “appears modern, flexible, and millennial. They discuss wearing and not wearing garments [required of members] and the pressure LDS women feel to be perfect. In one episode [of *Secret Lives*], the cast attends a Pride event, publicly bucking the church’s stance on homosexuality.” She adds that this “Mormon and ex-Mormon influencer ecosystem” is lucrative enough to be supporting the state of Utah and the LDS church (though their tithes). The church’s leadership is supportive of the influencers, with the church sponsoring some of their work. Whether these women influencers are “tradwives” or feminists, active Mormons or alienated from and even angry at the church, Read concludes that the church is finding new mainstream acceptance while keeping its identity. “Even if it loses more of its official membership, as long as Mormon aesthetics and concerns—motherhood, beauty, perfection, worthiness—continue to appeal to industrious women everywhere, the institution stands to profit.”

Conservative “Christian literary ecosystem” thriving

While the secular “literary ecosystem” is in decline, a Christian book culture seems to be thriving, Nadya Williams writes in the newsletter *Providence* (February 17). She refers to an *Atlantic* magazine article by literary critic Adam Kirsch, “The Literary Ecosystem Is Dying,” in which Kirsch, noting the decline of reading across all age groups and the recent demise of the *Washington Post*’s reputable books section, points to a cyclic phenomenon of book reviews being



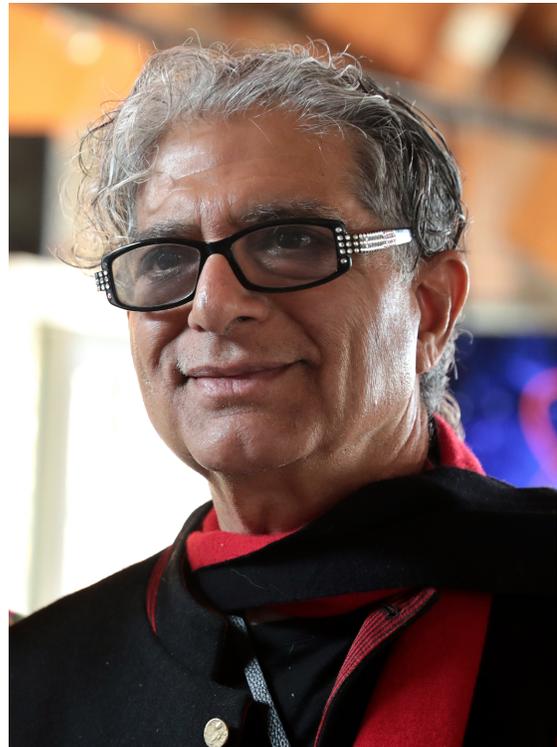
read less, leading to publications cutting book coverage, resulting in fewer books bought, which makes publications think they're not worth covering. However, Williams finds that publications with a distinct Christian identity that feature book reviews and review essays are numerous and increasing.

“While many of the books reviewed are written by and for Christians,” she writes, “others are intended for more general audiences—poetry collections, novels, works of history...The Christian literary ecosystem is thriving—expanding rather than contracting. And while many magazines for which I regularly write do not have a designated books section or a separate books editor, they publish multiple reviews weekly, interweaving them organically with news essays, analysis pieces, and op-eds.” As to why this is the case, she suggests that the “persistence of a conservative/Christian literary culture begs the question: could there be something different about conservative readers—and, especially, conservative Christian readers? Might Christians—a people of the Book—have a more dedicated relationship with books and reading after all?” She speculates that Christians’ view of literature as objectively revealing truth, beauty and goodness leads them to take “part in a literary culture geared towards a constructive vision of illuminating the human condition in ways that honor God.”

(*Providence*, <https://providencemag.com/2026/02/the-conservative-christian-literary-ecosystem/>)

Epstein scandals lead to New Age cancelling and calls for accountability

The controversy over the associations of well-known leaders and figures with Jeffrey Epstein has reached the New Age and wellness movements, resulting in cancellation but also recognition of the need to find new ways to hold leaders accountable for their behavior. The Substack newsletter *Ecstatic Integration* (February 27) reports that New Age spirituality is in a “ferment at the moment, after it was exposed that Deepak Chopra, perhaps the most famous guru in the world, was friendly with Jeffrey Epstein and sent him some chummy emails, after Epstein was convicted for sex with a minor, saying things like ‘God is a construct, cute girls are real.’ Chopra often emailed Epstein telling him to ‘bring your girls’ to a spiritual event that Chopra was leading.” Editor Jules Evans adds that it has been New Age influencers who have “led the pitchforks against Chopra and demanded he be de-platformed. And he has been. New Age organizations like the Shift Network, the Association for Spiritual



Deepak Chopra

Integrity and Mind Valley have issued statements condemning his remarks or cancelling appearances by him.”

