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PERSPECTIVES ON 2021

Perspectives on 2021  
EARS

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## Dear Colleagues, Dear Friends,

It is a great pleasure to offer you the second volume of articles written by the EARS team. Before you is a selection of the articles published in 2021 and we offer you this selection — out of more than 200 articles available — as a token of our gratitude for your involvement with EARS. The articles were written by our analysts and of course, our heartfelt thanks go to them in the first instance. They are the young scholars, often without a background in theology, that feel attracted by the fascinating world of religions. In our view, this is particularly important because it implies our discipline attracts a new and different generation. A generation that will certainly do things in a different way than the one we are currently used to, a generation that will also be able to transform our discipline. Therefore, many thanks to these young scholars and to the faculties that connected them with EARS.

This is not a book with scientific articles. We are keenly aware of its particular character, which differs from the ordinary scholarly publication. It is rather a rare collection of striking pictures representing the wonderful world of religions we live in. Some would call them popular articles, which in our view is a compliment. We consider them, indeed, rather as a series of pictures. Pictures showing you, on the one hand, the richness of the many forms of modern religion. Yet, on the other hand, also revealing the style and vision of the author who pictured a particular scene.

The infinite variety of forms religion has taken in our society remains fascinating. This time, however, these pictures are not hanging on the wall of a museum showing us some glimpses of the past. This time, it is our time, it is our society. Admittedly, many insist on the secularized character of our time and they are right. Yet, the articles confront us with the almost overwhelming presence of religion in this secularized society. Religion transforms itself and can be found in the many layers our society is built of. Religion is not something belonging to the past, it is modernity in an unexpected form. This unexpected form is what we aim to show in this book. Enjoy reading!



Kind regards,

Matthias Smalbrugge  
President EARS

## Author recommendations

The articles in this book were written by the EARS team of analysts. Most are based in Europe, ranging from Sweden to Spain and from the UK to Poland; others are from the US or New Zealand. They write about current events, global trends, and mostly about what interests them in the field of religion and society. On the next few pages, the authors will recommend their favourite article to you.

Please find all sources used for writing these articles on <https://ftr.nu/LLQV> or scan the QR code below.



## Ghila Amati

*Ghila is a PhD student at the University of Oxford. She is interested in the intersection between Modern Jewish Thought and Western Philosophy. Ghila is originally from Italy and speaks Italian, Hebrew, and English.*

"I personally recommend the article *Is there room for Jewish and Muslim traditions in Europe?* (page 148) since it asks an important and very relevant question that European nations need to face today."



## Ryszard Bobrowicz

*Ryszard is a PhD student in Practical Theology at Lund University interested in policies of management of religious diversity. Outside of academia, he serves as the acting director of A World of Neighbours Practitioners Network.*

"In the article *Are church and state really separated? The cases of Italy and Sweden* (page 124), Annamaria Laviola-Svensäter shows, on the examples of Italy and Sweden, that the separation of state and church is never straightforward. Understanding the relationship between the two, even in secularised countries, requires a greater level of detail and complexity."



## R. Anthony Buck

*Anthony is a theologian about to submit his doctoral thesis at the University of Oxford. His work integrates Bourdieusien sociology, cognitive science, and narrative theologies in hopes of helping liberate academic theology from itself.*

"Ridley Scott thinks technology, politics, and religion are basically the same and must fight one another for dominance, as they do in his futuristic series *Raised by Wolves*. The article *New tech, politics, and old religion: What is the future of technology in religion?* (page 192) considers whether Scott's insight means the future of religion must be both politically and technologically savvy, or whether that future has already come."





## Han Chang

Han is a freelance writer and analyst at EARS. In her free time, she can be found hiking in nature, dreaming in cinemas, or reading.

"I recommend the article *Coping with diversity in Religious Education in Germany* (page 89). It outlines how Religious Education is subject to recurring discussions in Germany, which have mainly revolved around the issue of dealing with religious diversity."



## Anne Clerx

As project manager for EARS, Anne combines her interest in writing with her organisational skills. She reviews and edits articles written by the analyst team — and writes one herself every now and then.

"I would like to recommend the article *Does religion make you happy?* (page 134) This article provides some potential answers to a question asked by many across the globe: can religion be the key to happiness?"



## Astrid Hamberg

Astrid completed her studies in 2019 after pursuing a BA in ancient history and an MA in theology in Leiden, Trier, and Amsterdam. Nowadays, she works at a publishing house as a copy editor, cooperating with authors, publishers and illustrators.

"As an avid lover of Tolkien's world, my recommendation would be to read about *The Christian symbolism in The Lord of the Rings* (page 34). It is interesting to see how Tolkien interprets and uses the gospel in the stories of Middle-earth."

## Meri Hannikainen

Meri is a Finnish writer and church worker. She is enthusiastic about religion, pedagogics, and the pedagogy of religion.

"My favourite article is *Does religion make you happy?* (page 134) The question on how different worldviews affect wellbeing is an important one and, in my opinion, would deserve more research."



## Pietari Hannikainen

Pietari works as a researcher and lecturer at the University of Helsinki. In his free time, he spends time with his family and friends, hikes in nature, and goes to church.

"I would like to recommend the article *Insights from the dashboard: Education across Europe* (page 94), which gives an outline of the various ways in which religious education is arranged around Europe. While it illuminates the complexity of religion-state relations around the continent, the article is also an introduction to a whole series of articles on the topic of education."



## Rosa Huotari

Rosa is a Doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki, Finland. In her PhD dissertation, she studies Christian commensality from the perspectives of social inclusion and contextual theology.

"I would recommend you read the article titled *Spirituality as a tool to battle mental illness* (page 136), as it opens a fresh and timely perspective on mental healthcare. It also shows how spiritual questions and existential reflection have been pushed to marginal in secular healthcare even though including them in treatments of mental illnesses would be beneficial to many."



## Muhammad Faisal Khalil



Faisal is pursuing his DPhil at the Faculty of Theology and Religion, the University of Oxford. He is the co-founder of All-Story and a technical advisor to UNICEF and UNFPA.

"I recommend the article *Can AI replicate religious leaders and rituals?* (page 186) This article is not only prescient to the rise of technology use since COVID-19 but also looks at the much-ignored impact of technology on religious life."

## Annamaria Laviola-Svensäter



Annamaria is a PhD student in Systematic Theology at Lund University. She studies medieval female saints and feminism in contemporary theology.

"I would like to recommend the article *How empowering can theology be? Europe and Black theology* (page 150). The text gives powerful insights on the development of Black theology, the role it plays in contemporary activism, and what Europeans could learn from it."

## Hannah Macaulay



Hannah is 25 years old and has a masters degree in Sociology from the University of Oxford. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, writing, ice skating and learning new languages.

"I recommend the article *Inclusion on whose terms? The Church of Sweden and the Roma minority in Sweden* (page 152). I found this article extremely interesting as it addresses the discrimination that the Roma community has faced for centuries in Europe, which was a refreshing angle."

## Frazer MacDiarmid

Frazer completed his doctorate in patristic theology at the University of Oxford in late 2021. He now works in New Zealand at the Office of Māori-Crown Relations, while still maintaining strong links with academic theology and Europe.

"EARS articles treat a lot of serious, often life or death issues — the article *Swipe right for a wife: The curious phenomenon of Christian dating websites* (page 194) offers a bit of light relief. I wrote this article after seeing an ad for a Christian dating platform. It seemed to reflect such an intriguing social moment — a collision of the traditional with the viral — which deserved exploration."



## Joshua Amiel Marasigan

Joshua is a graduate student at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the KU Leuven (Belgium). His research interests include contextual theology, spirituality, queer and gender studies, Filipino studies, and postcolonialism.

"I would like to recommend Luca's article *Ancient structures under fire in Belgian education* (page 78) because it is well-researched and he has written it knowing the context by experience."



## Juliette Marchet

Juliette is a student of Protestant theology at the University of Strasbourg. She is currently living in Berlin for a year of research in feminist and queer theology.

"I found the article *Swipe right for a wife: The curious phenomenon of Christian dating websites* (page 194) particularly interesting and it made me ask myself more questions about the use of dating apps. It is informative but also asks some very topical questions."



## Tyler Mikulis

Tyler, when not writing and editing for EARS, can be found socialising, debating, or enmeshed in a textbook as he pursues a law degree at the University of Chicago Law School. He developed a lifelong interest in religious news—especially the legally adjacent—while reading for a Master's degree in the Study of Religions at Oxford.



"In a year dominated all too often by bleak or divisive news, it became easy to overlook some of the lighter, yet nonetheless noteworthy phenomena occurring. For this reason, I recommend Frazer MacDiarmid's delightful and informative article on his foray into the world of Christian dating websites: *Swipe right for a wife: The curious phenomenon of Christian dating websites* (page 194)."

## Maria Inês Nemésio

Maria Inês is currently teaching Portuguese Language and Literature at Colégio de São José do Ramalhão. Within EARS, she is interested in religious education and freedom in Portugal and across Europe.



"I would like to recommend the article *Does religion make you happy?* (page 134) Given the current situation, it is essential to be aware of the role that religion plays in our daily life, not just as individuals but also as a society."

## Marko Pavlović

Marko is an international student in the Master's studies at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the KU Leuven in Belgium, and his research is focused on the position of women in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. He works for EARS as an analyst for all Balkan countries, because they share historical, religious, and cultural context with his home country Serbia.



"I recommend the article *Breaking the silence: Awareness of spiritual abuse in UK religious communities* (page 142). It highlights the importance of working on recognising and suppressing spiritual abuse, which is sometimes very difficult to detect and treat without the support of the family and the religious community in which it occurs."

## Francesca Perugi

After graduating in Contemporary History at the University of Florence in Italy, Francesca concluded a PhD at the Catholic University of Milan with a dissertation on the history of the European Catholic Church in the last decades. She collaborates with the Department of Religious Studies at the Catholic University of Milan and is a teacher in a secondary school.



"I would like to recommend the article *Insights from the dashboard: Education across Europe* (page 94) which reports on some problems regarding the teaching of religion in state schools. The article was possible thanks to the summaries in the EARS dashboard and compares the solutions found in different European countries regarding some common problems, such as the coexistence in schools of different religions and the difficulty to include this subject in state teaching."

## Timo Pieters

After his BA and MA in Religious Studies (specialising in Buddhism), Timo started focusing on 'effective altruism', or trying to solve the most urgent and neglected problems in the world. He is currently exploring institutional corruption, factory farming, and mental wellbeing.



"I encourage you to read *Coronavirus and the transhuman future* (page 56), because it highlights an underappreciated movement that is shaping our collective future. Many are not only unaware of this movement, but would probably disagree with its aims if they saw their potential consequences."

## Clémence Sauty

Clémence currently studies Protestant Theology. She graduated in Sociology and Political Science in Strasbourg, France.



"I recommend the article *How empowering can Theology be? Europe and Black theology* (page 150) because it puts current European discourses about religion into perspective. Religion means a different thing for different people!"

## Freddie Scott

Freddie is a freelance journalist living in Madrid and writing about the role religion plays in social and political debates across Europe. As a former student of Global History at the University of Oxford, he takes a keen interest in examining how studying religion helps us to understand the changes to the societies we live in.



"In a year in which Europe has begun to find its feet again after the COVID-19 pandemic, it's difficult to choose just one article from the many fascinating perspectives and insights. However, *Breaking the silence: Awareness of spiritual abuse in UK religious communities* (page 142) is a highly important contribution for the fact that it shines the light on a problem that has both worsened as a result of the pandemic, and is often hidden away from the view of those who do not suffer from it."

## Martha Scott-Cracknell

Martha recently graduated from an MSt in Study of Religions at the University of Oxford where she specialised in Islamic and Jewish studies. Alongside working for EARS, she also works for the Balfour Project, a British charity that works towards achieving peace in Israel-Palestine.



"I think that the article entitled *Spirituality as a tool to battle mental illness* (page 136) offers an important and fascinating insight into the positive impact that spirituality can have on the quality of health care services and the livelihood of those suffering from mental illness. The article highlights several different perspectives which helped to develop my understanding of the topic."

## Laurent Tessier

Laurent is a PhD student in history and anthropology of religion at the *École pratique des hautes études* in Paris and at the *Université de Montréal* (Canada). Graduated with a master's degree in geopolitics and conflict mediation and passionate about the study of religions in international relations, his work focuses on the development of Christian Zionism in Canada and on issues related to cultural and religious pluralism in France and Quebec.



"One of the most significant sociocultural phenomena of 2021 is the rise of cancel culture to the political and media scene in Europe, and especially in academia. The article *Cancel culture: An introduction* (page 154) provides a welcome analysis of the recent ideological evolution of this 'culture', which today not only threatens academic freedom, but also contributes to amplifying social divisions."

## Warja Tolstoj

Warja has recently graduated cum laude from the Research Master Arts and Culture at the University of Leiden. Her thesis was on the construction of religious institutional identity in Early Modern Rome. For EARS, she focuses mostly on the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian-speaking countries.



