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How secular protests became spiritual, and religious

The protests that have filled the streets of American cities and towns in the past month over police violence and racism have been reported to carry strong religious elements, both in implicit and explicit ways. When the protests first started and came under the leadership of the Black Lives Matter movement, it wasn't clear that religion would have a significant role in these events, largely because past activities and positions of the movement embraced a leftist black nationalism that distanced itself from traditional African American religious institutions [see RW, Vol. 31, No. 6]. But the protests over the killing of George Floyd and other racial issues were large and diverse enough that both white and black local and national religious groups found themselves often front-and-center in these events. A report by *National Public Radio* (June 7, 2020) noted that it was the convergence of the corona virus pandemic, which disproportionately affected minority communities, with the Floyd killing, that reignited black church activism both in their neighborhoods and at the national level. "Though their approaches differ from wanting to work within the system to upending it altogether, many black pastors say there's been little leadership coming from Washington," according to the article.

The groundswell of activism by religious leaders and faith was "reminiscent of what occurred during the civil rights movement in the 1960s," reports *Reuters* (June 9, 2020). The activism was also unique because conservative and liberal clergy and religious groups of various races were involved. "We're seeing it at the grassroots level. We're seeing rabbis walk alongside Muslim leaders, walking alongside Catholic priests and religious sisters," said John Zokovitch, executive director of the Catholic peace group Pax Christi USA. "We are seeing that race cuts across all religious denominations."



While liberal groups were important in shaping the emergent movement, in a similar way as they did in the civil rights movement, the protests soon attracted a more diverse set of participants." These conventional religious actors and groups were also joined by activists drawing on non-institutional black and African spiritual teachings and practices. The *Berkley Forum* (June 9, 2020), a publication of Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion and International Affairs, reports that many key BLM figures see the movement as spiritual as well as political. For instance, in BLM protests in Los Angeles, protestors recited the names of those killed in police violence as spiritual ancestors, with

libations poured on the ground as each name was called followed by the chant of “Ase” from the West African religion Ifa.

BLM stresses “healing justice,” which calls for healing from racial trauma, involving “a syncretistic blend of African and indigenous cultures’ spiritual practices and beliefs, embracing ancestor worship, ifa-based ritual such as chanting, dancing, and summoning deities, and healing practices such as acupuncture, reiki, therapeutic massage, and plant medicine in much of its work, including protest. That work, though, often remains invisible,” writes Herbah Farrag. While some see BLM as secularizing the new civil rights movement, Farrag argues that the movement’s “marginalization of patriarchal and hierarchical modalities of religion informs its members’ reinterpretation and expression of faith, political expression, radical organizing, and community-building.” The use of martyr language and imagery has also become increasingly prominent in BLM and other protests over police violence, writes Adam Ployd in the current issue of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Winter, 2020). Writing before the Floyd killing, Ployd cites the 2014 case of Michael Brown’s shooting and death in Ferguson, MO as being one in a long line of efforts to use martyr language and commemorations for protestors against injustice. He argues that to question the virtue of those killed in these police confrontations misses the point that they belong to the “cloud of witnesses” testifying to American injustice.

Politically conservative publications tended to focus on what they see as the implicit and sometimes explicit religious elements in the protests, especially for white participants. Kyle Smith, writing in the *National Review* (June 22, 2020), reports on protests that include such actions as corporate acts of repentance, kneeling in deference before black people, reliving the minutes George Floyd was pinned to the ground before his death by prostrating themselves on the ground, and foot washings in acts of contrition for the sins of white supremacy and racism. Smith argues that such actions and much of the protests represents a “transmutation of white guilt into a cult, a religion that borrows from and intersects with Christianity but substitutes its own liturgy.” At the center is the belief in the sacred quality on blackness. “Fallen white people can get closer to the divine by showing due deference in any way they can,” whether it be buying books to learn how to overcome white supremacy, donating money or apologizing to black friends and acquaintances, or engaging in “iconoclastic actions” of defacing and toppling statues deemed racist. Smith sees the main religious dimension to the protests and the wider movements of “woke politics,” such as LGBTQ and feminist activism, as extending to “ex-communications” (in other words, firings) and public shaming and denouncing of colleagues and others who are seen as “blasphemers” (or racists).