In surveying the coverage of Chopra, journalist Terry Mattingly in his Substack newsletter, *Rational Sheep* (February 27), finds few hard religion news articles on the scandal and its relation to Chopra’s teachings, compared to what would have likely been the case if the incident involved conservative Christians. Mattingly did find a commentary feature at *Religion News Service* where religion professor Liz Bucar writes about how Chopra’s “AI spirituality is hijacking spiritual hunger.” She reports that Chopra has created a digital-guru version of himself in which users ask questions and receive “answers” drawn from the author’s huge print, audio and video archives. The service costs 50 cents for a 30-minute session or \$10 a month for continuing spiritual advice. Bucar ties Chopra’s innovation to the way the “wellness industry already has zero accountability structures. No licensing boards. No ethics committees. No regulatory oversight. No complaint processes. Now we’re automating the very thing that had no guardrails to begin with.” In comparison, “religious traditions (for all their profound failures) at least have structures. Denominations can defrock clergy. Ethics boards can investigate complaints. Communities can organize for reform. There are theological frameworks, however imperfect, that can be appealed to.”

Full parishes and empty altars in Eastern Orthodox parishes?

The surge of converts to Eastern Orthodoxy in the U.S. is meeting a decades-old shortage of Orthodox priests. Since the 1990s, there have been reports and planning commissions to address the Orthodox clergy shortage in most jurisdictions. But the rapid growth of converts since the early 2020s has made the priest shortage particularly acute, says Fr. Andrew Stephen Damick of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese on his YouTube channel. “Priests feel overwhelmed” by the convert surge, he said. The situation makes the “structural problems of the priesthood so overwhelming that it drives away potential priests.” The priest shortage during this surge will mean that there will be a “rationing of pastoral care...New missions



will be slower being started.” Damick says that he hopes that the priestly drought during this harvest of converts will “end clericalism,” where the priest takes on too many responsibilities in the parish. To deal with this problem, he calls for voluntary mentors who can guide new converts in the faith, as well as more deacons who may eventually become priests. Even though only a small percentage of religiously affiliated military service members identify as Orthodox, just as in civilian life, there has been a “recent uptick” in active-duty military, particularly young men, joining the Orthodox faith, reports Maggie Phillips in *Arc* magazine (February 17). Yet there are currently only six Greek Orthodox chaplains spread across the active-duty military, reflecting a wider priest shortage in Greek Orthodoxy in the U.S. [The article doesn’t mention other Orthodox jurisdictions.]

Phillips adds, “The disparity between an abundant harvest and too few laborers is especially apparent in American military life, a predominantly male environment that emphasizes rigorous discipline—the same thing many theorize is attracting young men to Orthodoxy.” Chris Moody, a U.S. Army chaplain and Greek Orthodox priest stationed in the U.S., sees inquirers coming from Protestant backgrounds who appreciate the “unified symbolic worldview” they find in the Orthodox liturgy. These chaplains are different from priests in that they serve as a kind of cross-cultural missionary operating between denominations and different cultures and ethnicities. Military chapels often service multiple denominations on a single Sunday, which means Greek Orthodox trappings must be put away after services. The lack of an ornate building and other ethnic trappings, leading to an essential and stripped-down Orthodoxy, may be appealing and less alien to newcomers, Phillips writes. While there is considerable pastoral latitude for chaplaincy in the military, it “isn’t attracting new priests to replace the retiring Greek Orthodox chaplains on active duty. There are also the strict physical standards, and there is also the stripping away of the grandeur of the Divine Liturgy, not to mention the diminished role of a priest, who must subordinate himself to the demands of a commander and the needs of Uncle Sam,” she concludes.

(*Arc*, <https://arcmag.org/the-lords-pt/>)

CURRENT RESEARCH

- **Christian higher education (CHE) is still growing, unlike its broader state and secular counterparts, according to new enrollment data from the 2024 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.** Writing on a blog for the *Gospel Coalition* (February 18), Perry Glanzer cites this data as showing that Catholic and Protestant Christian higher education grew by 1.6 percent between the Fall 2023 and Fall 2024 enrollment periods. Protestant institutions’ enrollment alone expanded by 2.4 percent overall during that year. Glanzer adds that “the news gets better for Protestant institutions the farther back one goes. Protestant institutions grew by 3.6 percent over the past five years and by 10.9 percent over the past ten. Given these robust numbers, it is time for Protestants to stop the doomsaying once and for all.” In comparing the CHE figures with those of other sectors of higher education, the data shows state university



enrollment is now projected to have declined 3.9 percent during the past decade, and private enrollment is projected to have declined a significant 7.1 percent (the final stats have not yet been calculated for 2024). But even CHE may have to face the fact that years of steady enrollment growth may end soon, as the number of college-eligible students is going to shrink for the foreseeable future. Catholic, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and mainline Protestant institutions will be the hardest hit, according to Glanzer, as those three sectors have already seen a significant drop in enrollment over the past decade.