"In the past two years, many have turned to religion and spirituality for a sense of purpose, but also for ways to connect with others. I would like to recommend the article *Swipe right for a wife: The curious phenomenon of Christian dating websites* (page 194), which shows that religion not only can help to find a renewed sense of purpose, but also sometimes each other!"

## Luca Van Cleempoel

Luca lives in Antwerp, Belgium and studies Arabic, Hebrew and Ancient Greek at the KU Leuven university. He therefore has a special interest in the Jewish and Arab culture in Europe and the Middle East, and mainly focuses on these themes in analysing the Belgian media for EARS.



"One of the major geopolitical events of 2021 certainly was the rise to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the article *Tolerance and reluctance: Afghanistan and the Catholic Church* (page 157), Freddie Scott beautifully reflects on European Catholic leaders' responses to this humanitarian crisis on a continent where anti-migrant parties are growing faster and faster."

## Emma Van Dorp

Emma is a doctoral student from the University of Geneva in ecumenical theology. Her research is focused on Protestant theology in Swiss society and the ecumenical dialogue.



"I recommend *Reformed churches versus the climate crisis* (page 102). This article presents the reformed churches' discussion on ecology in Swiss society and their dialogue with Calvin's and Zwingli's theology to understand the need for ecological actions within the church."

## Laura Waardenburg



Having finished her bachelor in Gender- & Postcolonial Studies at Utrecht University, Laura is now in her second year of the Research Master Theology & Religious Studies at the VU Amsterdam. She is doing the specialisation Peace, Trauma and Religion, and in her own research she aims to analyse religion and trauma from a postcolonial perspective.

"The article I would recommend is *Spirituality as a tool to battle mental illness* (page 136). When religiosity and spirituality are discussed in relation to mental health, it tends to focus on the negative aspects. I wrote this article to highlight the benefits spirituality can have on one's mental health as well."

## Elisabeth Waldl



Elisabeth is a Master's student in Religious Studies and Art History at the University of Vienna, Austria, and is interested in Arabic and Islamic culture and religion and lived religiousness in contemporary Europe. Since 2020, she has worked for EARS, where she likes to research recent topics on religion concerning politics, justice, and everyday life.

"I would like to recommend the article *Religious appropriation: The right to be offended?* (page 24), which analyses an aspect of the controversial topic of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is a current and significant theme in academic debates and implies many important issues like cultural exchange, adoption, commercialisation, respectfulness, colonialism, oppression, and censorship."

## Themes shaping 2021

Many events shaped the year of 2021, from the rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations to the Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, and from the CIASE report on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in France to discussions on cancel culture. The articles in this book are classified into nine topics that have all played a key role this past year. They are topics that EARS has extensively covered and that are likely to remain important into the coming years.

### Society

*Page 22*

EARS aims to bridge the gap between religion and society. Therefore, we cover religious events and developments by showing their impact on European society. This year, a key discussion in several countries has been whether or not religious symbols can be worn in the workplace. In addition, we have covered topics such as secularisation, fasting, religious appropriation, and mindfulness.

### COVID-19

*Page 44*

With the vaccine rollout and several waves of increased cases across the world, COVID-19 has been a critical topic during 2021. We have seen how the virus impacted religious traditions and rituals, such as communion and religious services, but also church membership. In addition, vaccination efforts have been followed closely by many religious groups and institutions, including Muslims and the Vatican. Finally, this past year, it has become clear that COVID-19 has strongly impacted vulnerable religious communities, such as British Jews.

### Education

*Page 70*

Even in today's society, religion and religious institutions still play a major role in education in many European countries. However, education is undergoing a process of transformation. In the past year, we have seen how the subject of Ethics is increasingly replacing religious subjects at school. Moreover, the topic of diversity in Religious Education is being discussed in several countries. Finally, we have covered how national changes, such as the end of communism in some Eastern European countries, has brought new ways of teaching about religion.

### Sustainability

*Page 98*

2021 marked the year of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), on the occasion of which religious leaders and institutions called for climate action. In earlier months, the plea for preventing climate change already grew more urgent as parts of the world experienced forest fires, floods, and extreme heat waves. Leaders from several religions, including Pope Francis, have repeatedly expressed how religious communities can have a visible and positive role in sustainability efforts.

### Politics

*Page 110*

The year started with Joe Biden's inauguration in the US. The months that followed brought more political events and developments across the world where religion played a major role, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Taliban rising in Afghanistan. In Europe, we saw how the far-right is on the rise in Romania and how France is trying to counter Islamist separatism.

### Wellbeing

*Page 132*

Religion can positively affect wellbeing, for example through religious communities and social support. In addition, spirituality and religion can be important tools to battle mental illness. However, we have also seen how religions and religious institutions can have harmful impacts on wellbeing. The publication of the CIASE report on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in France is a key example from this year.

### Inclusivity

*Page 146*

We have seen inclusion efforts on various levels in the past year, examples being the inclusion of minorities, refugees, and people with disabilities. However, the Vatican decided this year that the Catholic Church cannot bless same-sex unions, leading to many debates on the subject. In addition, Jewish and Muslim traditions are becoming more and more restricted in Europe, thereby making it more complex for these communities to feel included.

### Normativity

*Page 168*

The role of religion within society is a complex phenomenon. In European countries, different historical, political, and cultural factors have shaped religions' influence on citizens' public and private lives. For some countries, normativity has existed in regards to religion, often with a specific religious tradition having dominance over matters of religiosity and morality within the country. In 2021, we have seen how national landscapes have changed, thereby affecting religion's role in society.

### Digitalisation

*Page 184*

Over the past year, we have repeatedly covered the role of technology and digitalisation in religion. COVID-19 forced many religious communities to move online for celebrations and rituals, but we have seen further developments too. For instance, we asked if Artificial Intelligence will be able to replicate religious leaders and rituals, and we discussed the topic of privacy in relation to technology.

# Society





## Religious appropriation: The right to be offended?

— *Author recommendation*

Appropriation, the adoption of one's culture, including icons, rituals, and behaviours, by members of another non-native culture, is a complex term. In fact, the concept has provoked much debate and examples of the term have been present for several centuries, such as in the 1800s, when upper-class Europeans used to have portraits painted of them dressed as Ottoman sultans in traditional Turkish clothing. However, in the multicultural, modernised 21st century, when understanding of different cultures, faiths, and traditions is much improved compared to the 1800s, appropriation remains a highly controversial issue.

Whether it be a white American teenager wearing a traditional Chinese dress to her school prom, festivalgoers sporting Hindu bindis on their foreheads, or celebrities attending the MET Gala dressed in outfits inspired by the Catholic Church, heated debates within Europe and across the world occur around what constitutes appropriation.

Through looking at both sides of the discussion, this article will give particular attention to religious appropriation, understood as another form of appropriation that specifically adopts icons or symbols of a religion, causing considerable offence to that faith community. Moreover, some suggestions on how future cases of appropriation may be avoided will be given.

### Religious appropriation in practice

While many high-profile cases of appropriation have taken place in the US, Europe is by no means immune to examples of appropriation. For example, the fashion industry came under the spotlight when Italian fashion designer Gucci debuted their 'Indy Full Turban' in the 2018 autumn fashion show. Gucci received hundreds of complaints, considering how the *dastaar* (Sikh turban) is 'an article of faith and carries an immense spiritual and temporal significance'. Moreover, many explained how offensive the Gucci turban was since Sikhs often face discrimination and abuse for wearing a turban in public spaces, yet now one of the most famous houses was stripping it of its meaning and turning it into a money-making fashion item.

Furthermore, the religious appropriation of symbols from Southeast Asian religions is very common. Unlike the Abrahamic religions that are historically deeply embedded in the fabric of European societies, less is known of the religious significance of icons of the Hindu and Buddhist faith, making them 'cool and marketable'. In many cases, this has resulted in religious appropriation.

This was evidenced when in September 2020, the ACCE, Spain's brewers' association, used the image of Hindu god Ganesha holding beer-making equipment to advertise a beer festival, causing outrage by Hindus who claimed it made fun of the deity. Furthermore, for years, the French owners of the hotel and bar chain 'Buddha-Bar' have received criticism from Buddhists who state that the bars promote drinking and consumerism, two things that are 'contradictory to the basic tenet of Buddhism'.

Interestingly, in the three examples outlined, those guilty of appropriation apologised profusely, claiming that they never meant to cause offence and are "fully committed to increasing diversity." Yet, despite these apologies, examples of religious appropriation continue to occur and be highly offensive to religious communities.

### Backlash against appropriation

However, despite criticism from religious communities and others in wider society, there are some commentators who believe that concerns around appropriation have gone too far.

An anonymous journalist from *The Economist* explains how the historical concept of appropriation has now "expanded to new extremes ... and obstructs free expression" in the 21st century. The journalist explains that individuals are so fearful of being socially shamed as a result of appropriating that now the "beneficial cultural exchanges that happen in art, music, dance and language ... are stigmatised." Moreover, British writer Kenan Malik explains that in the case of religion, certain beliefs are considered sacred and therefore are "put beyond questioning ... to challenge such belief is to commit blasphemy." Malik believes that this results in individuals becoming afraid of causing offence and therefore self-censorship begins.

Finally, even some religious commentators believe the term 'religious appropriation' to be "counter-productive." Reflecting on the MET Gala's 2018 theme *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination*, many Catholics were outraged at the blatant religious appropriation. However, British Catholic journalist Madeleine Kearns believed that the Gala theme was "patently silly" and that while all religions have the right to feel offended, religious appropriation is not a manifestation of this right, making it an actually "counter-productive" term.

### Power imbalance

While concerns around the restriction of freedom of expression and the censorship of cultural *appreciation* are valid and important contributions to the discussion of appropriation, certain commentators believe that these critiques fail to understand the power imbalance inherent to appropriation.

Like the example of 19th-century Europeans dressing up as Turkish sultans, some academics and writers believe that appropriation is a "by-product of imperialism, oppression and assimilation." The artist Kenneth Coutts-Smith termed this 'cultural colonialism' to describe how Western cultures (the more dominant power) take ownership of items that originate from minority, often colonised (non-dominant) communities. Because of this, claims of appropriation by minority communities are reflective of a wider context, a deeply painful history, and therefore should not just be swept aside as oversensitivity.

### Solution? Better education

As this article has outlined, the discussion on appropriation is a complex and nuanced one, with many differing opinions. Whether some commentators believe appropriation to be an exaggerated concern, a way to stifle freedom of expression, or instead an oppressive and offensive action, perhaps there is one solution that could help ease the tension — better education.

Arguably, if improved knowledge of religious beliefs and practices is emphasised, then perhaps appropriation could become less of a live issue. Taking time to learn about and appreciate another religion or culture means that future appropriation could be avoided and religious communities may feel less targeted, while at the same time, one's freedom of expression need not be compromised.

## How mindfulness was reinvented by removing its Buddhist roots

### Classical Buddhist mindfulness

For most modern people, 'mindfulness' means concentrating on the present moment, with a quiet mind, and without judgement. What few realise however, is that mindfulness has a very different meaning in the Buddhist traditions from which it emerged. The early Buddhist definition of mindfulness (Pali: *sati*) was actually 'to bear in mind' or 'to remember'.

Here, mindfulness is simply the capacity to retain an object in consciousness, without forgetting it, regardless of whether this object is in the past, present, or future. Mindfulness can therefore involve memory, imagination, and even ethical judgement. Many classical texts compare mindfulness to a guard or sentinel who protects the mind from unwholesome thoughts and impulses, which means that it 'bears in mind' a certain ethical framework.

### The goal of classical mindfulness

Mindfulness was traditionally never seen as a goal in itself, but only as a tool in the larger ethical project of eliminating one's 'mental afflictions', which (allegedly) cause all psychological suffering. The most fundamental of these, which is 'delusion', could not be eliminated by simply paying attention to the present moment, but only by deeply investigating the nature of phenomena. This investigative process is called 'insight' (*vipassana*) meditation, which is often (wrongly) equated with modern mindfulness.

The traditional claim is that *vipassana* meditation will only be fully effective if one first develops exceptional concentration, which requires months of sustained retreat practice. A good analogy for this is that you can only do proper astronomy research if you have a very stable and clear telescope. Likewise, you can only sustain your meditative investigations if your attention has attained a certain level of stability and vividness, which requires training. A common benchmark for this is the ability to sustain unwavering concentration on a single object for four hours straight. This is partly why *vipassana* practice was out of reach for laypeople, and even for most monks.

"Vipassana practice was out of reach for laypeople, and even for most monks."

### The reinvention of mindfulness during the vipassana revival

Prior to the 19th century, most Buddhists never meditated at all. They thought they were living in a 'degenerate age' where attaining liberation (*nirvana*) was virtually impossible. All one could hope for was to improve one's future lives by avoiding harm and doing good deeds. This was true for most monks as well. It was only during the 19th and 20th centuries that certain Asian modernisers started promoting Buddhist meditation for laypeople. This movement, known as the 'vipassana revival', was partly a reaction to European colonialism, which presented Western science and Christianity as superior to the local traditions

they encountered. The Buddhist modernisers therefore decided to use their strategy against them, and started presenting Buddhism (and meditation) as if it was more rational and scientific than the Western traditions of the colonisers.