Commentary magazine (June 8, 2020) goes a step further, comparing much of the protests (even if their cause was just at the beginning) to a classic case of cultic behavior, citing such debatable earmarks of this phenomenon as brainwashing and deprogramming. Abe Greenwald writes that the cultic ingredients of family disassociation, with some activists counseling protestors to shun family members who are not sympathetic to BLM; rituals, such as the public pledges, kneeling and foot-washing, and that have taken place at many protests, and the alienation resulting from months in isolation and financial distress, are all present in the protests. On the latter point, Greenwald writes that as “any hoped-for resumption of normal life was pushed ever further into the future...millions of Americans were broken, psychologically deprogrammed, and made into ideal potential cult recruits. (And it didn’t help that they were denied physically attendance at actual religious services the whole time). Emptied of the things they had previously relied on to know who they were—including the presumed soundness of the American system in which they participated—people took to the protests like it was the only real thing in the world. It brought purpose, structure, moral focus, and a new true north to millions of shapeless lives.”

(*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, <https://jes.pennpress.org/home/>; *Berkeley Forum*, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/the-fight-for-black-lives-is-a-spiritual-movement>)

Religious streaming services expand during pandemic

The shutdowns during the pandemic has also “expanded an already flourishing industry of faith-based streaming services,” reports the Economist. “At a time when trust in the mainstream Media is low, America’s faith-oriented entertainment industry is thriving. FaithTV and Godify both offer “entertaining Christian content to a diverse following” - Among the throng of denominational streaming services are Pure Flix and Crossflix, designed for evangelical audiences, and TN Saints, the “official” streaming service of the Mormon Church of Latter-day Saints. A good deal of the appeal of these services is their safeness. The Living Scriptures website promises “Good Clean fun. Film’s in the Living Scriptures library are the fruit of the Utah’s burgeoning “Mormon movie Industry, affectionately nicknamed 'Molltfre' films, which started over a century ago. Many of these companies have crossover appeal to evangelicals, Mormons, and even Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. *Christianity Today* (May/June) reports that last year’s entrance into streaming industry by Disney “quickly eclipsed niche faith and family services,” accenting a trend toward film companies shying away from explicit portrayals of faith. But it is likely that mainstream services, such as Disney Netflix, will also remain in play for many religious families because of their high-quality productions and occasional additions of a few faith-friendly shows, such as the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

(*Christianity Today*, 465 Gundersen, Carol Stream, IL 60188)



American Muslims rethinking Islamic ban on adoption

With many Muslim children orphaned in the context of humanitarian crises, Muslim voices advocating not only for care of orphans, but also for their adoption into Muslim families are starting to be heard, writes Nermeen Mouftah (Butler University, Indianapolis) in an article titled “The Muslim Orphan Paradox,” to be published in a coming issue of *Contemporary Islam* and already available as preprint (March, 2020). Care for the orphans is a recommended form of giving in Islam, even more so because Prophet Muhammad himself had become an orphaned child. At the same time, all Islamic legal schools consider adoption as prohibited. Islamic law emphasizes that lineage should be maintained and a father’s name should not be given to a non-biological child. This does not rule out “formal and informal mechanisms of care” or guardianship, Mouftah writes. Some Muslims, however, consider care as more important than

legal religious views and have adopted children. Based on four years of fieldwork, the article uses the issue of adoption as an example for illustrating how Muslims navigate Islamic law (in an American context in this case). All accept the Islamic tradition, but there are various ways of thinking about it or using it for shaping one's daily practices.

Muslim advocates of adoption “mobilize Euro-American, Christian, and secular values and concepts” in their efforts for advancing their views. But Mouftah warns that one should not see the debate as binary. Those who support the prohibition “are likewise concerned with creating a form of childcare that adheres” to Islamic law. There are also attempts to clarify the traditional ban on adoption. A 2011 document from the Muslim Women's Shura Council stated that prohibition only applied to the dissimulation of lineage. Connecting their advocacy to voicing the rights of women, this group also claimed that a woman can adopt. A younger generation of Muslim leaders stresses that Islamic law should answer the needs of the Muslim community. Some have both an Islamic training and experience in social welfare. Mouftah observes that a challenge for Muslims in North America is “deploying unfamiliar Arabic terminology that do not have equivalents in the English-language US or international laws.”

