

Southern Baptists pointing to evangelical moderation or just more polarization?

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) has been in the spotlight lately, not only for its national meeting in early June, but also for the way that the 14 million-member denomination is said to reflect the wide-ranging changes evangelicalism is undergoing. In the space of a few months, the church body has undergone its own “racial reckoning” over the controversial “critical race theory” (CRT), a continuing scandal over clergy sexual abuse, and rumors of an impending schism between ultraconservatives and the SBC mainstream over church teachings and politics. In the conservative political web magazine *The Dispatch* (June 20), journalist David French frames the SBC story as a struggle between evangelicals and politicized fundamentalists, with the former decisively winning. The election of Ed Litton, who is known more as a “pastor than a culture warrior,” represented this toned-down evangelical approach, stressing racial reconciliation and addressing clerical sex abuse. French reports that the convention also watered down a pro-life statement that would have rejected incrementalist approaches to ending abortion and refrained from a clear condemnation of CRT while retaining an earlier critical statement on the theory. Outgoing president J.D. Greear publicly expressed his regret that the SBC had gained a reputation as a political organization during the past few years. French concludes that by taking the above actions the SBC has effectively given the “nation hope that a commitment to a faith carries with it a commitment to morality, and that morality can be centered in both justice and grace.”

For its part, the conservative Reformed newsletter, the *Aquila Report* (June 21), views the SBC meeting as mainly a victory for “elitists and woke-minded Southern Baptists,” adding that “Southern Baptists should stop and remember that Ed Litton won that race by 556 votes. Despite all of the attempts by the platform personalities to assure us that we are united and ‘together on mission,’ there is no denying that the division within the SBC right now is real.” Giving further play to this populist framing of church politics as a vehicle of elite control, the newsletter continues: “There were two types of Southern Baptists in the convention hall: those who wanted open discussion and opportunity to repudiate Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality vs. those

who wanted to avoid addressing those ideologies by name; those who wanted the voices of hundreds of Southern Baptists to be heard (through the submission of this resolution by more than 1300 church members) vs. those (primarily the Resolutions Committee chaired by James Merritt) who wanted those voices silenced....”

Meanwhile, in an interview in *Vox* (June 18), ex-evangelical philosopher Greg Thornbury provides the standard interpretation of the SBC and evangelicalism that has occupied the mainstream media for the last several years, viewing these developments largely in terms of politics and polarization. Thornbury points to how the SBC faces a “long-term numbers crisis,”



Source: Associated Press / *New York Times*.

as shown by recent sharp drops in baptisms. He says that Litton will maintain the denomination's right-wing Republican tendencies, which have only grown during the Trump years, causing a continuing alienation among the younger generations who are moving to the left. The main reason the ultra-conservative candidate Mike Stone and his Conservative Baptist Network didn't win at the convention was because delegates were "tired of all of this negative press attention and all this politics" and concerned that it could result in a replay of the "purge" of moderates from the denomination that took place in the 1970s and 1980s.

“Heavenly Mother” finds following and reveals divisions among Latter-day Saints

Teachings and references to the “Heavenly Mother” are finding their way into ordinary Mormons' religious life, informing children's books, poetry, and a new round of theological debates, according to an article in *Christian News* (June 7). In the article originally published in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Peggy

Fletcher Stack reports “a tidal wave of interest in this divine feminine among Latter-day Saints.... It has become almost a movement.” LDS teaching on a Heavenly Mother emerged when church founder Joseph Smith asserted that God was the literal father of Jesus and all human spirits, leaving Smith and subsequent church leaders to posit that the Heavenly Father must have a wife. But there are considerable differences over the roles of this divine feminine. The church has increasingly associated the Heavenly Mother with earthly mothers and their role as nurturers, while men are the presiders in church and family life. This view has



Source: By the Light of Grace, 2018.

been challenged by feminists and gay rights advocates, saying it leaves them out of the picture. The fact that Mormons are instructed not to pray to the Heavenly Mother (or receive messages from her) adds to the sense that husbands and fathers have the lead role in the faith, Stack writes.