### The Burmese revival: Ledi and Mahasi Sayadaw

The Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) spearheaded this movement in 1904. His approach was still quite traditional, because he insisted that philosophical study was necessary for effective *vipassana* practice, but he also departed from tradition by dismissing the importance of first training one's attention skills. This was partly in order to make *vipassana* accessible to laypeople who were not professional meditators.

He was then followed by Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982), who set the standard for how mindfulness would be practised in the West. He departed from tradition even further than Ledi, by saying that there was no need for philosophical study or deep concentration, and that genuine insight could be attained in a short 10-day retreat. This made it extremely easy to export around the world. He also made two major changes to mindfulness itself. Firstly, he started defining it as non-reactive and non-judgemental awareness, and secondly, he introduced the popular technique of 'noting', where one mentally labels each thing that appears in consciousness.

### Postmodern, Western mindfulness

It was Mahasi's notion of non-judgemental and thought-free awareness that was eventually transported to the West by one of his students, called Nyanaponika Thera, who started calling it 'bare attention'. It was then incorporated into modern psychology, where it was defined as 'non-elaborative, present-centered, non-judgemental awareness'. The idea that mindfulness is 'all-accepting' was particularly emphasised, because it seemed to have a therapeutic effect on stress and chronic pain. However, this also divorced it completely from ethical judgement.

### Non-dualistic mindfulness

This modern definition of mindfulness is actually much closer to non-dualistic forms of mindfulness that one finds in Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. In non-dual mindfulness, consciousness becomes aware of its own nature, rather than merely focusing on sensory or mental objects. When these innovations started emerging around the 7th century, they were seen as very unorthodox by the Buddhist mainstream, because their classical sources told them that consciousness without a corresponding object was impossible. The 8th-century master Kamalashila even said that meditators who aim to stop thinking would be reborn in a special hell realm as mindless zombies for 500 aeons (millions of years).

"In non-dual mindfulness, consciousness becomes aware of its own nature, rather than merely focusing on sensory or mental objects."



### Multiple mindfulneses?

We can therefore see that there are multiple styles of mindfulness in different traditions. While some authors tend to portray certain styles of mindfulness as more authentic or authoritative than others, there is no need for this. Different styles exist alongside each other, because Buddhism has never had a pope-like authority who decides what is orthodox or heretical. In fact, many Buddhist traditions profoundly disagree with one other. The main thing to avoid is confusing one style for another when we talk about 'mindfulness'.

### Common ground

What all forms of mindfulness do seem to have in common is their interruption of our habitual identification (i.e. 'cognitive fusion') with the contents of our mind. This allows us to see thoughts as thoughts, rather than immediately believing their content. This is probably the main mechanism behind the stress reduction people experience from mindfulness, because it breaks the spell of our daydreams about past dramas and future catastrophes. As it turns out, being stressed is quite difficult if you pay attention.

*Timo Pieters*

## Why is a fast celebrated in a secular society?

In Switzerland, some regions have a public holiday during the month of September. This one-day holiday is called the Federal Fast or the Fast of Geneva. The majority of people living in these regions celebrate that day by eating a prune tart and not going to work or school. However, most of them do not know why this day is a fast day. How did a day of fast become a public holiday within five centuries? In a larger sense, how can remembering the religious element of a holiday help understand the holiday itself?

“How can remembering the religious element of a holiday help understand the holiday itself?”

### The history behind the Federal Fast and the Fast of Geneva

During the Reformation, a fast would be practised when events such as fires, plagues, and civil wars occurred. The fasting consisted of not eating for a day to be more disposed to prayer and understanding God through readings of the Bible. In the 17th century, this fast became a yearly practice for people from Geneva. The difference in names, Federal Fast or Fast of Geneva, appears in 1837 when the Swiss Federation joined all cantonal fasts in one ecumenical day. The canton of Geneva decided to keep their own fast as it is part of their reformed identity.

### The celebration of the fast in a secular society

Today, this public holiday is a resting day for most Swiss. However, in the political and religious domains, this day consists of acting in humility and solidarity towards those vulnerable in our current society. For example, in the canton of Neuchatel, churches will collect funds for victims of the COVID-19 economic crisis. In the canton of Vaud, the state counsellor, Christelle Luisier, will talk about solidarity before the ecumenical service.

### The influence of a religious moral value in today's Swiss society

From the Reformation to today, the day of fast became a means to act in solidarity. Switzerland, mostly Geneva, is known for its international work through the United Nations. However, the Swiss moral value of solidarity did not appear with the creation of the UN. During the Reformation, Calvin already called protestants to live in humility to remember the gift of grace. This moral value of humility influenced political decisions in Switzerland as politicians were in close relation with the Church. Later, the value of humility in politics was translated into acts of solidarity. These actions, through international aid, built the Swiss moral value of solidarity. Two examples from the Reformed moral value highlight Switzerland's work on solidarity. In the 16th century, Switzerland was a place of refuge for protestants from France and Italy. Then, Henry Dunand, a reformed man from the 19th century, created the Red Cross known for helping civilians during wars.

In conclusion, knowledge of the history of this public holiday can help us to understand that the Swiss cultural norm of international aid is influenced by a religious concept. Through religious history, we can discover how religion is still entangled in today's secular society.

*Emma Van Dorp*



## Is it legitimate to wear religious symbols in the workplace?

— *Author recommendation*

### The new EU ruling

A new ruling of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) allows companies to ban the wearing of religious symbols in the workplace if they can prove that this is needed to maintain their neutrality. This ruling came as a result of two different cases of Muslim women in Germany.

This new ECJ ruling is in line with a previous ruling by the same court in 2017. According to this 2017 ruling, employers can require their employees to wear a 'neutral' dress code, this being a dress code that does not feature any religious symbols.

### The background cases in Germany

The first case discussed by the ECJ court was the case of a childcare worker who was restrained for wearing a hijab at work. The employer argued that the hijab disrupted the policy of the workplace, according to which those working with children should maintain religious neutrality in order to allow the 'free development' of the young. The employer required this kind of neutrality only from those employees working with children, which the ECJ thought was reasonable.

The second case regarded a sales assistant who was also restrained for wearing a hijab. The employer claimed that the wearing of the hijab was in violation of the rule not to wear "conspicuous, large-sized signs of any political, philosophical or religious beliefs" and that this neutrality was essential to avoid workplace conflicts. In this case, the ECJ was less unequivocal and stated that the banning of religious symbols could only be allowed in exceptional circumstances when it is absolutely necessary.

"The banning of religious symbols could only be allowed in exceptional circumstances."

### Reactions to the new ruling

The ECJ ruling led to many different responses. Legal Swedish experts Ruth Nordström and Rebecca Ahlstrand underlined the possible consequences of the decision of the ECJ. According to them, even though the sentence does not automatically imply a general right to ban the use of religious expressions in Swedish workplaces, it might still lead to an increased number of companies adopting neutrality policies. However, according to the ECJ, such a policy would forbid not only religious symbols, but also political and philosophical ones.

Moreover, Turkey's cabinet ministers have criticised the European Union court's decision, saying it is "a blow to the rights of Muslim women" and that it would "grant legitimacy to racism."

Finally, the European Network Against Racism stated its disagreement with the law on Twitter, writing that

this ruling will "lead to justifying the exclusion of Muslim women, who are increasingly portrayed as dangerous for Europe, in the collective narrative."

### The problem of ruling for the whole EU

The ECJ's task in ruling on matters like religious symbols in the workplace is very difficult. This is because the same ruling has to apply to the 27 different EU member states. These states are very different from each other in their religious views and values and their approaches to human rights. While in France, for instance, public expressions of religion are banned, the UK does its best to encourage public religious expression.

Since the views are so different from one another, the ECJ needs to stay as neutral as possible. For this reason, it maintained a more neutral approach in this ruling and has left room for each European country to be more or less liberal, according to its own tendencies. Countries that want to limit religious expressions in public places will be allowed to do so, and places that would like to enhance religious expression at work will be allowed to do so as well. Yet, the ECJ still underlined that limitations of religious expression need to be towards all religions equally and cannot discriminate against followers of a specific religion.

It remains to be seen whether more secular countries will use this new ruling in favour of more neutrality in public spaces and whether more religious countries will be able to maintain religious freedom despite this ECJ bill. If this is to be the case, it will mean that the ECJ succeeded in maintaining its neutrality.

*Ghila Amati*



## Poland — an example of delayed secularisation?

### Polish Catholic Church in crisis

The Catholic Church in Poland is undergoing a significant crisis. At face value, it still retains a strong position in the country. There are approximately 91.9% of nominal Catholics, and 88% of pupils in educational institutions still participate in confessional religion classes. However, other numbers show that a significant change in attitudes is approaching. Recent data from Pew Research Center shows that Poland has the highest difference in the world in shares of younger and older adults who consider religion important. Also, the number of candidates to priesthood fell nearly 20% between 2020 and 2021 after several years of sharp decline. Are these signs of a delayed secularisation?

### Reputation continues to crumble

Changes in attitudes could be attributed primarily to the intensification of concerns around the Church's responses to the sexual abuse crisis, as well as the too-close political associations of at least some Church leaders. Both of these problems were highlighted in the fictional movie 'Clergy'. This movie portrayed the hypocrisy in moral and ethical stances of different representatives of Catholic clergy in Poland. The impression made by the movie was later confirmed in highly publicised documentary movies like 'Tell No One' or 'Hide and Seek'. The fictional movie was watched by a record audience with one of the highest viewing records in the post-1989 Polish movie industry. However, its numbers paled in contrast with the two above-mentioned documentary movies, which, at the time of writing, had over 24.5 million and 8 million views respectively.

The so-called McCarrick Report also undermined the mythical status of John Paul II. A subsequent documentary called 'Don Stanislaw' portrayed his former secretary and now cardinal in a poor light. The Terlikowski Commission, a lay-led commission that looked into the actions of Dominican Father Pawel M, showed in their 2021 report that similar patterns of negligence among bishops and parish priests could have been observed in the country's Dominican province.

### Low approvals and religious practice despite high rates of faithful

All of these events led to a significant drop in approval for the activity of the Catholic Church in Poland. According to the Centre for Public Opinion Research, public approval for the activity of the Church is at its lowest since 1989 when it was 85% — now it is only 46%. Between March and December 2020 the approvals fell by 16%, with a slight increase of 5% at the beginning of 2021. Another study of the same organisation showed that while the level of religious faith only slightly diminished between 1992 and 2021 (from 94% to 87.4%), religious practice has seen a significant drop in the same period — from 69.5% to 42.9% in the general population. Among people aged 18-24 this change was even more significant — the drop has been from 69% to 23%.

### Increasing hostility and attacks on church buildings

The increase in the loss of approval coincides with the increase in hostility towards the Church. In the light of the October 2021 Constitutional Tribunal ruling which further curtailed possibilities for abortion, Poland experienced the most significant protests in its post-communist history. In an unprecedented turn, some of

the protesters targeted Catholic churches and disrupted liturgies, accusing the Church of alliance with the government in violating their rights.

### "Will Poland follow Western Europe along the trajectory of secularisation?"

#### Is Poland experiencing delayed secularisation?

All of these changes put forward the question: will Poland follow Western Europe along the trajectory of secularisation, and experience delayed secularisation? The significant change in the younger part of Polish society could suggest so. However, as the country remains one of the most religious in Europe, there still might be a twist in the plot. Even in credibility terms, there might occur, for example, changes in approval for the Catholic Church, as exemplified by the early 2021 correction. Two significant questions remain. Will the Catholic Church in Poland be able to better respond to the corruption in its midst? And will it set itself free from too-close governmental alliances? These seem to be the biggest factors impacting social perception. The next few years will probably be decisive.

*Ryszard Bobrowicz*



## The Christian symbolism in The Lord of the Rings

— Author recommendation

### A Catholic work

J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, called his book “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work.” He was a devout Catholic himself, and he regarded the Gospel as the ultimate story. This is because it contains the greatest possible ‘eucatastrophe’ (good catastrophe), namely the unjust death and resurrection of Jesus. Since Tolkien strongly disliked one-to-one correspondences, he decided to weave Christian themes into his book without making them too obvious. However, knowing where to find them makes the story come alive in a totally new way.

### Parallel narratives

First of all, we can see that Tolkien has modelled his story on the basic plot of the Bible. *The Lord of the Rings* starts with an unspoiled paradise (the Shire / Garden of Eden), which is rudely disturbed by evil (Sauron / Satanic snake). Then there is a moral quest, which brings about moral and spiritual maturation. Finally, there is an apocalyptic ending (‘Dagor Dagorath’ / Armageddon), which then culminates in the redemption of the world (the Kingdom of Heaven).