Some families manage to make the best use of various options in Islamic law for solving the issues they are facing, often by selecting positions from different legal schools. The three key issues from an Islamic legal viewpoint are identity, inheritance and the fact that a child who is not from the family lineage is considered as marriageable to members of that family according to Islamic law. According to guidelines provided in 2017 by the Fiqh Forum, “The Islamic Position Regarding the Care of Orphans and Abandoned Children,” the inheritance issue can be solved through bequest and the third issue through breastfeeding: “In Islamic law, if non-biological siblings drink the same breastmilk, the sibling group behaves as biological siblings (they cannot marry one another, and do not need to apply the norms of Islamic decorum and covering with each other).” As Mouftah remarks, the 2017 document should be seen as attempts by religious authorities to accommodate changes already underway. It did not fully answer the expectations of adoption advocates, but they saw it as a first step. Mouftah concludes by suggesting that the debates about orphan care illustrate Muslim efforts to reform family law as well as decisions by Muslim believers in America about what they see as essential to living the tradition.

(*Contemporary Islam* - <https://www.springer.com/journal/11562>)



CURRENT RESEARCH

● **Church attendance in the mainline Presbyterian Church (USA) has actually increased for larger congregations during the pandemic, while it has dropped for smaller churches,** according to a survey of pastors in the denomination. The survey, conducted by the denomination, found that congregations with 26-100 average worshippers have declined, but has increased for those with over 100 typically in attendance. This suggests that more visitors are gravitating to larger churches for online worship. “It is also consistent with reports from pastors of small churches, in which many are encouraging their worshippers to visit other services.” The survey found that 90 percent of congregations report that giving has decreased since the outbreak. But most feel that they will be able to manage with little to no reduction in expenses. But 10 percent fear they may have to make significant budget cuts in order to survive and seven percent are concerned that the financial pressures may lead to serious consequences. In response to needs created by the pandemic, 33 percent report having begun a time of prayer for healthcare workers, 32 percent expanded existing food distribution programs, and 27 percent have sewn face masks.



(The study can be downloaded here: <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Report-COVID-and-PCUSA.pdf>)

● **Women running for office are less likely to emerge and succeed in more religious areas of the U.S., but this pattern holds less true in districts that are “women friendly” in terms of political leadership, according to an article in the journal *Politics and Religion* (online in June).** Past studies have shown that women candidates are less likely to emerge and succeed in areas with greater numbers of religious identifiers, especially in more competitive contexts, such as the U.S. House of Representatives. Nicholas Pyeatt of Penn State University and Alixandra Yanus of High Point University look at women running for office in state legislatures rather than the House of Representatives and find considerable differences in results depending on whether the particular district has had women running for office and/or winning elections. The researchers analyze state legislature data and find that context, as well as religious composition of voters, is important in these more local environments for women’s entrance and success in politics. While religion did have a consistent negative effect for the representation of women, in districts with high percentages of religious adherents and evangelical Protestant identifiers,” they conclude.



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

● **A study of sermons in churches in Africa finds that they show different kinds of approaches to political participation that influence members' involvement in society.** The *Washington Post* (June 5, 2020) cites the study, “From Pews to Politics: Religious Sermons and Political Participation in Africa,” by Rachel Beatty Riedl and Gwyneth H. McClendon, as comparing Christian belief across Africa to how it relates to views about the possibility of change in this world and the sources of societal problems and how this affects the efficacy of political participation. Through a detailed examination of the content of sermons preached in churches, the authors find four ways that churchgoers engage in politics: Those who attended churches teaching liberation theology had a high belief in the possibility of change and assign collective responsibility for problems. These people are highly engaged in politics and social activism. People who attend contemporary Pentecostal churches in Africa also had a high belief in the possibility of change in this world, but they attribute individual sin as the cause of problems and look to transformation through leadership training, influencing public officials, and converting others to make inward change.