Margaret Toscano, a feminist theologian who was expelled from the LDS partly over her views on the issue, argues that the Heavenly Mother's many roles in Mormon teaching "suggest a polymorphous divinity that makes room for non-gender-conforming individuals." But there is a general contestation about the identity of the Heavenly Mother. Some members criticize the way she has been interpreted by LDS feminists to reflect their non-binary and multicultural perspectives and would rather let her image remain abstract and mysterious. But others are filling in the blanks and appealing to a popular audience. There is now a "Girl's Guide to Heavenly Mother" and a "Boy's Guide to Heavenly Mother," as well as an art exhibit and poetry about the divine feminine. A recent conflict suggests the concept's church-dividing nature. In a recent Zoom seminar for Mormons in New York, LDS feminist theologian Fiona Givens speculated that the Heavenly Mother could be synonymous with the Holy Spirit. Givens was subsequently pressured to step down from her position at Brigham Young University's Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship following complaints about her comments.

Black Eastern Orthodox converts turn African American history into Orthodox history

Following in the footsteps of other religious movements associated with black identity, African American converts in the United States are adopting the full Orthodox doctrinal framework while adapting Orthodox forms to their history and needs, writes Elena V. Kravchenko in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (March). Her article is based on field research on the Brotherhood (now Fellowship) of St. Moses the Black, a group that was originally founded by Fr. Moses Berry of the Orthodox Church in America to provide assistance to Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees residing in St. Louis in the 1980s. Taking its name from a third-century Desert Father, the group now has chapters in a few cities, with both black and white members. Its publications not only emphasize the lives of African saints but draw a link between ancient African Christianity and the African American experience, similarly to the claims of other African American religious movements about their respective traditions.

Building on the Orthodox veneration for martyrs and exemplary people, members of the Brotherhood are "enfold[ing] Black Americans into the history of Orthodox Christianity" and recognizing African Americans who suffered for their faith, fought for the abolition of slavery, and engaged in the civil rights movement. They see the Orthodox tradition that has taken root among African Americans as "growing out of the seed of the blood of black American slave-martyrs for Christ," in the words of Fr. Berry. They reimagine African American history as Orthodox history, Kravchenko notes—although not claiming that the people they commemorate,

who were never exposed to Orthodoxy, should be inserted into the Orthodox calendar of saints. “We should hold them up as confessors and heroes for ourselves and especially our youth,” writes Fr. Paisius Altschul. These people are seen as a source of inspiration for peaceful protests against injustice in an Orthodox way, with Fr. Berry declaring that “to make a change, we reach towards heaven, not the unrighteous wisdom of this world.”

(*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, <https://academic.oup.com/jaar>)



Source: The Catalogue of Good Deeds, 2017

Hip-hop artists increasingly take Christianity along on ride to mainstream acceptance

Hip-hop music, a counterculture genre that emerged in the 1970s on the black and Latino streets of the Bronx, has seen a gradual shift toward Christian themes in recent years, reports Sandi Dolbee in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* (June 13). “After capturing the allegiance of generations of urban young people, a growing crew of hip-hop artists are taking their penchant for in-your-face narratives into the world of amazing grace,” she writes. “The underlying foundations and institutions of Black people and music in the Western world, including hip-hop, are rooted in religion,” says hip-hop scholar and fan Roy Whitaker, an associate professor of religion at San



Source: Max Pixel (Creative Commons Zero - CC0 License)

Diego State University. Dolbee adds that hip-hop “historians note that in the early days, many artists were influenced by Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam and even some Rastafarians. But there’s been a migration toward Christianity—with a hip-hop worldview that mixes social irreverence with born-again reverence.” At the genre’s outset, some churches and pastors were so opposed to the language, misogyny and hyper-sexuality of hip-hop that they publicly burned the CDs.

But the genre has won both religious and secular respect. By the end of 2017, hip-hop surpassed rock music to become the most popular genre in the country. “It also became firmly ensconced in many contemporary church services seeking to draw in a younger, more diverse congregation by finding ways to marry their own faith messages with the beats that resonated with hip-hop audiences,” Dolbee writes. Danny Baragan, the lead worship pastor at Rock Church in National City, says that some “people may walk in, and to be really honest, they get really uncomfortable hearing hip-hop in a church. But I think it’s a safe place for them to be in tension with that a little bit. And the hope would be that they would say, ‘Hey, this is being done positively. This is celebrating someone’s upbringing and culture and expression and you know what? I need to be a little more open-minded to that.’” Dolbee adds that the Christian turn may be a result of aging—Snoop is 49 years old, Kanye is 43, and the late DMX was 50. “I think we live our life one way

for so long and when it continues to give you the same results, you realize I need to change something. I need to grow up a little bit, and I need to mature in the way I approach life. And I think a lot of those guys realized that,” Barragan says. While DMX’s death in April “may be a reminder of the lifestyle tension between hip-hop and holiness, the musical blending appears to be here to stay,” Dolbee concludes.