Enrollment “bright spots” for Catholic higher education over the past 10 years have been the University of St. Thomas, MN (245 percent growth), Merrimack College, MA (76 percent), La Roche University, PA (52 percent), and Thomas Aquinas College, CA (50 percent). HBCUs “continue to suffer both in their enrollment numbers and the low commitment they give to the operationalization of any Christian identity.” Simmons College of Kentucky, which has emphasized a Christian identity, has seen a growth of 94 percent. Mainline Protestant universities likewise tend to de-emphasize their Christian mission, while some sell their academic rigor. But Glanzer sees overall mainline decline and/or secularization, with the only two bright spots being Eastern University (with 132 percent growth over the past 10 years) and McMurray University, TX (215 percent growth). That leaves other Protestant schools, represented by the more

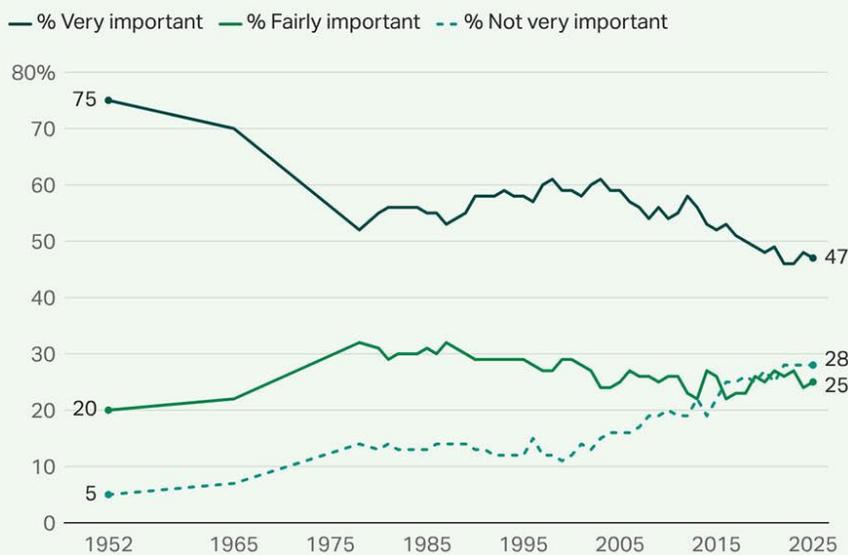
evangelical International Association of Christian Education (IACE) and Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), as the main sources of slow but steady growth and consistent religious identity, led by Toccoa Falls College, GA (233 percent over the past decade), Campbellsville University, KY (216 percent), Southeastern University, FL (200 percent), and Columbia International University, SC (164 percent). Glanzer adds that the closures faced by some CCCU schools such as Trinity International and Trinity Christian (both in IL), are more due to the secularization and depopulation of the Chicago area and the saturation in that market.

(*Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/are-christian-colleges-doomed/>)

• **A new Gallup Poll finds that, while church attendance continues to decline, there has been no significant change in the importance of religion to Americans.** The poll found that the percentage of Americans who say religion is “very important” in their lives remained at 47 percent. Religious service attendance continues its gradual decline, according to Gallup. A majority of U.S. residents—57 percent—say they rarely or never attend religious services, compared to 42 percent in 1992. U.S. blacks showed the sharpest decline in saying religion is important. Between 2001 and 2005, 85 percent of U.S. blacks said religion was very important, compared with only 63 percent in 2021–2025. Republicans, holding at 66 percent, were one of the few groups showing no decline in saying religion was very important during the past 20 years. Democrats fell from 60 percent to 37 percent over the past two decades.

Importance of Religion Among U.S. Adults, 1952-2025

How important would you say religion is in your own life — very important, fairly important or not very important?



Based on annual averages
Those with no opinion are not shown.

GALLUP

● **The newly released annual *Statistical Yearbook of the Church*, which reports on pastoral indicators in world Catholicism, shows significant growth in baptisms and religious vocations in Southeast Asia and West Africa, even if demographic factors have played a big role in such increases.** Sociologists Stephen Cranney and Stephen Bullivant, reporting in *Church Life Journal* (February 3), analyzed the yearbook’s data on baptisms and ordinations over a 50-year period, finding both megatrends and internal variations. For instance, the much-touted explosion of priests from Africa is moderated by the finding that the likelihood that Catholics will pursue ordination has declined in Africa over the past decade. “Interestingly,” they add, “Asian Catholics have the highest ordination rates—a fact that has remained consistent for over four decades. In general, all continents are lower than where they were in the early 1990s. So in large part Africa is becoming the world’s factory for priests simply because it is becoming the world’s factory for people.” Cranney and Bullivant see the Vietnamese church as the most vital on these measures, having moved from about 10 priesthood ordinations per million Catholics in 1993 to nearly 40 today, a fourfold increase.