People who attended contemporary mainline Protestant and Catholic churches had a low belief in the possibility of change in this world, yet point to collective responsibility for problems. These “Reluctant Reformers” are sometimes engaged in petitioning and protesting and tend to focus on structural change as the solution to governance problems. In contrast, people in the traditions stemming from the early 20th century Holiness tradition (a precursor to modern Pentecostalism in Africa) showed low belief in the possibility of change in this world, are rarely engaged in politics and instead are focused on individual transformation and growth.

(*Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/06/05/how-religion-shapes-africans-political-behavior/>)



Santa Muerte—a folk saint for both sides in the drug wars

Both narcos and those who fight against them actually turn to the skeleton saint known as Santa Muerte for spiritual favors and protection, writes Kate Kingsbury and Andrew Chesnut in the *International Journal of Latin American Religions* (June 2020). In over ten years of observation in Mexico and abroad, the researchers found that the growing cult of Santa Muerte extends beyond the narco subculture (see **RW**, Nov. 2017). Mexican authorities have destroyed thousands of shrines dedicated to Santa Muerte across the country as part of their difficult fight

against the powerful drug cartels. Kingsbury and Chestnut’s research is based mostly on interviews in person, but also on online interviews, since there are more than one thousand Santa Muerte groups with tens of thousands of members. Different from other folk saints derived from folk heroes, Santa Muerte personifies death. The cult emerged into public space from the late 20th century. It is denounced by the Catholic Church, but many people deem her to work miracles. Her veneration is mostly unorganized and informal, although there are also organized forms, such as Santa Muerte Internacional (SMI), a global network of affiliated public shrines.



Due to a constant uncertainty about life and death in drug related violence in Mexico, the cult of Santa Muerte can be used to explain, predict and control events by all those involved, in an attempt to control violent circumstances supernaturally, although the popularity of the cult is not limited to them. This shows how the cult of Santa Muerte has different meanings for different people, either as a narco saint or as a saint who protects them from narcos. It is also popular in jails, with SMI’s most important activity being its prison ministry. Prisoners hope to be kept safe and to get their sentence reduced, but Santa Muerte is popular among prison guards as well, though in a more concealed way. According to Kingsbury and Chesnut, the views of Santa Muerte as a narco saint is reductionistic. Despite those stereotypes, members of the armed forces fighting drug cartels and policemen also ask for her protection, and for good a death. By doing so, they seek access to heaven instead of a long stay in purgatory, as well as the protection of their families. Thus the Santa Muerte “is not so much the guardian angel of drug traffickers as she is the matroness of the drug war.”

(*International Journal of Latin American Religions* - <https://link.springer.com/journal/41603/>)

Export of Afro-Brazilian religions producing different syntheses for different audiences

Afro-Brazilian religions abroad do not only serve the religious needs of Brazilian diasporas, but also encounter the religious searches of diverse audiences for spiritual practices of Brazil, giving rise to new experiences and religious groups operating according to different logics, writes Amurabi Oliveira (Federal University of Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Brazil) in the *International Journal of Latin American Religions* (June 2020). Her observations are based on fieldwork in Brazil and elaborate on a discussion with the Uruguayan male priest of an Umbanda temple in Barcelona, Spain. Notwithstanding debates about an alleged “purity” of Afro-American religions, some Umbanda temples interact with the New Age movement in Brazil, too, reflecting the wide range of variations within Umbanda. The Barcelona temple shows characteristics of a New Age center and includes Umbanda. It presents itself as syncretistic shamanism—shamanism being seen as “a concept that people in Europe know about.”

The Umbanda temple is combined with an esoteric house, offering divinatory practices (e.g. tarot) as well as various esoteric products for sale. Those initiated into Umbanda also have access to the various rituals of the religion around the year. It is also an adjustment to a European

environment, with elements of the New Age bringing legitimacy, but Umbanda being central in terms of ritual practice. Unrelated to actual shamanism, the concept of (neo-)shamanism is being used for engaging Umbanda “in an extensive dialogue with other cultural matrices.” Thus, the center functions both for a wider audience, with a version of Umbanda based on the concept of syncretistic shamanism, and for people initiated into Umbanda, who practice the rituals of Umbanda and of other Afro-Brazilian religions.