### Middle-earth has a God

We can also see that Tolkien’s world was created by a single God called Eru Ilúvatar. Eru accomplished his work through the help of intermediaries called *Valar*, which are similar to the Christian concept of angels. All living things are in a hierarchical relationship with Eru but he does not rule over them like a tyrant, controlling everything. Instead, he leaves room for free will, including the will to do evil. However, the evil creatures of Middle-earth do not have an evil nature but merely suffer from an absence of goodness. This is the Christian view of evil that was famously expressed by St. Augustine in the 4th century.

### Satan and his minions

The ‘Satan’ of Middle-earth is Melkor (‘He who arises in Might’), the most powerful of the *Valar* (angels). Like Lucifer in the Bible, he refused to participate in the community of creation because he wanted to create and rule on his own. In Christian morality, this pride of total independence is the worst sin of all. Melkor could therefore only produce fake imitations of Eru’s creations, such as the orcs, which were a mockery of the elves. Saruman likewise tried to play God by breeding his horrible Uruk-hai.

### Sauron

Sauron was one of the higher *Maiar* (helpers of the *Valar*) who joined Melkor’s revolt against creation. He forged the One Ring to tempt beings with its triple powers of immortality, invisibility, and coercion (control over the will of others). His name, which is based on the Greek word for ‘lizard’ (*sauros*), reminds us of the snake in the Garden of Eden, and his cold-blooded lack of empathy. His single eye symbolises how his single-minded obsession with power has made him blind to any depth of perspective.

### Science and technology as disguised magic

For Tolkien, this selfish obsession with knowledge and power, which sees nature and living beings as mere instruments, is the essence of evil. Therefore, it makes sense that he strongly disliked modern developments that were driven by a similar mentality. He likened magic, especially black magic, to modern science and technology, because they both seek to dominate and control the processes of nature. Descartes famously said that the goal of modern science was to make us “masters and possessors of nature.” Once Saruman became obsessed with power, Treebeard started referring to him as having “a mind of metal and wheels...” The other aim of black magic, including the Ring, is to control the will. This reminds us of the greatest evil of modern times: the coercive totalitarian regimes of the 20th century.

“This selfish obsession with knowledge and power, which sees nature and living beings as mere instruments, is the essence of evil.”

### The corrupting influence of power and evil

Since evil is the absence of goodness, it can only exist by preying on the virtues of good people, and trying to pervert them through pride and selfishness. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the most heroic and ambitious members of the Fellowship are therefore most susceptible to the corrupting influence of the Ring. Boromir, for example, wanted to use the Ring to defeat the enemy but was consumed by its power. Likewise, Gandalf refused to carry the Ring because it might corrupt his desire to do good. Tolkien warns us that unlimited power (symbolised by the Ring) enslaves the will because it removes all constraints from our desires. We need these constraints of human nature to keep us sane and attuned to the needs of others. For Tolkien, evil actions are therefore always unfree actions. It is precisely the weakness and innocence of the hobbits that makes them virtually immune to such evil. All they wanted to do was act as servants to the good rather than as lords and leaders.

### The Christian virtue of humility

It is this emphasis on the virtue of the weak, the small, and the humble, that arguably defines Christian morality. As Jesus said: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Tolkien himself said that the moral structure of his work was primarily about “the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble.” Arguably, what defined Jesus was his selfless devotion to the common good, which is also what characterises the hobbits. It is why they can be entrusted with destroying the Ring. The Shire was actually Tolkien’s vision of life as it is supposed to be lived; free of excessive ambition and in harmony with nature and one’s community.

### The virtues of faith, hope, and love

Tolkien also pays special attention to the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. The Fellowship is a demonstration of faith as deep trust and friendship. They are in fact the embodiment of the highest form of friendship,



namely a community of virtue that is bound by its shared aspirations to do good.

But it is Tolkien's unfailing emphasis on love that makes his Christian message clearly shine through. For example, the way in which Frodo shows pity and forgiveness to Smeagol would be incomprehensible to warrior cultures like Sparta or Mongolia. For them, mercy was a flaw, and vengeance a necessity. Frodo loves Smeagol as Jesus loves the sinner, which allows Smeagol to re-discover his original goodness (his former hobbit self). We also see that the hope of the Fellowship is unbreakable despite all the setbacks and tragedies they face.

"It is Tolkien's unfailing emphasis on love that makes his Christian message clearly shine through."

#### The final redemption and incarnation

While Tolkien does not describe the final redemption in *The Lord of the Rings*, he has written about it in his later book 'The Debate of Finrod and Andreth'. There, he says that it was Melkor who brought the curse of death into the world, and that only a human could cure this death curse. This future human would be the incarnation of Eru Ilúvatar, who has come to redeem Middle-earth. It seems that Tolkien finally succeeded in finishing his story in a biblical way.

*Timo Pieters*

## Does Christianity need poetry?

Poetry is unsettling. It simultaneously praises the muses of beauty, love, and pleasure, and the desire of the soul to grasp ultimate meaning and presence. Poetry embraces the depths and the heights of human experience and spirituality. However, it is not self-evident that religions would use this literary genre to express their message. In many ways, poetry can be deemed excessively sensual. So, why and how would religions integrate poetry?

Poetry can be found in any religion. Piyyutim, for instance, are traditional Jewish liturgical poems. Besides, the sacred book of Islam is called the Quran, which translates to 'the recitation'. This list of examples could continue, but for now, let us explore poetry in Western Christianity.

#### Poetry is a prophetic genre

In Greek antiquity, education was provided by poets who sang legendary stories and verses. In this oral culture, poetry was crucial to pass on common myths from one generation to the next. These first poets were called aeds, but they were, in fact, priests. The form of poetry they promoted was the hymn. Through time, poets became self-sustaining artists, singing not only about Gods but also heroes.

Poets encapsulate a presence in words. They use symbols to give the impression that what is physically absent is in fact present to the senses. They therefore remain connected to aeds.

16th-century poet Pierre de Ronsard defines poetry as "an allegorical theology." The purpose of poetry is to let us feel and perceive what is too complex for our minds to understand. According to Ronsard, poetry is pedagogy about the divine. 19th-century writers Victor Hugo and Arthur Rimbaud portray two sides of the prophetic function of poets. While Hugo argues they are "visionaries," tasked with guiding humanity into its future, Rimbaud proclaims they are "seers," who deregulate their senses in order to experiment what is unknown to man.

"The purpose of poetry is to let us feel and perceive what is too complex for our minds to understand."

#### The 'Word of God' is expressed poetically

The ambiguity between poetry and religiosity is persistent. It is not surprising that sacred books are woven into poetry. Through the eyes of Michael Edwards, writer and literary critic, the Bible appears to be inherently poetic. Some books are specifically intended to be part of this literary genre, like the Song of Songs and the Psalms:

"Let the rivers clap their hands,  
Let the mountains sing together for joy"

More than that, the Bible contains numerous figurative stories, metaphors, parables, allegories... and countless hyperboles:

“And if your right hand causes you to stumble,  
cut it off and throw it away”

On another level, Christian theology itself is poetic. In Christianity, God is not directly revealed in Scripture. God reveals himself in Jesus Christ. Jesus's life and death are, in themselves, the 'word of God'. That too, is tremendously poetic:

“He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood,  
and His name is the Word of God.”

The language of the Bible strikes the imagination. Its musicality was obvious to the first people who heard it. Indeed: not until recently were Jewish and Christian believers able to read the Bible, each in their everyday language. Current mass literacy and printing should not have us forget that for a long time the books of the Bible were copied only to be read in assemblies.

#### Poems serve the purpose of the church

Western Christianity did not frame the Bible as poetic until the 5th century, says Michel Zink in his book *Poetry and Conversion in the Middle Ages*. Until then, it was believed that this literary genre was essentially pagan and therefore dangerous. If poetry was a divine medium, it was definitely not that of the Judeo-Christian God.

Zink notes that it took the literary knowledge of Saint Jerome to admit that the Bible contained actual books of poetry. The scholar was confident that the Bible was superior to classic literature; from his point of view, the Christian message could only benefit from profane wisdom and art. He encouraged Christians to assimilate classic literature and bring about one of their own. This had tremendous consequences in the Middle Ages.

Poetry therefore became acceptable and justified. It was converted and would, in turn, convert souls. 'Conversion' meant the constant return to God and the acceptance of his primacy in human affairs. Literature became a means to expand Christianity in the West. From then on, Christian poets could identify as prophets. One of their role models was David, the alleged writer of the Psalms and a prophet that “explained the sacred mysteries on his divine lyre.”

A myriad of poems was then written. It not only served the purpose of prayer and meditation of the Bible, but also theological and political confrontation. For example, the Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation movements publicised their disagreement through bitter poems. Western Christianity had successfully integrated the poetic genre as part of its own culture.

#### Poetry and Christianity: a love-hate relationship

Poetry is an integral part of religiosity. In fact, it is probably its native language. As we have seen before, the texts that were to be read in assemblies were intensely poetic. Western Christianity remained nonetheless blind to their power of suggestion; until it redefined poetry as a means to turn souls to God.

From then on, poetry about the divine was not only in the Bible. The recitation of the 'word of God' was supplemented with proclamations of faith. These expressions of faith and subjective discourses about God were condensed in poems. The church nevertheless remained jealous of the power of poetry. Poetry magnifies ordinary experiences of beauty and decay. It tends to look for the *inner* dignity of these experiences, and make them meaningful in themselves. On the contrary, Christianity aims at changing humanity in regard to an *outer* standard: that of God. Through its social influence, the Church has contributed to censoring 'immoral' poems even during the 19th century.

Whether it prompts moral decay or spiritual elevation, Western Christianity cannot reject poetry. It has become an essential part of religious experiences.

*Clémence Sauty*



## House of One: What is driving Europe's newest interfaith project?

In summer 2021, an imam, a rabbi, and a priest laid the foundation stone of Europe's biggest interfaith project. When it opens in four years' time, the 'House of One' will incorporate a mosque, a synagogue, and a church. It will also include a central space where people of all three faiths and none can come together to discuss and pray.

Situated in the heart of Berlin, the project's symbolism as a point of interfaith unity is unmistakable. But who is driving this project, and what motivates them? Furthermore, are there any potential conflicts of interest that participants should be aware of?

### Theological vision

This project is the brainchild of three founders, each a leader of their own religion: Gregor Hohberg, a Christian pastor; Kadir Sancı, an imam; and Tovia Ben Chorin, a rabbi. For all three, their faith is the primary motivation for this project.

The project is not intended to create watered-down versions of each faith; nor is it supposed to conclude that all three religions are necessarily worshipping the same deity. Rather, believers will grow in knowledge and respect of other faiths. "The people there will remain true to their own faith, live by its strength and enter into peace-loving conversation with one another," says Gregor Hohberg.

The building's architecture reflects this vision. Three separate prayer spaces are connected by a central meeting space where people of any faith and none can meet together to commune, share stories, and, if appropriate, pray. The three equal faiths, each maintaining its own integrity and distinctiveness, are united in their openness to learn from and engage with the other faiths.

The building is situated on the site of a 13th-century church, which was badly damaged during the Second World War and demolished under communist rule in 1964. A place of peace and mutual respect between peoples will grow out of a place bearing the scars of war and ideological intolerance.

### Social impact

Berlin also holds particular significance as a city from which extreme hatred against a religious group emerged and was propagated. Rabbi Tovia speaks movingly about how Berlin is for him both the 'city of wounds' and the 'city of wonders'. It was the heart of the Nazi machine that exterminated 6 million Jews, LGBT people, and others considered enemies of the state. However, in the House of One, we now see the healing of these wounds emerging from the same place. The three religions that shaped the course of European civilisation are now united around their shared identity as people of faith.

The reappearance of fighting between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 sparked a wave of anti-Israel protests across Europe, including Germany. So shocking was this resurgence of antisemitism within living memory of the Nazi regime that German authorities banned the Hamas flag out of solidarity with its Jewish citizens.

This venture comes at a time of widespread Islamophobia across Europe. A 2019 poll found that over 50% of Germans consider Islam to be a 'threat', which is consistent with data from the previous decade. Legitimate

criticism of aspects of Islam that seem to undermine gender equality, democracy, or LGBTQ rights, often collapses into discrimination against Muslims, or even hate crimes. The House of One will be the first mosque located in the centre of Berlin.

With this backdrop of growing intolerance, it is no wonder that education is a priority for the House of One. Even though the building will not be finished until 2026, the project is already engaging with schools across the country, asking students to reflect on the theme of 'tolerance'. The team of educators brings a range of skills including mediation, therapy, and 'democracy and peace education'. The team hopes to work with communities, schools, and faith groups to increase mutual understanding and open-mindedness, which is the key to enriching encounters with people of other faiths.

### Sources of funding

At a cost of 47.3 million euros, the House of One has required a lot of fundraising to get off the ground. Their major donors are the German federal government and the state of Berlin, who are contributing 30 million euros between them. The project has also qualified for several smaller federal- or state-funded grants, including those supporting democracy and urban growth in Germany. Furthermore, the mayor of Berlin has been made the chairperson of the Board of Trustees.