The authors add that baptism numbers generally follow the same trends as priesthood ordinations, with baptisms in Africa having doubled since the 1980s. But as with ordinations, they find a demographic factor behind this trend. By adding population structure into their analysis, Cranney and Bullivant find that the boom in African baptisms is not because of a “day-of-Pentecost-style, conversion-led growth, but more likely because African Catholics—unlike most of the rest of the world—are actually having children in appreciable numbers.” In fact,

aside from Africa (and some parts of Asia), every other continent is rapidly trending downward on these measures, most likely due to secularization. The traditional cores of Catholic strength in Latin America and southern Europe are quickly losing their Catholic character (Croatia is now the most Catholic country in Europe by these measures). They add that there are a handful of countries where the “baptisms-by-live-births measure shows increasing Catholicism, and not just an increasing number of Catholics being born. For example, children in Burundi are increasingly likely to be baptized Catholic...” Cranney and Bullivant conclude that “the ability for Africa’s baptisms-per-live-births rate to remain flat could also be seen as a ‘glass half full.’ When other regions of the globe are sharply secularizing, the capacity of Africa—and Asia—not to show a downward trendline is impressive in itself.”

(*Church Life Journal*, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/where-the-catholic-church-is-growing-and-what-it-means-for-the-future/>)

• **The growing number of newly baptized people in France [see last month’s RW] are more involved in religious practice and in church after baptism than adult catechumens of 10 years ago.** Writing in the British Catholic magazine *The Tablet* (February 18), Tom Heneghan and Natalie Watson report that a recent survey by the Catholic daily *La Croix* found that entries in France into propaedeutics, the preparatory year before full seminary studies, increased by 50 percent between 2023 and 2025. Many of the prospective students are part of a wave of adult baptisms in highly secularized France. One view of this phenomenon is that these new Catholics are responding, by asserting their own faith, to the heightened profiles of Muslims and evangelical Protestants in a society that frowns on public displays of religiosity. Propaedeutics enrollment grew from 99 in 2023 to 146 last year. According to one estimate, about 70 percent of these students are expected to enter the seminary, and around half should stay on and be ordained. Heneghan and Watson report that this trend is already prompting seminary directors to consider changes in the way they train young men. Earlier this month, they met in Paris and agreed that rules for entering the seminary needed clarification. Often having grown up without a Catholic background, the newcomers may have some misconceptions about the faith. Fr. Poussier said the newcomers “arrive full of enthusiasm and are ready to give their all for the



church. We must be very respectful of their faith journey...[and] careful not to see them just as a pool of new recruits.”

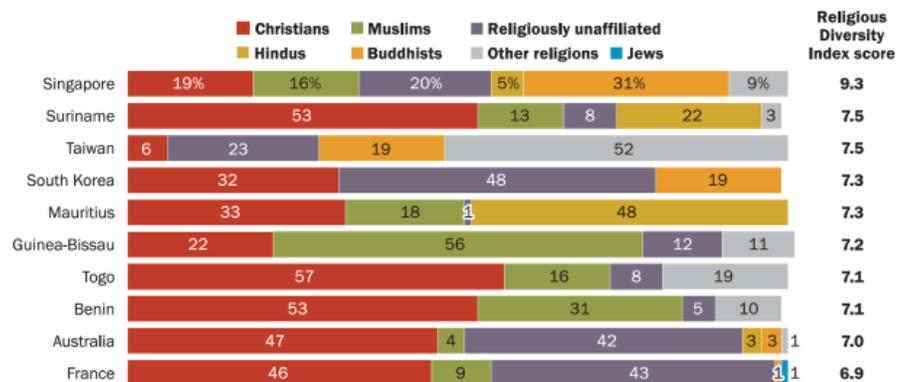
Meanwhile, in Germany, theology departments are experiencing a sharp drop in enrollment. While other arts subjects saw a 12.5 percent decline in the last six years, the numbers of “full-theology” candidates in Catholic faculties in state universities such as Münster, Bonn, and Tübingen fell by more than 50 percent. In church-run institutions the decline is less but still evident; in Frankfurt-St. Georgen, Eichstätt-Ingolstadt and Trier, student enrollment shrunk by about a third. In contrast, the new Cologne University of Catholic Theology reported an increase from 46 to 82 candidates. The five-year degree is the traditional training route for Catholic priests, as well as a requirement for other positions in the church. Faculties of Catholic theology in Germany are provided by the state while the curriculum and teaching staff are approved by the church. The growth in church-run institutions such as Cologne is partly due to rising numbers of international students, as well as missionaries. Heneghan and Watson conclude that the decline poses challenges for future recruitment in the German church, as well as the protected status of such faculties within the church and the state.