(*International Journal of Latin American Religions* - <https://link.springer.com/journal/41603/>)



Anglicans divided over shape of post-pandemic church life and ministry

The Church of England and the wider Anglican world are experiencing “accelerated changes” from the pandemic which may have serious consequences for “brick-and-mortar” church life after this crisis, according to reports. *The Economist* (June 4, 2020) reports that “Empty pews in the Church of England have been replaced by packed-out virtual congregations. A quarter of Britons have attended an online religious service since lockdown began, providing a boost to a faith that has seen dwindling church attendance.” The charismatic megaparish, Holy Trinity Brompton, which meets in four locations, has doubled its attendance to nearly 10,000. This new vitality is “exposing a gulf between clergy who think of online services as a necessary (and temporary) evil and those who want to innovate. The government has said churches should remain closed until at least July, but liberal vicars are keen for [such] change to outlast the crisis. Some even think churches, with their fussy hierarchies, get in the way of spreading the Lord’s message.” But conservatives are concerned that their liberal peers are exploiting the crisis to



challenge the dominance of church worship in the Christian faith. Some conservative clergy are taking the government to court for keeping churches closed. Surveys find that church members agree, with one finding that two-thirds of regular churchgoers want churches open by July. In response, liberal priests are saying that if churches reopen, and innovations keep going, they believe they can attract more people to the faith.

An article in the conservative Anglican news service *Virtue Online* (May 29, 2020) cites a *Times of London* report noting that the switch to virtual services has convinced some C of E leaders to respond to the “massive shrinkage” in parish churches and dioceses that it runs. The incoming Bishop of York, Stephen Cortrell, has been appointed to review the future of the church’s 42 dioceses, with some sources saying he is willing to consider making dramatic cuts in the number of historical buildings. The rise of online services “has vastly accelerated a dramatic change in the way the Church of England will do its stuff because of declining attendance and declining revenues.” This includes rethinking about the upkeep of its 43 cathedrals and 16,000 churches, its large number of bishops, and merging diocese’s functions of administration, education, and theological training. The pandemic, in effect, has presented the church with a “blank sheet,” where it may be necessary to “define what we mean by ‘church.’” I think for too long `church has meant a building and a vicar and possibly a geographic area to serve,” Cortrell said.

The call for radical change dovetails with a growing emphasis on “intentional discipleship” in Anglican churches around the world, which is now making its way into theological education, according to Stephen Spencer. Writing in the *Journal of Anglican Studies* (Online in April), Spencer notes that initiatives such as the “Season of Intentional Discipleship,” which is used in dioceses around the world, reflects a growing consensus that Christianity should be applied to all of life and not confined to church activities and those in ministry. That is not exactly a novel teaching, and the article adds that the turn to discipleship, which has been the theme of recent Anglican Consultative Council meeting and the communion-wide Lambeth Conference of 2020, is more about churches “returning to ancient ways.” Fears about the survival and growth of many Anglican churches has also revived a concern about fostering daily Christian living and the importance of sharing the faith with others.

But the discipleship theme is more challenging to bring into theological education, since seminary programs separate the potential clergy from laypeople and removes them from “a community of disciples.” Other forms of theological education are based on a university model where the emphasis is on theological learning and reasons and sits uncomfortably with discipleship and its emotional and relational approach to Christianity. These two kinds of training are also facing financial pressures, with students in the global South unable to afford traditional education at seminaries and theological colleges. Spencer cites the widespread effort known as Theological Education by Extension (TEE), which started among Asian churches as an alternative to traditional seminaries. TEE is a “holistic approach,” that allows churches to offer theological training to laypeople and emerging leaders. The program is based on individual learning but also students’ involvement in local learning groups, followed by some form of practical application. Typically, a course is completed in three months and then the learner proceeds to the next course, leading to diocesan or parish certificate or diploma. Some of these programs are accredited by denominations, but Spencer notes that TEE groups can reproduce rapidly, as they don’t require buildings, professors, or scholarships; group leaders are more mentors than teachers. The shift from students to apprentices in this model fits well with the new emphasis on discipleship, though this “flipped” classroom approach still needs the expertise and support from traditional theological educational institutions.