The German Evangelical Church is also a major donor, though the amount of their donation is not freely accessible. No major donors from Muslim or Jewish organisations are visible on their website.

The House of One also welcomes donations from individuals. People can 'sponsor a brick' for 10 euros, for which they receive a 'blessing'. Donors can also make prayer requests which become part of the liturgical cycle of the faith communities.

### Conflicts of interest?

With well over half of their donations coming from German authorities, can the House of One be considered 'independent' from the federal and state governments? Would they feel free to criticise a decision of the country's leadership, or to call out abuses? This question of independence is all the more pressing considering that their trustees are led by Berlin's mayor.

Similarly, what degree of influence will the Evangelical Church enjoy over the project? As the only Christian denomination to make a substantial donation, will their doctrines and concerns be granted priority over those of the Catholics, for example? More concerningly for the House of One's mission, will the (apparent) fact that Christians have donated more than Jews or Muslims at all affect the project's direction?

The distinction between support and influence is blurry at best. While donors may give altruistically, it is a (cynical) principle of capitalism that investors invest in the expectation of some return. The House of One leadership would do well to think about these hypothetical questions before they become a reality.

*Frazer MacDiarmid*



## Are 'holidays' more inclusive than 'Christmas'?

During the past weeks, a number of guidelines from the European Commission have caused confusion and anger. At the end of October 2021, commissioner for equality Helena Dalli presented a document encouraging the commissioners to use terms such as 'holiday season', instead of 'Christmas'. Similarly, the guidelines discouraged the use of gendered words and pronouns.

A number of politicians and the Vatican criticised the document for denying Europe's Christian roots when rejecting the use of words such as 'Christmas'. However, others have criticised the European Union for not being inclusive enough. For example, the European Commission does not have any non-white members. The document has now been withdrawn but the question remains: is tradition against diversity? Let us look at the debate about holiday traditions and diversity.

### Either Christmas or inclusion?

Many European countries have reacted to the part of the document that suggests the word Christmas should no longer be used. In Italy, different political parties rejected the idea of a Europe that forgets its roots. On the contrary, according to many politicians, Europe should be proud of its origins and learn how to celebrate them, instead of impeding the use of the word Christmas. The Vatican found that cancelling Christmas would imply denying Europe's Christian roots. But not only this, as Cardinal Pietro Parolin explained that, over time, forgetting the influence Christianity had on Europe and denying the differences between different people can have dangerous consequences. As Cardinal Parolini explained, "destroying the difference and destroying the roots means precisely to destroy the person."

In the French newspaper *La Croix*, Isabelle de Gaulmyn found that the values of solidarity that influenced the opening of Europe to refugees in 2015 could be seen as the result of Christian teachings. In other words, the manual and its proposition to stop using the term Christmas seem to have united many different political voices in their cry for respecting Europe's Christian roots. Many journalists and the Vatican shared in this cry. Some, however, found that the question had been too politicised. In the Swedish newspaper *Sydsvenskan*, Heidi Avellan commented that Christmas is safe for this year. However, she warns that similar propositions often become a way of giving too much power and attention to nationalistic parties. Similarly, the website *Politico* argues that right-wing politicians are usually quick to connect inclusive language to the suppression of roots and identity. Seen from this point of view, it seems as if the need to keep Christmas and tradition is not only of historical and religious importance, but also of a political one.

### Inclusion against tradition?

While restrictions on the use of the word Christmas has led to many protests, the inclusive aim of the document has also been criticised. The document suggested that words such as 'chairman' or 'ladies and gentlemen' should be substituted with gender-neutral alternatives such as 'chairperson'. Italian newspaper *Il Giornale* comments that there is nothing wrong in defining a woman as a 'lady'. More generally, the same newspaper criticises the use of words such as parent 1 and parent 2 instead of father and mother. The website *Politico*, on the other hand, does not find the use of gender-neutral words as particularly striking, since similar propositions have been made before. In addition, the idea of using the word 'holidays' instead of 'Christmas' seems to have

been connected to the need to remind the commissioners that not everyone is Christian.

Debaters in different countries agree on the importance of inclusion and respect. However, they find that the right way to promote these features would be to recognise that people are different, instead of trying to eliminate these differences.

"Tradition can sometimes seem to be against diversity."

### Is tradition against diversity?

The discussion following the internal document of the European Commission shows that tradition can sometimes seem to be against diversity. In this particular case, the document suggested avoiding the use of words connected to traditional holidays as a way of acknowledging diversity. On the one hand, as many have pointed out, diversity can be appreciated without forgetting the past and neglecting different traditions. On the other hand, the document tried to make the Commission more inclusive through the use of non-gendered words and pronouns. Tradition does not need to be against diversity. Inclusion, however, takes more to achieve than substituting 'Christmas' with 'holidays'.

*Annamaria Laviola-Svensäter*

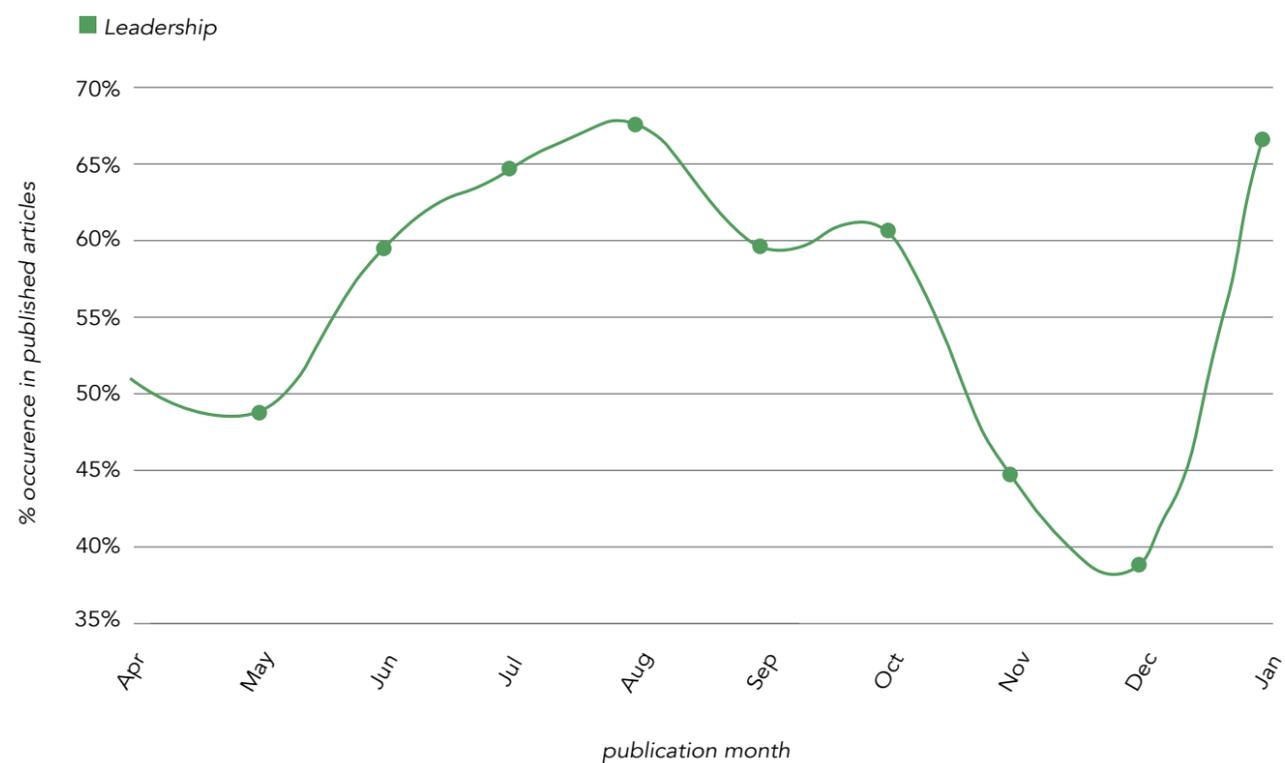
# COVID-19



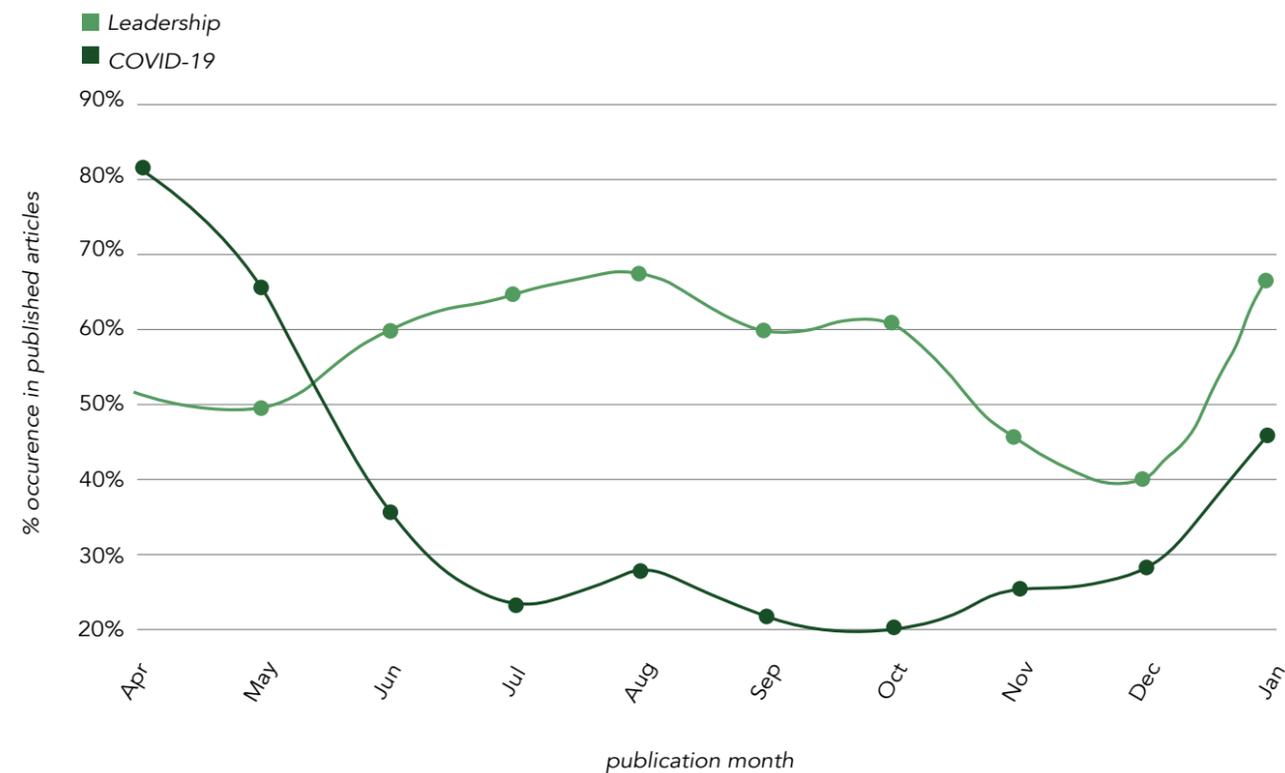


## Insights from the dashboard: Leadership and COVID-19

In the past months, leadership was a trending topic on the EARS dashboard. In fact, whereas only 39% of articles added to the dashboard in December 2020 related to leadership, this was the case for 67% of all articles in January 2021.



Not only did the topic of leadership occur in 67% of all articles; it also showed significant overlap with the issue of COVID-19. About a third of all articles about leadership also concern the topic of coronavirus. As shown in the graph below, both subjects gained significant importance on the dashboard in January.





Let's take a look at the recent developments around these two issues in Europe.

#### **Vaccination efforts**

In news articles from all across Europe, we see a similar pattern when it comes to the relationship between leadership and COVID-19: discussions about vaccines. Several religious leaders have spoken out on vaccination, most of them urging faithful to get the jab. For instance, the Bishop of Antwerp called Belgian Catholics to get vaccinated without hesitation, Irish bishops have encouraged all citizens to support the vaccination program, and also the Holy See and Pope Francis have urged people to get vaccinated. In Italy, calls rose to prioritise priests in COVID-19 vaccination programs, since the death toll amongst clergy has grown. On the other hand, the Georgian Church has stated to be satisfied that getting the vaccine will not be mandatory. The Church has also said not to promote vaccination efforts, since that is the sphere of doctors, not theologians.

#### **Pandemic effects**

Not only has the Holy See supported vaccination programs; it has also drawn attention to the damaging social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, in February, Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič, the Holy See's Permanent Observer to the United Nations in Geneva, focused on the importance of caring for the most vulnerable in society. According to Jurkovič, the pandemic has had adverse effects on everyone's psychological, emotional, social, and economic wellbeing. However, COVID-19 has also brought forward latent global problems, such as greed, individualism, and efforts to silence minority voices.