(*The Tablet*, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/france-sees-rising-interest-in-seminaries-while-german-theology-numbers-fall/>)

● **Singapore has emerged as the world’s most religiously diverse country, according to a new Pew study.** The study finds that Buddhists (at 31 percent) are Singapore’s largest religious group, along with substantial shares of religiously unaffiliated people (20 percent), Christians (19 percent), and Muslims (16 percent), plus Hindus (5 percent) and adherents of all other religions (9 percent). In second place for religious diversity is Suriname, the only Latin American country to be in the top 10. Over half of Suriname’s residents (53 percent) are Christians, with the rest mainly Hindus (22 percent), Muslims (13 percent), and religiously unaffiliated people (8 percent). Most of the other countries in the top 10 are in the Asia-Pacific region (Taiwan, South Korea and Australia) or in sub-Saharan Africa (Mauritius, Guinea-Bissau, Togo and Benin). France is the only European country on the top 10

In the world’s most religiously diverse places, Christians are often the largest group

% of people in each place who are ...



Note: Higher scores on the Religious Diversity Index reflect a more even distribution of the seven religious categories studied. Source: Pew Research Center calculations using religious composition estimates for 2020, which are based on more than 2,700 censuses and surveys.

“Religious Diversity Around the World”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

list. Its population is largely Christian (46 percent) and religiously unaffiliated (43 percent), with a sizable Muslim minority (9 percent). Three countries rated the least religiously diverse places in the world: Yemen, Afghanistan, and Somalia.

(The study can be downloaded at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2026/02/12/religious-diversity-around-the-world/>)

● **During the first four years of the war in Ukraine (from Feb. 24, 2022 to Feb. 24, 2026), at least 742 cases of destruction or damage to religious buildings have been recorded, according to data collected as part of the “Religion on Fire” project of the Workshop of Academic Religious Studies (February 24), a Ukrainian community of religious scholars on Facebook (Orthodoxie.com, March 3).** Due to access difficulties, these data only cover the territory under Ukrainian control and do not include the areas occupied by Russia, which represent just under 20 percent of Ukrainian territory. The data is consistent with earlier data reported from other sources by **RW** [March 2024]. In addition to these figures, a more detailed report is in preparation. Just over half of the destruction (involving 395 sites) affects places of worship belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In second place, a quarter of the damage (194 sites) belongs to Protestant communities.



Chart summarizing the statistical data collected by the “Religion on Fire” project.

In third place is the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (i.e., the autocephalous Ukrainians), with 75 churches affected. Thirty-one Roman Catholic or Greek Catholic churches have also been hit by the war, as well as 22 synagogues. Eleven religious educational institutions have been destroyed or damaged. Finally, there are 18 places of worship of other religions and seven mosques. These are conservative figures, not only because the areas occupied by Russia are not included, but also because some information has probably not yet been obtained. This testifies to “the considerable losses suffered by the country’s religious infrastructure.”

(Facebook page of the Workshop of Academic Religious Studies, in Ukrainian, <https://www.facebook.com/officialmarinua>)

Not-so-secular Sweden serving as new model?

Secularism appears to be losing ground in Sweden, though like other countries, it is too soon to say that religion is overshadowing non-belief, writes Joel Halldorf in the online newsletter of the Christian journal *Comment* (January 8). Sweden has been viewed as the model secular society, registering church attendance figures under 5 percent. In cultural terms, religion was widely believed by Swedes to be an outmoded thought system pushed aside by a scientific worldview. However, that easy secularism is what is being challenged and viewed as old fashioned in Sweden today, according to Halldorf. He marshals anecdotal evidence for this emerging post-secularism—from pastors reporting that youth are now showing up at services, to every major Swedish newspaper now having a theologian among their columnists (something unthought of a decade ago), to conversations about spirituality making their way even into “secular, intellectual dinner tables that once kept religion firmly at arm’s length.” One factor in the declining status of secularism is the growing religious diversity of Swedish society. The surge of migration into



Uppsala Cathedral

Sweden has “brought a growing presence of Muslims, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Pentecostals, which further unsettled Sweden’s secular self-image. New layers of religious diversity were added to a society long accustomed to viewing itself as uniformly secular,” Halldorf writes.