(*The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2020/06/04/online-services-swell-the-church-of-englands-congregations?>; *VirtueOnline*, <https://virtueonline.org/church-england-faces-massive-shrinkage-owing-covid-19-pandemic>; *Journal of Anglican Studies*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-anglican-studies/latest-issue>)

Muslim-background intellectuals find place in European far-right

While much of the far-right targets Islam as a foreign and undesirable religion, Muslims and ex-Muslims are “increasingly prominent” in the West European far right groups, bringing a new spirituality to this often secular movement, writes Julian Gopffarth and Esra Ozyurek in the journal *Ethnicities* (online in June, 2020). When most far right groups and leaders have referred to religion it has usually been about claiming a Christian heritage (or a Pagan identity in some cases), even though actual Christian belief and practice has been found to be weak. The researchers look at the case of the German far right group AfD (Alternative for Germany), which has recently started Jewish and now Muslim-background groups to reach new demographics with its populist and nationalist message. They find that the number of Muslim-background members have been growing, with books and other publications authored by them becoming influential in far-right networks. While ex-Muslims are valued in these groups for providing an insiders’ knowledge of Islam, practicing Muslims depict their involvement in the far right as showing the “potential of Islam for a revived German nationalism,” Gopffarth and Ozyurek write.

The Muslim-background intellectuals tend to be of Turkish, Kurdish, and other Middle Eastern origins as well as German by birth and are demographically diverse. In examining the writings of 14 Muslim-background intellectuals, the authors find that such writers and activists as Seyran Ates and sociologist Necla Kelek are strongly anti-Muslim, drawing a stark contrast between the liberalism rationality of German society versus what they see as the Eastern irrationality and barbarism of Islamic society.

Other activists, such as Ahmad Mansour, describe themselves as Muslim but promote a radical reform of Islam, especially in the area of gender equality and the prevention of radicalization. Such radical reformers believe that Muslims in Germany will have to undergo their own version of the sexual revolution to overcome an authoritarian and repressive identity and “become mature citizens ready for democracy.” Compared



to these two groups, other networks are more devoutly Muslim and are becoming more visible in far-right circles. Represented by such intellectuals as Ai-Bakr and Eren Guverci and the Al Muribitun movement, this network views the spiritual potential of Islam complementing the essential spirituality of the German people, seeking to revive the view (held by some Nazis) that Islam is a more vital and heroic religion than Christianity and rationalism. The last network consists of ex-Muslims who are the most adamantly anti-Islamic (and illiberal) as they celebrate the German nation. The article concludes that the liberal and illiberal ways in which ways the

far-right responds to Islam shows how it is pursuing new recruits for taking up a German nationalist identity.

(*Ethnicities*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/etn>)

Russian Orthodox Church sees the Internet as a crucial tool for outreach

The Russian Orthodox presence online has been strongly developed after initial skepticism, especially as a way to attract young people and to show the Church as intellectually vibrant, and its significance is bound to increase as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic, writes Jacob Lassin (Davies Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University) in the monthly magazine *Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West* (June 2020). At first, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) had been suspicious of the Internet as a space in which immorality might spread and Christian religious life become endangered. But subsequently, it has come to recognize the integration of the Internet into the daily lives of the people, and to see it as a useful instrument for reaching the Russian population and reinforcing its influence. It attempts to create attractive websites, similar to those used by Russian people for secular purposes. The ROC is aware of online criticism against the church and thus invests considerable resources for developing its presence online and making itself attractive to young people, especially those with a higher education. It wants to see more young people in church and to dispel the image of parishes attracting primarily older people.

Lassin observes that sites cover a wide ideological spectrum, from the conservative website pravoslavie.ru (established as early as 1999) to the more open and diverse content of pravmir.ru. Moreover, the ROC has noticed the rise of social networks and launched its own, elitsy.ru, complemented by a variety of other resources (online TV channel, and digital pilgrimages). The strategy of creating its own social network seems also to aim at preserving the faithful from critical discussions about the church that may take place in other similar settings. Moreover, some prominent priests publish their widely read own blogs or pages, something that can be a



blessing for the church, but also cause embarrassment when they voice criticism of the Church leadership. One such alternative voice is Ahilla.ru, a website founded in 2017 in response to the church's political involvement by a former priest. A study of the website by the journal *Entangled Religions* (11.3) finds that while Ahilla.ru emerged from the inside of the church but now unites church dissidents whose anonymous discussions about the church and its leadership create an alternative space to challenge the hierarchy, writes Hannah Staehle.

Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West, Institut G2W, Bederstrasse 76, 8002 Zurich, Switzerland - <https://www.g2w.eu/>; *Entangled Religions*, <https://er.ceres.rub.de/>)

The Wenzhou model fostering the rise of Chinese Christian nationalism?

Business-friendly evangelical churches originating in the Wenzhou region of China are expanding globally, serving as a new model of missions, but may also be spreading Chinese nationalism, according to two reports. In the evangelical Hong Kong-based journal *China Source* (June 8, 2020), Brad Fulton looks at how Chinese Christians from Wenzhou—considered China’s Bible belt—have pioneered in a model of missions where church planting networks follow the circuit of business entrepreneurs and their overseas contacts and opportunities. Because of their isolated geography that keeps some distance from China’s religious restriction, Wenzhou’s churches have created an infrastructure for programs and resources for churches



throughout the country and beyond, as well as inspiring persecuted Christians. But the particularity of the region, with a distinct dialect difficult for outsiders to understand, and the way Wenzhou Christians tend to keep to their own “tribe” in their missions is problematic, Fulton writes. Add to that, Wenzhou’s “boss Christians,” who too easily export business style into ministry, can just as easily tarnish the reputation of Christianity in areas where they are too closely to commercial expansion, such as in China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

In the journal *PentecoStudies* (19:1), Nanlai Cao, who coined the term “boss Christians” in her studies of Wenzhou’s churches, turns her attention to Wenzhou’s missions abroad. She finds that Wenzhou Christians “doing business in other places are eager to establish their own churches and are reluctant to cooperate with local Christians in their church-building projects. There are also large Wenzhou churches in Europe, particularly in Italy, Spain, and France... Instead of being integrated into Western or even other overseas Chinese Christian community, the ‘Wenzhou model’ of churches in Europe operates on a basis of autonomy and maintains close transnational ties to the church communities back in Wenzhou, resembling the business dealings of Wenzhou immigrant enclaves in Europe.” Rather than targeting Westerners, as is the case with most “reverse missions,” Wenzhou prioritize reaching Chinese immigrants. Second-generation members do engage in outreach, as is the case during the pandemic when they handed out desperately needed face masks while evangelizing local Italians. Chinese lay preachers even linked the pandemic in Italy to be part of Europe’s “spiritual crisis” and the increasing “lack of testimony” among Europeans. Cao concludes that Wenzhou’s Christians are spiritualizing the nationalism among other Chinese business leaders in the West as they see China as taking the “last baton in the global evangelical movement.”

(*ChinaSource Quarterly*, <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/the-wenzhou-model-and-missions-from-china/>; *PentecoStudies*, <https://journals.equinoxpub.com/PENT>)

Hindu deities drafted as 'celestial epidemiologists' in war against COVID-19

COVID-19 has “increased the goddesses’ workload,” as deities are being repurposed from other causes by Hindus to help fight the virus, reports *The Conversation* (June 15, 2020).

Anthropologist Tulasi Srinivas writes that there have historically been several goddesses that have been delayed during many deadly pandemics in India from ancient to modern times. Collectively known as “Amman,” or the Divine Mother, the goddesses of contagion, Srinivas finds in her research that “small shrines all over India dedicated to these goddesses of contagion, often in rural, forested areas outside village and town limits...The goddesses act as “celestial epidemiologists” curing illness. But if angered they can also inflict disease such as poxes, plagues, sores, fevers, tuberculosis and malaria. They are both poison and cure.”