Similarly, the Vatican Secretary for Relations with States, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, has emphasised that coronavirus does not justify the limitation of human rights. According to Gallagher, governments should combine the protection of public health with the protection of their citizens' human rights, such as the right to religious freedom and freedom of conscience.

#### **Leadership and COVID-19**

The overlap between religious leaders' responsibilities and statements or efforts around COVID-19 is clear. For instance, most religious leaders are rather positive about global vaccination efforts, and support both faithful and the wider community to get vaccinated. Nevertheless, they are also aware of the problems the pandemic has caused in society, ranging from economic to emotional effects. In the next few months, the efforts taken by religious leaders might well influence the containment of coronavirus, as well as its direct effects.

*Anne Clerx*



## Communion during confinement

European churches have had to close their doors or reduce their activities to stop the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Some church activities are relatively easy to transfer online, but the Christian practice of communion is not one of them. Many churches have tried their best to administer communion while adapting to coronavirus guidelines. Some have gone on with their business as usual, whereas others have been looking for new, creative ways of administering communion despite the restrictions.

### Doing the best with ongoing restrictions

As Switzerland went into lockdown in March 2020, a local Catholic pastor came up with an idea. He started serving consecrated host (the bread in Eucharist) in paper bags outside of his church for parishioners to take home. Soon after, the diocese ended this practice, appealing to strict Vatican orders. Although taking the host home in a paper bag was a step too far for the Catholic Church, Catholics have made other adaptations to their Eucharist traditions in the course of the pandemic.

Following the lead of Pope Francis, Catholic churches are gathering where possible, following strict safety instructions. Obligation to attend mass has been abolished, and instead of priests placing the host directly in the faithful's mouth, it is now placed in their hand. Priests are also obliged to wear face masks. Moreover, most Protestant churches have found ways to gather and administer communion following the coronavirus restrictions of their countries, using face masks, hand sanitiser, and social distancing. An Anglican pastor in the Netherlands even found a creative way to keep distance regulations by using long chopsticks to administer Holy Communion.

In Finland, communion has been administered in small groups. Some parishes of the Evangelical Lutheran Church give communion privately, and some organise multiple gatherings with small groups of people. Other parishes open up church doors after online Mass to administer communion one by one. The Anglican Church has a concept of 'spiritual communion', that has been used during the lockdowns. The idea of spiritual communion is that when someone is prevented from partaking in communion for a serious reason, they can still partake in the Eucharist through a prayer without the bread and wine.

### Do shared communion cups or spoons spread the virus?

The Orthodox Church has a tradition of giving communion with a shared spoon. Using shared utensils is not a rarity in Christendom. For example, the Anglican and Catholic churches have used a shared communion cup. However, they did change their communion customs when the pandemic began. This is not the case with the Orthodox Church, as in countries like Georgia, Greece, Belarus, and Russia, conservative Orthodox Christians have continued using a shared spoon. They believe that it is impossible to catch any disease from the Holy Communion. The practice has been widely criticised, especially since the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church, Archbishop Ieronymos, was hospitalised after contracting coronavirus.

Not all Orthodox churches have been as strict with doctrine. In Romania, Patriarch Daniel has stated that those who are "weak in faith" may refrain from kissing the icons and use their own spoon in communion. The Finnish Orthodox Church has forbidden kissing of the icons and physical touch, and has started to provide communion using disposable wooden spoons that are burnt after the service.

### Online communion

The majority of European churches disapprove of online communion. Among these churches are the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and many Lutheran churches. They believe that Christ is present in communion, although in different ways. They also require ordained clergy to consecrate the elements. Thus, celebrating online communion is not seen as a possibility. However, among the historic protestant traditions, a wide variety of communion practices exist. Reformed churches also require ordained clergy to consecrate the elements, but at least the United Reformed Church in the UK and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands have been celebrating online communion during the pandemic. Moreover, whereas some other churches debate the validity of online communion, in the Netherlands questions are being asked about the possibility of online baptism.

Even though some Lutheran churches are against online communion, others have been practising it. For instance, the Church of Denmark had a communion service broadcasted on the radio. The Evangelical Church in Germany does not have an official stance on online communion, but does not disapprove of member churches choosing this option. For churches that do not require ordained clergy to consecrate the elements of communion, adapting to online communion is easier. This includes Baptist churches and many modern Protestant churches. The Baptist Church in the UK has even put together a recorded online communion, to allow faithful to participate in communion from their homes at any time. Some Pentecostal and non-denominational churches already celebrated home communion or online communion even before the pandemic. Thus, the pandemic has not impacted their communion practices significantly.

### Theology matters

Communion practices during the coronavirus pandemic show how church doctrine impacts behaviour in unexpected circumstances. Theology affects whether religious groups continue physical meetings during a pandemic and how they choose to follow safety guidelines, as is seen in the Orthodox Church in Greece, or with some evangelicals.

The lockdowns during the current pandemic have made churches rethink central theological questions around communities, physical presence, and the consecration of the bread and wine in communion. Also, new questions are being asked about how Christ is present in the elements and how the consecration actually happens.

*Pietari Hannikainen and Meri Hannikainen*



## Long-term impact: COVID-19 and the British Jewish community

The coronavirus pandemic has had an impact on all religious and cultural communities in the UK, changing how everyday life is practised. British Jewish communities have suffered significantly from the effects of COVID-19. Death rates amongst British Jews were very high compared to other faith communities and the normal practices of Jewish religious and communal traditions were altered.

This article will examine the different ways in which the pandemic has affected British Jewish communities. It will look at the difficulties the virus has presented amongst communities, examples of positivity during these dark times, and the long-term effects that the pandemic will leave for British Jews.

### A significant impact

When COVID-19 began to spread more rapidly in the UK in mid-March 2020, cases amongst British Jews were particularly high. Devastatingly, many of these cases resulted in death and data shows that there was a 127% increase in Jewish burials in the UK between March and May 2020. Specifically, the Orthodox Jewish community in London experienced one of the highest rates of coronavirus infection recorded anywhere in the world, with the overall infection rate at 64%.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) revealed in June 2020 that “Jews had elevated mortality from coronavirus” compared to British Christians, likely due to the close-knit, communal nature of Jewish communities and above-average family size. However, considering that British Jews are ‘longlifers’ and have been described as a group ‘with especially low mortality’, the increased death rate created significant shock and upset.

Moreover, like other religious communities, the normal celebration of key Jewish festivals was put on hold and Jews had to find new ways to celebrate. While many synagogues moved services online in an attempt to connect those who were apart, for strictly Orthodox Jews who cannot use electricity on Shabbat (holy day) or religious festivals, online streaming was not possible. Therefore, the impacts of the pandemic on British Jews have been wide ranging and life changing.

### Resisting the rules

The high death rate within British Jewish communities inevitably made many Jews incredibly worried about the threat of the virus. As the pandemic worsened, the majority of British Jews did their utmost to change their lives to follow the lockdown restrictions and keep each other safe.

Yet, worries were increased by the actions of some Jewish communities who did not let government coronavirus restrictions get in the way of their religious and cultural practices. In March 2020, some Jewish leaders feared that pockets of the UK’s ultra-Orthodox community were not receiving the necessary warnings. In Stamford Hill, an area of north-east London, some synagogues remained open and social distancing was not enforced.

Moreover, during the UK’s third lockdown in January 2021, when only six attendees were allowed at weddings, the police were called to a Haredi Jewish wedding party in Stamford Hill. 150 guests were gathered and the organisers faced a £10,000 fine for breaking lockdown rules. Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis said the event

was “the most shameful desecration of all that we hold dear.” Moreover, several whistleblowers informed Jewish News that these rules were “being routinely flouted” and dozens of large weddings had taken place.

Furthermore, many ultra-Orthodox Jewish schools continued to operate during lockdowns even though the government guidelines stated that only vulnerable children were allowed to attend school. A teacher at a Haredi school in the Manchester area said: “Schools are running at 100% capacity. The guidelines are vague, and it’s up to the headteachers’ discretion.”

### Coming together

However, despite such transgressions of the rules, some British Jews felt that the media unfairly covered these events which resulted in stigmatisation of all Jewish communities. Rabbi Levi Schapiro, a founding director of the Jewish Community Council of North London, condemned the illegal wedding in Stamford Hill and said “their actions were not representative of everyone.” But all the media attention and condemnation of the wedding ‘unfairly masked the sacrifices’ made by the majority of Jewish communities.

In fact, some Jews went above and beyond to help their community and create light during such dark times. For example, to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, socially-distanced shofar blowing took place in driveways in Elstree and Borehamwood with 1,300 people registering to attend this religious celebration. Rabbi Levi Schapiro helped launch a food programme to feed Haredi families who had lost their income or been bereaved. Moreover, drive-in candle lighting events were held in Manchester to celebrate the festival of Hanukkah.

### “Jewish life must change forever”

These examples highlight the kindness of many British Jews who have sought to bring a sense of community and support in the face of adversity. However, inevitably, Jewish life has changed dramatically. Speaking about the pandemic in March 2021, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis said that whilst it has created a “fundamental rupture” in communal life, it has also led to a “historic moment” to consider what comes next for British Jewish communities.

Therefore, what will the future hold for British Jews, post pandemic? The Chief Rabbi urges Jewish communities to take full advantage of the ‘Zoom revolution’ that allows Jews from around the world to connect. The Institute for Jewish Policy Research also suggests that support and donations to local synagogues, that are the “main mechanism fuelling Jewish life,” are essential. Moreover, better mental health services within the Jewish community to manage increased demand since the pandemic began, is a necessity. As British society begins to open up again, it is clear that the coronavirus pandemic has fundamentally altered British Jewish communities. But, hopefully, a positive future lies ahead.

*Martha Scott-Cracknell*



## Coronavirus crisis affects church membership

Over the course of 2020, as the coronavirus paralysed the continent, European churches have been reporting interesting trends regarding church membership. Compared to the statistics of 2019, some churches, like the Catholic Church in Austria, and Evangelical Lutheran and Orthodox Churches in Finland, have seen a significant drop in people leaving their respective institutions.

Making a comparison of church membership between all European countries is difficult, as different churches have different methods of keeping records, and not all share their statistics publicly. Also, many have not yet completed their statistics for 2020. However, it seems that across various countries, the year 2020 witnessed a pause in the downward trend in church membership.

### Crises affect human behaviour

Times of crisis affect our psychology and behaviour. The threat of disease and constant news flow about the pandemic can result in heightened anxiety and affect mental health. However, a constant feeling of threat can also have more subtle effects on our behaviour, leading, for instance, to more conformist and tribalistic behaviour. Examples include altered opinions on immigration, tolerance of differences, moral judgments, and even political affiliations. This has been already seen in increasing reports of racism.

A crisis can also lead people to turn to spirituality to find comfort and answers to existential questions. It has been acknowledged that natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes have led religious people to turn to their faiths when seeking to find explanations for such negative, unanticipated, and impactful events. It is likely that viral pandemics have a similar effect. In addition, during crises, less religious people also turn to religious coping mechanisms to find meaning in an overwhelming situation.

A recent survey shows that for some, coronavirus has had an effect on religiosity. For example in France, though the majority reported no major change, a sizable number, around 10% of people, said that the pandemic increased their religious faith. 5% of less religious individuals and 33% of religious individuals said the pandemic has strengthened their faith. At the beginning of the pandemic, the need for spirituality was also visible in Google trends, as searches for 'God' and 'prayer' skyrocketed. On the other hand, in all surveyed countries, 1–5% of people said that the pandemic had in fact weakened their faith.

It is also important to acknowledge that the interest in religiosity has not grown similarly in all countries. For instance, in Sweden, only 3% have experienced their faith growing stronger, and the pandemic did not seem to have an effect on the membership statistics of the Church of Sweden. The largest increase in religiosity was reported in the US (28%) and Spain (16%). One possible explanation for the difference could be that Sweden is one of the most secular countries in the world, whereas religion is more important in the US and Spain.

### Why did they not leave?

Quite surprisingly, the pandemic has made Christianity easily accessible to those who would not normally be active in the church. Churches have been active in helping people financially and socially during the crisis, for example helping with grocery shopping, food aid, financial aid, and caring for the sick. The online presence of churches on social media has also increased with live-streamed church services. In countries like France and

Finland, televised church services have made records in viewing figures. Church services have become available without having to walk out of the door.

Increased religiosity might not be the only explanation for the changing trend in church membership. It could just be that at the time of an acute crisis, pondering one's affiliation with a religious organisation is not a priority. However, the reasons behind this phenomenon have not yet been researched.

*"The pandemic has made Christianity easily accessible to those who would not normally be active in the church."*

### Disasters could change the course of secularisation

Times of crisis in the past have induced the rise of spirituality. An extreme example are Holocaust survivors, whose increase in religiosity could be seen even after five decades. In addition, in the US states hit by earthquakes in 1811 and 1812, church membership went up by 50%, and more recently, religiosity increased after the Christchurch, New Zealand, earthquake of 2011. Also, people affected by war are more likely to practice religion. Some scholars have even suggested that natural disasters have an important role in maintaining or enhancing religiousness in a society.