The pandemic may also have been an accelerant of this trend, for which there is now more than anecdotal evidence. Halldorf cites the annual Youth Barometer, which surveys 15,000 people from ages 15 to 24 and found a growing interest in religion and spirituality in this group, even naming Jesus “Influencer of the Year” for 2025. During the same year, the Church of Sweden released its annual statistics, “showing a modest but noteworthy rise in confirmations—the first uptick in this kind of statistic at least since the 1970s.” Between 2005 and 2010, 5,000–6,000 people applied for membership in the Church of Sweden annually. In the early 2020s, that number grew to over 10,000. In 2024, 14,000 new members joined—the most in decades. The 2025 figures exceed even that; by November, nearly 18,000 had joined. Also in 2025, the SOM Institute, which runs Sweden’s most comprehensive study of social values, published a report showing that the share of young Swedes who attend services throughout the year doubled between 2020 and 2024, from 17 to 34 percent, the highest attendance rate in two decades. Belief in God in this age group also climbed, from 20 to 34 percent, reaching its highest level since the data were first collected in 2010. Attributing this trend to migration doesn’t account for the fact that both immigrants and non-immigrants have followed the same trajectory.

(*Comment*, <https://comment.org/not-so-secular-sweden/>)

Sufism in Central Asia wades into digital world

In Central Asia, some Sufi groups are attempting to balance “the preservation of tradition with the demands of digital culture,” write Bekzhan Azhimov, Nurlan Kairbekov, Zholaman Bulan and Tussipkhan Imammadi (scholars based at Kazakh universities) in an article published in the *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* (January). The authors selected four YouTube channels with a significant number of followers, in Central Asian languages or in Russian, which remains a lingua franca in those countries. Three channels are associated with the Naqshbandiyya order, while the fourth one promotes the (neo-Sufi) teachings of the influential thinker Said Nursi (1878–1960) from Turkey. The Naqshbandiyya’s deep historical roots in the region lend the digital presence of these orders a particular legitimacy, serving as a natural extension of an enduring heritage. Among the study’s main findings, several deserve emphasis. First, the thematic core of online Sufi preaching revolves around universal ethical values—love, compassion, humility, and self-purification—rather than technical theological or juridical debates. This distinguishes Sufi digital discourse from that of other Islamic currents, which tend to foreground questions of creed (*aqida*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*).

Secondly, a recurring narrative thread across the accounts studied is the concept of *insān kāmil* (the “perfect human”), presented as both a spiritual ideal and an ethical framework for personal transformation. Third, one can notice a tension between openness and esotericism, with Sufi



Screenshot from Sheikh Nazim's Salтанat TV, one of the YouTube channels examined as part of the study on digital Sufism in Central Asia.

preachers deliberately withholding their core mystical practices—particularly *zikr* and the specifics of the master-disciple relationship—from digital spaces, reserving them for direct, guided transmission. Still, there are also instances of virtual *zikr* sessions (online spiritual communities) and individualized mentorship may be achieved through interactive Q&A sessions, direct messaging, and online mentorship programs, which seek to replicate aspects of the traditional sheikh-disciple relationship. Moreover, “sermons and posts often address modern personal and social issues, such as stress, alienation, and ethical dilemmas, while embedding these discussions within a Sufi spiritual framework.” There is a pragmatic adaptation to a medium that rewards accessibility but sometimes struggles to convey the experiential depth of Sufi practice, according to the authors.

(*Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/>)

Growing impact of Pentecostalism on Protestant churches in Nigeria

In addition to the impact of members switching affiliations, Pentecostalism has been reshaping traditional Protestant churches in Nigeria through their adoption of Pentecostal practices, write Nigerian scholars Adideran Amos Ayoola, Paul Adedotun Adesupo, and John Bgenga Ayandiya in the *International Journal of Humanities, Literature and Art Research* (January). Their research is based on a literature review as well as a survey of 100 respondents in 10 churches of the Ogbomoso North Local Government Area of Oyo State. Sixty-five percent of the respondents