CURRENT RESEARCH

- Increasing numbers of African American mosques are closing while the overall number of mosques in the United States continues to expand, according to a new report.** “The American Mosque 2020: Growing and Evolving,” a study jointly published by the Islamic Society of North America, the Center on Muslim Philanthropy, and the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, was conducted by Ihsan Bagby, who produced similar reports in 2001 and 2010. Bagby writes that in “2020, the US Mosque Survey counted 2,769 mosques, which is a 31 percent increase from the 2010 count of 2,106 mosques. Undoubtedly, the primary driving force for the increase of mosques is the steady expansion of the population of Muslims in America due to immigration and birth rate.” The report found that prayer services held in mosques on Fridays, a practice known as *jumah*, averaged 410 attendees before the coronavirus pandemic in 2020—an increase over the 2010 figure of 353. Nearly two-thirds of mosques recorded an increase of 10 percent or more in *jumah* attendance during the period under study. Bagby also found social capital among mosque members high, being more likely on average to participate in interfaith and civic efforts than members of other religious groups. The opposition to the construction of Muslim places of worship suggests that anti-Muslim discrimination continues and is more institutionalized than other forms of religious discrimination in the United States, Bagby concludes.



Source: ArtisticAbode, 2012 (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported)

(The report can be downloaded at: <https://www.ispu.org/public-policy/mosque-survey/>)

• **A new study of the American secularist community confirms the largely white, older, and highly educated makeup of people involved in atheist and secular humanist groups, although finding them to be more politically liberal and to have higher representations of LGBTQ individuals than previous studies.** The study, presented at the June Zoom conference of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN), attended by **RW**, is said to be the largest of its kind on



Source: United Church of Bacon, 2012

organized secularism (as opposed to nonbelievers uninvolved in secular organizations), with 12,977 respondents, and was conducted by Dusty Hoesly, Joseph Blankholm, and Courtney Applewhite of the University of California at Santa Barbara. The survey found that 64 percent of respondents were 50 and over, with a median age of 61, and that 93 percent were white, 50 percent male, and 74 percent holders of a bachelor's degree. Most of the respondents identified as "atheist" (79 percent), with a smaller number calling themselves "secular humanists" or "freethinkers." But in comparing their work to previous studies of this population, the researchers found today's secularists to be more politically liberal (with only one percent saying they were Republican) and to have a higher rate of LGBTQ identification (15 percent).

These secular "joiners" are different than secular "non-affiliates," who are younger, more female, and more politically moderate, according to a related survey that was presented at the session. That study, conducted by Juhem Navarro-Rivera of Socioanalítica, was based on a 2021 "Secular Voices Survey," which included 1,505 secular non-joiners. In comparing his findings with the University of California survey, Rivera found the age distributions to be complete opposites. Non-joiners also are less politically active, less strict church-state separationist (being less likely to agree that the phrase "one nation under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance is unconstitutional), and more critical of liberal immigration policies, with 90 percent of joiners supporting more liberal immigration laws compared to 50 percent of non-joiners.

• **While a large majority of adults in the United States support allowing marijuana use to some extent, the degree of acceptance varies according to Americans' religious identity and their levels of religious commitment, according to an analysis by the Pew Research Center.** Among American adults who identify with a religious group, just over half agree that marijuana

should be legal for medical and recreational use, while roughly a third say it should only be legal for medical use. Among non-affiliated people, by contrast, about three-quarters say marijuana should be legal for both medical and recreational purposes, while only a fifth say legal marijuana use should be confined to medical reasons.

White evangelical Protestants were the only group with fewer than half (44 percent) saying marijuana should be allowed for both medical and recreational use. A similar share agreed that it should be legal only as a medical treatment, while 14 percent said it should not be legal for either purpose. Larger proportions of white mainline Protestants and black Protestants (62 percent and 63 percent, respectively) say marijuana should be legal for medical and recreational use, with smaller shares (31 percent and 28 percent) favoring legal marijuana only as a medical treatment. Among Protestants and Catholics overall, views on marijuana were found to be quite similar.