Antonio Guterres, secretary-general of the UN, has argued the current pandemic to be the greatest challenge to the world since World War II. In addition to the deaths caused by the coronavirus, the pandemic has led to economic and social devastation. The pandemic has affected ordinary lives in unexpected and psychologically challenging ways. Only after the pandemic is over will it be seen whether prayer and streamed church services will remain popular, or whether the increase of religiosity was merely a passing phenomenon.

*Pietari Hannikainen and Meri Hannikainen*



## Coronavirus and the transhuman future

— Author recommendation

The World Economic Forum (WEF) is an annual conference where some of the wealthiest and most powerful people in the world come together for 'public-private cooperation'. Since mid-2020, the WEF has been promoting its vision for our post-coronavirus future, which they call 'The Great Reset'. In their view, the pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of our old system, and therefore presents a perfect opportunity to 'reset' our world and start anew. What is striking about this plan, which the WEF has condensed into a virus-shaped mind-map, is its implicit endorsement of a philosophy called 'transhumanism'. The term is not used explicitly, but its values and goals can be seen at every level of the plan. Now, according to some, transhumanism is not just a new philosophy, but a new religion that will be the dominant worldview of humanity going forward.

### What is transhumanism?

In a nutshell, transhumanism is a philosophical movement that promotes the view that the human species should take control of its own evolution through human-enhancement technologies, such as brain implants and nanotechnology that reverses ageing. This will then allow humanity to transcend its physical and mental limitations. The term itself was first coined in 1957 by Julian Huxley; the brother of Aldous Huxley, the famous author of the dystopian novel *Brave New World*.

### Transhumanism and the Fourth Industrial Revolution

Now, one of the three main goals of the Great Reset agenda is "to harness the innovations of the Fourth Industrial Revolution to support the public good..." As the founder of the WEF, Klaus Schwab, explains, the Fourth Industrial Revolution "will lead to a fusion of our physical, digital, and biological identities." He specifically considers technologies that will change what it means to be human, because they will integrate into the human body and mind in order to overcome ('transcend') their limitations. Sound familiar? As Schwab himself admits, these new technologies can also "intrude into the hitherto private space of our minds, reading our thoughts and influencing our behavior..." While these technologies seem like science fiction, they are nearly at our doorstep. In fact, much of the pandemic response effort relies on Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies, such as genetic sequencing, vaccine biotechnology (mRNA and vector platforms), and contact tracing (mass surveillance) software. Social distancing measures have also forced people to replace their physical world with a virtual one, including digital versions of school, church, shopping, and even parties. While this has been a terrible loss for most people, this digitalisation of our lives (including COV-id apps and digital currency) is part of the WEF's vision for our future, and therefore, in their view, might be quite desirable.

### A transhumanist paradise?

While there is a big debate about whether transhumanism should be defined as a religion or not, it definitely functions like a religion, in the sense that it provides a framework of meaning for human life that contains many of the goals of classical world religions. For example, most religions promise the goal of immortality, either in this life or after death. Some traditions (like Christianity and Islam) clearly aim for

immortality after death (resurrection or heaven). Other traditions (like some forms of Daoism) have aimed for immortality in this life; usually through alchemical potions or self-cultivation, such as yoga and meditation. Transhumanism also aims for immortality, but through technology rather than through supernatural aid or spiritual transformation. Technologies that will be used for this include nanorobots, genetic engineering, and converting our brain activity into a digital form, and then uploading it into a supercomputer that will last forever (if possible). Secondly, most religions seek a state of permanent happiness, either in this life (nirvana in Buddhism) or after death (paradise in Christianity or Islam). Transhumanists think this can instead be achieved by creating 'happiness drugs' and brain-chip interfaces that manipulate the brain's pleasure centres. Thirdly, most religions aspire for human beings to attain a state of divinity. The transhumanist ideal is likewise for humans to become god-like creators who can manipulate the material world at will (through 3D printing and atom-assembling nano-robots), and even to create new forms of life (through synthetic biology). All of this shows that transhumanism is based on the assumption that suffering (such as ageing, sickness, and death) is a technical rather than a metaphysical problem, and can therefore be solved with more and better technologies.

### Transhumanism as a new religion

While approaching transhumanism as a religion-like phenomenon is already very revealing, some argue that transhumanism should be treated as a new religion in its own right. Yuval Noah Harari promotes this idea in his book *Homo Deus*, where he defines religion as "anything that confers superhuman legitimacy on human social structures." He distinguishes between two types of transhumanist techno-religions: (1) techno-humanism and (2) dataism (data religion). In the first view, technologically enhanced humans (*homo deus*) will replace biological humans (*homo sapiens*), or develop a hierarchical, class-based relationship with them. In the second view, humanity as such is replaced by new kinds of digital entities, such as an all-knowing, self-aware AI (Artificial Intelligence) that has no more use for us. In this future, data (information processing) would replace God or human nature as the ultimate source of meaning and authority in the universe. A self-improving super-intelligent AI (aka 'the singularity') would know us better than we know ourselves, and would therefore function as a kind of omniscient oracle or sovereign to which we make humble offerings in exchange for the solutions to all our problems. Perhaps Google and Facebook will become our new gods? Harari seems to think it is possible.

### Transhumanist assumptions

The Great Reset and its underlying transhumanist views both rest on fundamental values and assumptions about reality, and these are not necessarily self-evident. The idea that we should always transcend our human limitations (aka 'extropianism'), or that human beings are nothing more than a collection of biochemical algorithms for survival and procreation, are highly contested. It is therefore up to each individual to decide whether they accept this worldview and its aims, and whether they wish to support the Great Reset agenda.

Timo Pieters



## The Vatican's complex history with vaccines

### Vaccine to pope and pope emeritus

On January 14, 2021, the Vatican's novel COVID-19 vaccination campaign achieved a significant milestone as officials confirmed both Pope Francis and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI had received their first doses of the vaccine. Beyond bringing the pope, whose age and medical history make him particularly vulnerable to the virus, closer to COVID-19 immunity, the move also served as a powerful seal of approval for the vaccine, an issue over which several Catholics have expressed moral concerns.

Catholics who have raised ethical questions over the vaccine have not done so from a fundamental disagreement with the idea of vaccines, as some other religions do, but rather over how vaccine development is conducted. While some vaccines are created in living tissue harvested from animal, insect, or plant cells, others use stem cells developed from aborted fetuses. The abortion may have happened decades before — in fact, most stem cell lines originate from fetuses aborted in the 70s and 80s. The cells are then manipulated to allow indefinite replication, thereby allowing scientific experimentation years into the future.

Yet, to some Catholics, this makes little to no difference. To use a vaccine that benefitted, however marginally, from these cell lines would, in essence, endorse the abortion and potentially encourage further procedures. As of early 2021, the leading vaccines in Europe all utilised foetal cell lines at some point in either the development or assessment process. How is it, then, that the pope freely took the vaccine, even going so far as to declare it an ethical obligation for other Catholics?

Understanding this issue first requires a glance back several decades, to the earlier uses of stem cell line technology.

### Origins of anti-vaccine thought: *Charter of the Rights of the Family & Donum Vitae*

In 1983, the Vatican entered the discussion surrounding research performed on embryos, declaring in the Charter of the Rights of the Family that "[r]espect of the dignity of the human being excludes all experimental manipulation or exploitation of the human embryo." Wishing to further clarify moral questions raised by new technological advances, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, one of the departments of the Roman Curia in the Vatican, issued in 1987 an 'Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation', (or *Donum Vitae*). Within it, the Congregation firmly held that there were no possible goals, however noble or beneficial, that could justify experimentation on embryos or fetuses. For some Catholics, the beliefs underlying these documents were tantamount to a spiritual ban on receiving vaccines that involved, at some point in the process, aborted foetal stem cell lines.

### The measles debate — a Vatican vaccine microcosm

Living by such rules, however, creates both practical and health-related concerns, as several widespread vaccines, including measles, used such cells in the process. Furthermore, many European countries require children to receive some of these vaccines before attending public schooling. Can Catholic parents object? Must they?

In 2003 to address this concern, Debra L. Vinnedge, the Executive Director of a US-based organisation called Children of God for Life, aimed at eliminating the use of aborted fetuses in science, wrote to the Vatican. In her letter, addressed to Cardinal Ratzinger who would later become Pope Benedict XVI, Vinnedge

asked for clarification as to how Catholic parents should proceed regarding vaccines generated using aborted foetal stem cell lines.

Over the next two years, several groups within the Vatican took up the question and eventually issued a formal report entitled: 'Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses'. The document details the different types of what it deems "licit cooperation in evil" involved in the multi-stepped process from abortion to vaccine. While identifying a small amount of abortion-supporting complicity for those who receive the vaccine, the paper ultimately concludes that if there are "considerable dangers" to health and no alternative vaccines, then "vaccines with moral problems pertaining to them may also be used on a temporary basis." The measles vaccine, it added, certainly fits this bill. Parents, however, bear a responsibility to request and call for other vaccines to be made, ones that did not include the use of embryonic stem cell lines.

This line of argument received further support with the publication, in 2008, of 'Instruction *Dignitas Personae*', a supplement to *Donum Vitae*, updated with new argumentation. In it, the Congregation noted that concern over a child's health could justify the use of a vaccine that employed abortion stem cell lines at some point in the process.

In 2017, following the rise of anti-vaccine sentiment in Italy, the Vatican, via the Pontifical Academy for Life — an honorary society tasked with promoting the Vatican's views on the sanctity of life — issued an even clearer statement, explicitly encouraging Catholics to have their children vaccinated. In it, the Church addressed similar concerns as in its previous statements, yet went further to declare that the distance between the original abortion and the administration of vaccines essentially eliminates any "morally relevant cooperation." Catholics, therefore, could get vaccinated in good conscience.

"Concern over a child's health could justify the use of a vaccine that employed abortion stem cell lines at some point in the process."

### And the COVID-19 vaccine?

As pandemic-induced economic standstills have bled into 2021, many have looked to a growing number of vaccines as a means of escape. With that, however, have been familiar calls of the vaccines' immorality.

To better understand the calls, it is best to overview the entire vaccination process. There are generally three phases: (1) development — when scientists create the vaccine, (2) confirmation — when scientists ensure the vaccine works, and (3) production — when companies manufacture the vaccine. For two leading vaccines as of early 2021 (Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech), foetal cell lines were used only in the confirmation process, not during the development or production processes. In other words, the vaccines did not derive from foetal tissue nor would the final product contain foetal tissue. However, some groups used abortion stem cell lines to verify that the vaccines produced immune responses. The Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine, which was developed along more traditional lines (that is not using mRNA), did use abortion stem cell lines in the production process. Again, however, the final product has no stem cell tissue.



Correspondingly, some religious figures raised concerns. Addressing them, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith released a statement in December 2020, announcing that receiving any of the vaccines, given the lack of alternatives that did not involve cell lines and the several scientific steps of removal from the original abortion, would be morally acceptable.

“It was an ethical obligation to receive the vaccine — as it would help save lives.”

Shortly before receiving his vaccine, Pope Francis went further, declaring that not only was it morally acceptable, it was an ethical obligation to receive the vaccine — as it would help save lives.

While the Church still condemns abortions and scientific research on aborted tissue, it has generally adopted the view that receiving vaccines — both common childhood ones, like measles and chickenpox, and newly developed ones for COVID-19 — do not make one complicit. In fact, the Church appears to have adopted newer, more pressing concerns involving vaccines and morality: vaccine distribution and disease elimination. Moral attention seems to have transitioned from how the vaccines are produced to (1) where they are going and ensuring that the wealthier nations of the world share with countries in need and (2) encouraging people to get vaccinated not only to protect themselves, but also their neighbours.

*Tyler Mikulis*

## Building confidence in the vaccine amongst British Muslims

Although Christianity remains the most followed religion across Europe, the number of Muslims on the continent is on the rise. As of 2016, 4.9% of Europeans identified as Muslims, a number that is expected to rise to around 11% by 2050. However, despite the growth of this community, the United Kingdom's vaccination campaign has revealed that there is a disconnect between civil authorities and many Muslims, a problem that has worsened due to fake news and misinformation. A number of recent schemes to create confidence among British Muslims may provide important lessons for leaders and authorities across the continent in the short, but also the medium and long term.

### Targeted communities

It is a common but problematic misconception to assume that minority groups, such as Islamic communities, have uniform political and social views. In particular, this assumption overlooks the fact that fake news has an enhanced role when targeting groups that may not follow or trust the same sources as the wider society. This problem has become more evident in recent months as the level of distrust in the coronavirus vaccine among Muslims, and its close link to fake news, has started to cause issues for vaccination programmes. Therefore, before looking in detail at how civil groups in the United Kingdom (UK) are trying to overturn these doubts among British Muslims, it is important to explore specifically why Muslims may be more exposed and at danger of fake news regarding the coronavirus vaccines.