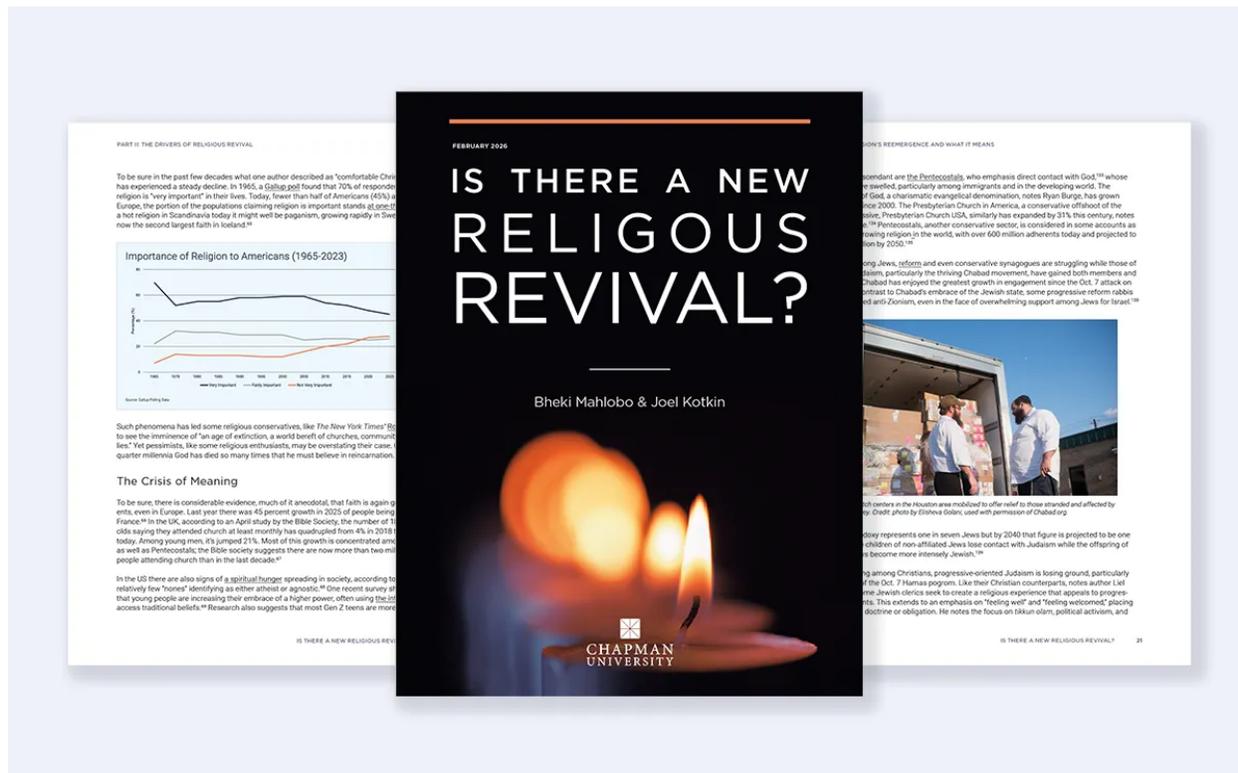
transitioned directly from Protestant churches to Pentecostal denominations. The majority are relatively recent additions to the Pentecostal movement, with 60 percent having joined within the last 10 years. Eighty percent of the respondents considered the exercise of spiritual gifts— healings, miracles, signs and wonders—to be a primary factor drawing people toward Pentecostal churches.

The authors note that “music has been central to the shift” in Protestant churches. Contemporary praise music, spontaneous prayer, night vigils, and deliverance sessions—once absent from Anglican, Methodist, or Baptist worship—have become increasingly common. “The adoption of spontaneous testimonies and altar calls also reflects Pentecostal influence,” they add. These practices were rare in Protestant settings prior to the 1980s, but have become increasingly normalized. Protestant devotional culture has thus been transformed. Pentecostal preaching styles have had an impact on Protestant homiletics, “with messages linking scripture to daily struggles.” House fellowships, cell systems, prayer bands, and discipleship classes are being adopted in an effort to increase lay participation. Media-driven evangelism strategies (radio, television, social media), long a Pentecostal hallmark, have been progressively adopted by historic denominations. While some dynamics have introduced tensions into Protestant spaces that were previously foreign to their institutional culture, Pentecostalism appears to have already left an indelible mark on Nigerian Christianity beyond its own ranks.

(International Journal of Humanities, Literature and Art Research, <https://mediterraneanpublications.com/mejhlr>)