(The Pew analysis can be downloaded at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/26/religious-americans-are-less-likely-to-endorse-legal-marijuana-for-recreational-use/>)



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● **Estonia, regarded as one of the most secular and even atheistic of nations, has been found to have a number of growing churches characterized by strong pastors, hospitality to people outside the congregation, and community service.**

Writing in the journal *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* (June), researchers Ago Lilleorg, Kaldo Soom, and Tonu Lehtsaar conducted interviews with congregants from nine growing churches (from Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Seventh Day Adventist denominations) in Estonia from 2019 to 2020. Although some of the churches still had small congregations, most had shown over 50 percent growth between 2003 and 2017. One of the most common features of these



St. John's Church, Tallinn, Estonia (source: Sami C., 2015 | Flickr).

churches was their “open” atmosphere where attenders would feel at home and valued, sometimes expressed in having tangible and physical needs met. An outward focus toward the wider community and society, such as assisting refugees, the disabled, and the homeless, was more evident than an emphasis on proclamation of the Gospel. The clergy in these churches practiced teamwork and had a strong relational thrust to their ministries, yet their social focus could also lead to burnout. As found in many successful religious movements, members’ social networks helped to draw in new attendees, according to Lilleorg, Soom, and Lehtsaar.

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

“Evangelical extremists” a terror threat in Brazil?

Attacks against Afro-Brazilian religious groups led by evangelical Christians in Brazil have increased in recent years, causing human rights watchdog groups and activists to press for a “terrorist” designation for such perpetrators, writes Danielle Boaz of the University of North Carolina in the online *Journal of Religion & Society* (Vol. 23). Boaz writes that these patterns of attacks are largely carried out by evangelicals targeting the rituals and places of worship of such Afro-Brazilian religions as macumba and Candomblé, viewing themselves as engaged in “spiritual warfare” against sorcery and Satanism. Most recently, such assaults have been carried out by gangs of drug traffickers who have converted to evangelical churches, with a series of attacks in the Rio de Janeiro area where the gang members threatened and/or ordered the closure of 100 Afro-Brazilian temples, destroyed religious artifacts, and threatened priests with death while beating and holding devotees at gunpoint, often videotaping the incidents. Boaz adds that evangelical drug traffickers are only one segment of these “evangelical extremists,” and that these incidents are taking place in different regions of Brazil. There is now government documentation that these attacks are coming from those with evangelical backgrounds.

The hotline Disque 100, established in 2011 to record such incidents, has registered 2,862 reports from victims and witnesses of religious intolerance in the last eight years; 82 percent of the cases



Source: Greg Willis, 2008 | Wikipedia (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic)

have occurred from 2015 to 2018. Devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions represented, on average, 50 percent of the victims in cases when their religions were known, and from 2016 to 2018, they represented 64 percent—although Afro-Brazilian faiths combined comprise less than one percent of the population. Protestants, representing 22 percent of the population, comprised 62 percent of the aggressors’ religions, when these faiths were known. In November of 2019, the International Commission to Combat Religious Racism released a report analyzing 300 cases of intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions that took place between 2000 and 2019. In cases where the aggressors’ religion was known, 100 percent were Christian, with related documentation showing that 80 percent were evangelical. Boaz writes that the government is aware of this pattern of violence, as are such international monitors as the International Religious Freedom Report of the U.S. State Department, but they refrain from designating extremist evangelicals as domestic terrorists, even with the recent introduction of anti-terrorist legislation. Along with other activists, Boaz argues that with evangelicals representing an increasing percentage of the population, including policy makers and even President Jair Bolsonaro, there is a reluctance to consider some of their fellow believers as terrorists “because they are neither a foreign or ‘exotic’ threat.”

(*Journal of Religion & Society*, <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/>)

French Catholics show new tensions over Tridentine rite and eye Vatican intervention

The accommodations made by the Vatican for celebrating the Tridentine (Latin) rite may be taking a more turbulent turn in the post-Vatican II Catholic Church judging by recent events in France. *La Croix International* (June 29) reports that the Archdiocese of Dijon has asked the traditionalist Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter (FSSP) to leave due to the refusal of its local clergy to celebrate Mass according to the post-Vatican II rite, while the pope is intending to soon publish a note on the correct application of his predecessor’s document *Summorum Pontificum* regarding the use of the Tridentine rite (which Benedict XVI defined as the “extraordinary form of the Mass” in comparison with the post-Vatican II “ordinary form”). The Fraternity is a traditionalist group that is fully part of the Roman Catholic Church while dedicated to the use of the traditional rite.