With the greater use of traditional medicine in India over the decades, contagion goddesses were waning in influence, but COVID-19 has revived a handful of them, as they have “developed rich post-pox lives, reinventing themselves for modern afflictions.” With the shutdown of temples and other sites of public rituals, many of the healing rites have become home bound. Priests offer special home decorations, “including garlands of acidic lemons believed to placate the goddesses,” and they have also been portrayed in posters by Indian artists on Facebook. On such artwork features a hygienically masked Mother

India attacking the coronavirus with a trident. “The goddesses’ many gloved hands grasp sanitizer, masks, vaccination needles and other medical equipment.” Meanwhile, a new deity called “Corona Devi” has been installed in a temple dedicated to the pox goddess. The priest plans to offer worship for “Corona Warriors” – health care workers, firefighters, and other frontline personnel. Srinivas concludes, “Here science and faith are not seen as inimical to one another, but as working together, hand-in-glove.”

(*The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/indias-goddesses-of-contagion-provide-protection-in-the-pandemic-just-dont-make-them-angry-139745?>)

Findings & Footnotes

■ Last month, we neglected to mention an important special issue of the journal *International Affairs* (March, 2020) devoted to the interaction between international relations and the discipline of religious studies. It is not as arcane as it sounds, with editor Katherine Brown writing in the introduction to the issue that “we cannot understand international affairs without understanding religion and also that we cannot understand religion without understanding international affairs.” But Brown adds that the actual research on the interaction between the two fields



in the has generated a paltry 72 articles with religion as the main subject since the flagship journal began in 1922. Fifty-two of these articles focus on Islam, with just 7 on Christianity 4 on Hinduism and none on Buddhism. In redressing this poor track record, the issue pays special attention to groups and movements considered marginal, including articles on the role of women in the Islamic State, the prospects of “post-secular counter-terrorism” in dealing with the IS, and how engagement with faith-based environmental activism can be effective by taking the theology of its participants seriously. For more information on this issue, visit: <https://academic.oup.com/ia>

■ *Strange Rites* (Public Affairs, \$16.99), by Tara Isabella Burton, is a valuable book that shines a bright light on the underside of American religion and spirituality, even if their “godless” proponents and participants may not always recognize them as such. The culturally conversant Burton offers the reader in-depth “participant observation” in the lifestyles, beliefs, half-beliefs, and doubts as well as the often experimental and “remixed” rituals, practices, and new forms of community in the growing population of the non-affiliated. Burton acknowledges that the “nones” are a diverse population, with many holding conventional beliefs, if not practices, and others increasingly non-religious and non-spiritual, but she tends to focus on the “spiritual fluidity” and mix-and-match quality of one segment of this unwieldy group (which can also include believers affiliated with particular religions) Thus, Burton estimates that at least half of all Americans may be “remixed.” As other studies of “spiritual-but-not-religious” Americans have shown, many have a free-floating spirituality and sense of the transcendent that they attach to a wide range of activities that they claim as the most authentic to their lives.



Through an interesting detour through American religious history, Burton shows that all of this remixing is not necessarily something brand new, although social media has intensified it.. The book is most informative in teasing out (sometimes reading like a dizzying catalog of a whole era) the subtle shades of spirituality and even actual religion in the secular and not-so secular environs of Soulcycle, Jediism, video games, the Satanic Temple, the alt-right, Jordan Peterson, Black Lives Matters activism, safe spaces, transhumanism, utopian kink and polyamorous relationships, political magic and witchcraft, social justice warriors, Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop and the idea of “self-care,” Harry Potter fandom (which, in fact, has influenced many of these new spiritual/religious expressions), performance art, and most of all, consumerism and the branding of spirituality.

Although these new forms may not provide the meanings, rituals, and community of traditional religions, their remixed quality doesn’t necessarily demand such “one-stop-shopping”; for instance, one can have the need for rituals provided yoga and the need for meaning provided by political activism. Burton notes that the multiplicity of these new religious forms obviously reflects and intensifies the fragmentation of modern life, especially as people sort themselves out into like-minded tribes (electrified by fan culture). Where all this ferment is leading (especially in the wake of a global pandemic and what has been called a new “cultural revolution” stemming from the protests, all of which took place right after this book was in the galleys), is anyone’s guess. But the reader can only admire the lengths Burton goes to make sense of this chaotic and quite unsecular brave new world.