Finding & Footnotes

■ Scholars, practitioners, and laypeople continue to argue about whether a religious revival is afoot, both in the U.S. and abroad. The new Chapman University-issued report, *Is There A New Religious Revival?*, by Bheki Mahlobo and Joel Kotkin, probably won't convince the naysayers, but the 32-page document is unique in bringing together a wide range of quantitative, qualitative, and anecdotal data in making the case for at least a quasi-religious or a "post-secular" resurgence. The authors acknowledge that, in much of the West at least, the indicators are more often pointing in the other direction, such as the widespread rates of non-affiliation among young adults. But they show that even this pattern is showing some signs of reversal, citing examples of young men returning and converting to religious groups ranging from the Orthodox and Hasidic Chabad movement to conservative Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox churches. Mahlobo and Kotkin place some credence in the "quiet revival" in the UK, even as critics have faulted surveys of this phenomenon for lacking true random samples. But the report is on more solid footing in its citing of shifts in the discourse of intellectuals toward religion and spirituality and away from the new atheism; the fact that religious affiliation has "evolved into a form of elite social behavior linked to stability, community leadership, and bourgeois respectability"; the ways in which religions are functioning as a form of "social insurance," substituting for government welfare, particularly for weak states; and "the growing evidence of religion's utility, including its provision of [a] spiritual anchor, [which] seems likely to grow by offering a viable alternative to [the] hyper-competitiveness and individualism rife in secular-driven societies." To download this report, visit: https://blogs.chapman.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/56/2026/02/Is-There-a-New-Religious-Revival_Report-2026.pdf



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

1) The recent appointment of Archbishop Ronald Hicks to the New York Archdiocese is one sign of the growing influence of the network based around Chicago's progressive **Cardinal Blase Cupich**. When it comes to playing "kingmaker" in U.S. episcopal appointments, Chicago's Cardinal Cupich is said to have few peers. Hicks, just appointed to the New York Archdiocese, is the fourth former deputy bishop of Cupich's to be named to a major American see in just the past 13 months. The three other prelates are Archbishop Jeffrey Grob of Milwaukee, Archbishop Michael McGovern of Omaha, and Archbishop Robert Casey of Cincinnati, each of whom was installed as an archbishop in 2025. Cupich promoted each to a key archdiocesan-wide position after his 2015 arrival in Chicago, with the four prelates accounting for more than 12 percent of all U.S. Latin Rite archbishops, the upper echelon of church leadership in the country. Cupich is also "a longtime member of the Vatican's Dicastery for Bishops and one of the most progressive prelates in the country, [underscoring] the considerable influence the Chicago cardinal has exerted on the U.S. episcopal landscape over the past decade," according to Jonathan Liedl. Cupich's close rapport with the late Pope Francis made him his eyes and ears in the U.S.



Cardinal Blase Cupich

The close relationship with Francis allowed Cupich to influence appointments beyond those involving his former subordinates, such as Cardinal Robert McElroy's placement in the Archdiocese of Washington after a Cardinal Cupich-led lobbying effort. The Vatican has also drawn heavily from Cupich's many auxiliary bishops (more than archdiocese) when looking to fill diocesan vacancies. In fact, Chicago auxiliaries accounted for nearly 50 percent of the 13 new bishops introduced at the recent bishops meeting in Baltimore. While there is no sign that Cupich's episcopal candidates all reflect his progressive views, they tend not to be known as "culture warriors," those who take public stands against progressive-backed departures from Christian morality in the wider society and generate "negative press" for the church. For instance, the "minor exorcism" performed by Springfield's Bishop Thomas Paprocki in 2013 in response to Illinois legalizing so-called "gay marriage" was the kind of action that would "not [be] looked upon favorably" by Cardinal Cupich and would get a candidate blocked from advancement. Cupich has played an outsized role in shaping the present-day American hierarchy, a reality that will come into even clearer focus with his former vicar general now archbishop of the influential New York archdiocese. (**Source:** *National Catholic Register*, February 3)

2) **Project Blitz**, an initiative created by the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation, Wallbuilders, and the National Legal Foundation, is one of the more influential efforts of the ambiguous Christian nationalist movement. While definitions and manifestations of Christian nationalism are disputed by both proponents and critics, the project translates admittedly Christian nationalist values and ideas into concrete legislative action at the state level. Modeled on the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Project Blitz produces model bills for sympathetic state legislators to introduce across the country, promoting measures such as displaying “In God We Trust” in public buildings, recognizing Christian Heritage Week, certifying student prayer rights, and establishing policies favoring heterosexual marriage and birth gender.

Between 2019 and 2021, Project Blitz introduced 241 bills in state legislatures, with Texas leading at 23 and 16 states seeing none at all. States with a stronger historical Christian-right presence saw more bills, independent of Republican legislative majorities or Trump’s 2016 vote share. Additionally, the proportion of evangelicals in a state positively predicts bill introductions, highlighting their role in fostering receptivity. Political scientist Kimberly Conger writes that a “Christian nationalist movement with a historical pedigree has a much stronger chance to both pass and implement its policy goals because the fields were plowed and ready from earlier activities of the Christian Right.” She argues that a strategy aiming at a change of laws at the state level seeks to “impact the foundation of how we approach democracy and its relationship to religion.” (Source: *Politics and Religion*, online January 14)



Source of illustration: The View from This Seat blog (<https://theviewfromthisseat.blogspot.com/2019/03/what-about-project-blitz.html>).