The FSSP arrived in Dijon in 1998, five years before Archbishop Roland Minnerath was appointed head of the Archdiocese. On May 17, he announced that he would no longer allow the two FSSP priests to continue to reside and offer Mass in the old rite in the church in Dijon made available to them by the diocese. The reason was their refusal to celebrate the Mass in the ordinary form even occasionally, at the risk of creating a “parallel community.” “I have chosen a traditional rite; I intend to be faithful to it. It is a choice of life,” the local superior of the FSSP replied to *La Croix* when confirming his refusal to celebrate according to the new rite. This

position is apparently shared by one out of every two FSSP priests, according to inside sources cited by *La Croix*. Currently, Catholic traditionalist communities in union with Rome are regulated by the July 2007 *motu proprio* of Benedict XVI, allowing lay people who want the Mass celebrated in the old rite to turn to Rome if their local bishop and clergy turn down their request. Pope Francis's note on the correct application of *Summorum Pontificum* is expected to strengthen the bishops' authority on such issues. It might also lead to the suppression of the *Ecclesia Dei* section of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, responsible for overseeing relations with traditionalist communities.



Source: Joachim Specht, 2010 (Wikipedia)

Hindus not exempted from India's religious freedom restrictions

Violations of religious freedom by India's government are not only committed against minority religions but also increasingly against Hindu institutions, writes Timothy Shah in the online journal *Religions* (12). What Shah calls India's "other religious freedom problem" can be seen in the way the country's Hindu nationalist government has enacted "controls and limits on majority religious institutions[,]...an oppressive and invasive reality that is simply out of step with what

Hindus have a right to expect from a Constitution that declares on its face that they possess an equal right to maintain and control their own religious institutions. And it is an invasive reality that other religious institutions and communities, particularly Muslim and Christian ones, generally do not have to experience, at least not to the same degree.” He is referring to how Hindu temples are administered by the government, granting them little autonomy. Shah cites the recent case of Sabarimala Temple, where Indian judges “have even arrogated to themselves the right to identify which theological doctrines and practices within any given religious tradition (including Hinduism) are ‘essential,’ regardless of what the community itself might say, in order to justify the state’s regulatory reach and power over any doctrines and practices it deems non-essential.”

Because the state has consolidated Hinduism as one homogenous identity, any attempts by religious communities to adopt a “Hinduish” or neo-Buddhist identity or to exit formal Hinduism are not permitted and they are still designated as “Hindu” (something that other religions also do not experience). Shah writes that Hindus also experience religious violence at about the same rate as Christians; a Hate Crime Watch study of religious related violence from 2009 to 2012



Source: Piqsels

found 14 percent of victims were Hindu and 15 percent Christian, while 59 percent were Muslim. But Shah adds that few monitoring groups and surveys have recorded these and other infringements on Hindu religious freedom. In part, this is because religious freedom measurements, as designed by such prominent polling firms as Pew Research Center, tend to focus on the impact of religious restrictions on individuals and to look at outbreaks of discrimination and violence rather than legal structures and laws. Other agencies, such as Human Rights Watch and Open Doors International, focus on religious minorities. Shah concludes that the growth of religious restrictions, including on Hinduism, has its roots not so much in the recent wave of Hindu nationalism but in the way that, dating back to Nehru's secularism, "India has long failed to cultivate a 'liberal-pluralistic' public culture that invites all points of view—and all communities and institutions, including religious ones—into competitive, peaceful, productive mutual exchange."

(*Religions*, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/7/490>)

Jihadists turning hostile toward China?

While jihadists have long been critical of China for its discriminatory policies toward Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the country's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) means it will create infrastructures in areas where jihadist cells are also present, thus creating new threats for Chinese companies and citizens, writes Jan Wojcik (a board member of the European Issues Institute, an independent think tank based in Warsaw) in an article published on the *European Eye on Radicalization* website (June 25). Jihadist groups used to see Western countries and Jews as their main foreign enemies, but China has also caught their attention over the past 10 years, despite the country's efforts not to interfere in the internal policies of Muslim countries and its cautious approaches that have even allowed it to keep good contacts with the Taliban. The fate of Muslim Uyghurs is denounced by jihadists, but they are mostly not able to target China in its own territory due to the high level of state control.

The agreements between China and local governments as part of its ambitious New Silk Road development project started breeding discontent, since they seemed to bring little improvement to local populations, not to mention corruption, waste of money, and a lack of transparency in the dealings. In addition to Central Asian and some Pakistani jihadist groups already hostile to China, international groups such as the Islamic State and al Qaeda have voiced criticism of China over the past ten years, Wojcik notes, even if it is not the priority for most of them at this point. Hostility to China extends beyond Central Asia, as shown for instance by growing threats from al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) against Chinese workers in North Africa and Chinese investments in Africa's Sahel. It is no coincidence that a recent law was passed in China allowing the People's Liberation Army to deploy abroad and take part in counterterrorism operations, although the protection of infrastructures that are part of the BRI is ensured by some 20 private

security companies lacking counterterrorism expertise. The global expansion of China is also associated with risks, and jihadist groups may become one of them.

(*European Eye on Radicalization*, <https://eeradicalization.com>)



Source: Al-Mesbar Studies & Research Center, 2018

Independent Pure Land Buddhist networks, clergy face bans in China

Pure Land Buddhism is the latest religion to face banning by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), reports Deng Huizhong in the online newsletter *Bitter Winter* (June 17). In May in Jilin province, the police interrogated followers of Buddhist Master Jingzong of Hongyuan Monastery, which is located in Xuancheng, Anhui province. Police told devotees that the teachings promulgated by Master Jingzong were *xie jiao* (“heterodox”), and that his group and the so-called “Hongyuan Method” would be banned in Jilin. The followers were taken aback by the banning since Jingzong publicly teaches in Xuancheng’s Hongyuan Monastery, which he built from 2004 to 2007. This monastery has not been closed by the authorities, as would be the case if it had been classified as *xie jiao*. Huizhong writes that it might be thought that



Amitabha Buddha with his attendants Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva. Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, China (source: Tengu800, 2011 | Wikimedia - Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication).

“overzealous police are at work in Jilin, if it was not for the fact that *Bitter Winter* has also learned that the government-controlled China Buddhist Association is sending to ‘friends’ abroad a list of Buddhist masters whose teachings are *xie jiao*, and Master Jingzong of Xuancheng is included.”

Huizhong adds that followers are convinced that there are ulterior motives behind the criticism of Master Jingzong. One factor may be that Jingzong’s own master, Master Huijing, besides being an internationally respected Pure Land teacher, is from Taiwan. Another factor is that the Pure Land network is fiercely independent and difficult to control for the China Buddhist Association. Buddhist scholar Edward Irons notes that Pure Land groups were never formally included in the national list of the *xie jiao*. However, since they have been denounced as a *xie jiao* in 28 different cities and provinces, usually with the designation “under instruction from the central leadership of the CCP,” Irons regards the group as in fact part of the list of the *xie jiao*. He adds that “the various Pure Land Associations constitute in effect a network that is too well-organized and uncontrolled to be allowed to continue.” Already in 2011, one of the largest Pure Land groups,

the Pure Land Learning Association, founded in Taiwan in 1984 and incorporated in its present form in Australia in 2001 by Master Jingkong, was banned in China.

(*Bitter Winter*, <https://bitterwinter.org/pure-land-buddhism-under-attack-in-china/>?)

Findings & Footnotes

■ Even if it is not the case across the board, we often hear more of religious decline than vitality today, so that the new book *The Demise of Religion* (Bloomsbury Academic, \$115) seems to fit the mood. But the anthology, edited by Michael Strausberg, Stuart A. Wright, and Carole M. Cusack, actually delivers a more nuanced message than the forecasts of inevitable religious decline and secularization. The varied case studies suggest that just as religious organizations can die, they can also be revived and reinvent themselves, with new related ones being born. The editors outline several trajectories of the demise of religions (a different phenomenon than the more subjective state of religious decline), ranging from leadership issues to the loss of economic resources, disruptions in intergenerational transmission, failed prophecies, violent self-annihilation (mass suicides and murder), and state actions against religions.

The subsequent chapters flesh out these different trajectories with case studies of demised religions, such as: Japan's Aum Shinrikyo, which persists in national memory for its terrorist actions; the Seattle megachurch Mars Hill and how the scandals relating to the authoritarian and charismatic ministry of the founding pastor—and protests from members and others—resulted in the congregation's dissolution; and the several instances of government repression and pressure that resulted in religious demise, such as with the Branch Davidians, the Mormon fundamentalist Yearning for Zion Ranch, and the French New Age Horus community. Standing somewhat apart from the other contributions is anthropologist Joel Robbins' chapter on how anthropology needs to take more seriously religious change and demise rather than persistence. He argues that his case study shows how an indigenous religion in Papua-New Guinea no longer "worked" for its adherents because of institutional changes and pressures and how it was replaced by Pentecostal Christianity.