“It is a common but problematic misconception to assume that minority groups, such as Islamic communities, have uniform political and social views.”

### Exploitation of exclusion

The spread of fake news with the intention of scaring Muslims away from the vaccine has been noted in various countries in Europe, for example in the UK and Spain, as well as around the world in places such as India and Australia. In an interview with the Turkish broadcaster TRT World, Dr Mohammed Ghaly, a specialist in biomedical sciences and Islamic ethics, explained why Muslims may be particularly exposed to misinformation by pointing to two key problems.

Firstly, due to Islamic religious values, there is a natural doubt about the necessity of taking a human-made vaccine due to the Islamic belief that God is the giver and healer of all disease. Building on this theological dilemma is the fact that fake news has been spread on social media, WhatsApp, and online forums, often without being seen or known about by the wider society. This misinformation has often been closely linked to more general conspiracy theories about the vaccine. However, for Muslims, these conspiracies may be more able to exploit preexisting fears about Western pharmaceutical companies who have a past history of experimenting on minority populations.



### A lack of trust

As the UK races ahead of other European countries in their vaccination campaign, the depth of these doubts about the vaccine has started to become clear. Concerns about an uneven distribution of the virus leaving certain communities exposed to outbreaks were confirmed with a survey conducted in the city of Oldham. The survey, which was carried out in December 2020, asked members of the large Muslim population in the city whether or not they would take the vaccine. The responses were shocking, with only 28% saying they would receive it, whilst 22% were unsure and 50% said they would refuse.

According to Salman Waqar, a British doctor and General Secretary of the British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA), one of the biggest issues facing civil authorities is that, when compared with the wider society, many Muslims feel isolated and disconnected from health services who are now offering the vaccine. As Waqar explains, in reality the vast majority of people who are “vaccine hesitant” have “genuine questions that they haven’t had answered.” Therefore, rather than the more surreal concerns that are sometimes associated with those who doubt vaccines, such as the implantation of microchips or 5G trackers, many Muslims who are worried about the vaccine are actually focused on far more understandable and realistic doubts. For example, the idea that the vaccine may not be halal (permissible in Islam) because animal products or aborted fetus cells have been used in its production.

The question, therefore, is: how can the civil authorities build confidence and minimise these doubts? Waqar states that the key to overcoming these problems and getting Muslims vaccinated is to have “credibility and to build trust.” However, in the British context, this is not as simple as it may seem. As Waqar explains, there is a long-term problem in which members of the Islamic community have over many years become isolated and disconnected from the health services and civil authorities. This means that when “all of a sudden people are knocking on their doors” to ask them to be vaccinated, there is an understandable level of caution, which has only been deepened by the spread of anti-vaccine fake news.

“Concerns about an uneven distribution of the virus leaving certain communities exposed to outbreaks were confirmed with a survey.”

### Countering doubts

Therefore, to resolve this problem of a lack of trust, a number of schemes are underway across the UK to give more power to local community leaders. Returning to Oldham, where the December 2020 survey showed a staggeringly high level of anti-vaccine fears, the local Islamic community has decided to take on an active role in countering doubts by offering free training for imams and other prominent community figures at the European Islamic Centre in the city. The aim of the training is to give local community leaders the confidence to go out and spread a positive message about vaccines, with both male and female representatives being trained.

As well as training imams, alternative policies have been pursued to encourage more Muslims to get vaccinated. In Birmingham, a mosque called the Al-Abbas Islamic Centre has been transformed into a

vaccination centre with hopes that 500 people can receive the jab there each day. The imam, Sheikh Nuru Mohammed, told the BBC that he hoped that by using the building as a vaccination centre, it would “help dispel false information that the vaccine was forbidden in Islamic law.”

### Lessons to be learnt

Due to the fact that vaccination campaigns across Europe have yet to reach anywhere near the number that they have in the UK, it is so far hard to say whether the same problems are occurring across the continent. However, if such problems do arise, the lessons being learnt in the UK could provide an important example of two key points.

First of all, it is crucial that civil authorities do not assume that campaigns targeted at the general society will be sufficient to resolve the specific concerns of many Muslims towards the vaccine. Therefore, it is imperative that the reasons that Muslims may fear the vaccine are taken seriously and not just dismissed as ‘conspiracies’.

Secondly, in cases where Islamic communities may not be fully integrated into the wider society, it is crucial that local community leaders and religious figures are given a central role in building confidence in the safety of the vaccine. This second point may well have important consequences long after COVID-19, with the need to build links between Muslims and secular states becoming ever more important as the Islamic population continues to grow in the coming decades.

*Freddie Scott*



## COVID-19 and freedom of religion

### The death of Marcus Lamb

On the 1st of December 2021, the news of Marcus Lamb's death due to COVID-related pulmonary disease spread around the world. Lamb was one of the most vocal anti-vaccination campaigners, the views that he shared globally over the Daystar Television Network he founded. Both Lamb and Daystar were more broadly known for presenting vaccines as a spiritual attack of the Evil against Christians and their freedoms.

The example of Lamb shows that the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent restrictions and vaccination rollout constituted an intersection in which the values of public health and collective good clashed with the ideas of individual freedom, including freedom of religion or belief. By that, it highlighted specific challenges in balancing them not only for politicians and policymakers, but also individuals in spaces such as workplaces, places of worship, or even family gatherings.

### Lockdowns and restrictions on church services

One of the first significant clashes between the two occurred during the early imposition of restrictions with the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak in Europe. The availability, or lack thereof, of the places of worship and any activity within them was among the most crucial issues at the time. Some countries, like Poland, did not close their churches even when other significant restrictions were introduced, and were slow to impose any limitations on numbers of participants. Countries such as England and France went in the other direction and suspended all public worship for significant amounts of time. Yet others, for example Spain, quickly limited the numbers of worship participants without suspending it altogether.

### Pushback against the restrictions

Such restrictions caused significant pushback from many, especially Catholics for whom Sunday Mass celebration is a commandment. In Ireland, the closure of the churches by the government has brought comparisons to Oliver Cromwell and the 17th-century anti-Catholic measures. Some individual priests were also going as far as to claim that consecration secures one from the disease. Many bishops and episcopates in Europe, while at first complying with the regulations, decried them as discriminatory when businesses were reopened before places of worship. This also led to a greater pushback when the government wanted to return to restrictions with subsequent waves of the virus outbreak.

### A balancing act

Larger religious organisations began to underline the need for an adequate balancing of different values. For example, the World Council of Churches wrote in its 'Reflections on Freedom of Religion or Belief during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic' that 2020 was a historic year for Christianity in Europe, because of the unique situation in which many Christians could not participate in Easter celebrations due to legal measures. However, as they underlined, the protection of the weak and vulnerable was also of high importance from a religious perspective.

### The need for a more adapted approach

Some also criticised the states for overt limitations introduced not because of safety but out of other arbitrary principles. For example, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, the president of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, criticised European states for not differentiating between different types of services based on their health threat, but suspending all services in a one-for-all system. As he pointed out, this type of imposed equality was not demanded by different religious denominations but imposed from above. As an alternative, he referred to the interfaith collaboration between Catholics, Muslims, and Jews in Luxembourg, which led to the development of particular safety regulations adapted to concrete practices.

### Vaccination rollout and religious objection

Another clash between public health and religious beliefs occurred with the vaccination rollout. While vaccination opposition on religious grounds has been an enduring phenomenon long before COVID-19, renewed urgency took place during the pandemic. Although many religious leaders called on people to get vaccinated, there were also religious communities and individual believers whose doctrine rejected vaccines or their particular ingredients (e.g., those derived in some way from aborted fetuses) that warranted protection under Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

### Excused by a prayer book?

In some cases, however, freedom of religion has been used to circumvent restrictions. For example, Krzysztof M. Zalewski, in an opinion piece for *Krytyka Polityczna*, described an anecdotal story of his colleague, an Austrian businessman. As coverage of basic religious needs is among the plausible reasons to leave the house, the Austrian businessman is moving around with a prayer book.

### The need for scalpel, not a blunt tool

All of these stories highlight how difficult and multi-level the issue of balancing religious needs is in a time like that of the COVID-19 pandemic, with no simple solutions on how to handle it. One thing is clear — development of regulations, policies, and recommendations in situations that require limitation of individual freedoms on behalf of the common good necessitate a greater attention to detail. Scalpel is needed in place of a blunt tool of a simple suspension of public worship or complete lack thereof.

*Ryszard Bobrowicz*



## The problematic use of the Star of David for protest in the COVID era

### The rise of COVID health passes

In order to incentivise vaccination and prevent future viral surges, particularly following the rapid spread of the delta variant, several European nations, like France and Italy, have developed health pass programmes. These systems mandate proof of vaccination, a recent negative test, or proof of recent recovery in certain settings, like restaurants and theatres. As of early November 2021, the French government has extended these measures through at least July 2022. These developments have been met with outrage, often leading to protests.

### Problematic anti-vax parallels

Several protestors have accused European governments of creating new 'classes' of citizens, namely: the vaccinated and unvaccinated. In France, for instance, the leader of the right-wing *Debout la France* party, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, has spoken out against his fear of having "two categories of citizens in France." Others have labelled the passes unjust forms of discrimination.

With the introduction of apps and cards that attest vaccination status, some detractors have escalated the 'separate categories' rhetoric by comparing health passes with the segregationist and genocidal policies of the Nazi regime. To symbolise this perceived similarity, some anti-vaccine and anti-health pass advocates have donned altered versions of the yellow Star of David patch labelled 'Jude' or 'Jew', that Jewish citizens were forced to wear under Nazi rule. Protestors from the United States to Europe have altered the patch, keeping the Star of David, but adding 'No vaccine' or 'Unvaccinated' instead. In so doing, these protestors have themselves drawn extensive criticism of antisemitism.

### A disturbing recurring trend

The belief that government responses to the pandemic bore similarities to Nazi treatment of Jews predated even the first vaccines. In the fall of 2020, some German protestors drew parallels between the Holocaust and government responses in the COVID-19 era. Continuing this trend, shortly after health officials began distributing the first vaccines, altered Stars of David started cropping up. In January 2021 during anti-vaccine protests in Prague, protestors wore yellow stars labelled 'unvaccinated'.

Since January 2021, the Star of David has been reworked by anti-vax protestors in cities across Europe, from London, Brussels, and Lille, to Amsterdam and Munich. In addition to wearing the altered yellow star, some protestors have created signs that compare quarantine to concentration camps, while others have asked who the next Anne Frank will be.

Outside of Europe, anti-vaccine and anti-government protestors in the United States have adopted the parallel, too. A hat store in Nashville, Tennessee went as far as to sell Star of David patches emblazoned with 'NOT VACCINATED'. Similarly, a Washington state politician wore an unlabeled Star of David badge while giving a speech against COVID-19 measures in the state.

### Unified criticism of antisemitism

As the altered Stars of David have spread, they have been consistently criticised as offensive and antisemitic. In January 2021, the Czech federation of Jewish communities joined politicians to condemn the misuse of the Star of David following the protests in Prague. Israel's ambassador to the Czech Republic called the use of the patch a "disgrace and an insult to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust."

German officials have been similarly harsh on the parallels drawn between pandemic response and the Holocaust. Felix Klein, Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against antisemitism, described the protest tactic as "breaking a taboo." Social Democrat lawmaker Rüdiger Erben spoke even more directly, saying that anyone wearing such a patch acts "as an anti-Semite of the most repulsive kind."

After an April 2021 rally in London where protestors used the Stars and made other comparisons to the Holocaust, Karen Pollock, Chief Executive of the UK Holocaust Educational Trust, criticised the protestors, noting that "the ignorance of the history these people are invoking is deeply painful, at worst it is provocatively and purposefully antisemitic."

Following news that similar protest tactics occurred in Montreal, Yad Vashem — The World Holocaust Remembrance Center — issued a statement urging people not to draw such misguided and offensive parallels. The protestors' manipulation of the Holocaust "trivializes the horrific atrocities that were perpetrated and denigrates the memory of victims and survivors."

Beyond harsh criticism, some cities, like Munich, have gone as far as banning the use of the altered yellow stars.

### An unfortunately unoriginal tactic

The trivialising use of Holocaust allusions as political symbols of oppression is unfortunately not unique to the pandemic. Different movements in Europe have adopted the tactic before. Recently, France's *gilets jaunes*, or yellow jackets, movement became marred in controversy when some supporters were caught yelling antisemitic insults. Another sympathiser tweeted that the political fight of 2019 was the same as the fight of 1939.

While these allusions are strongly and swiftly condemned as insensitive, inaccurate, and antisemitic, they illuminate a problematic undercurrent in modern Europe of using misleading allusions to the Holocaust as a political tool. Protests against the COVID-19 restrictions have provided a new, but unfortunately likely not final, medium for these allusions.

*Tyler Mikulis*



## Faith-based food assistance in times of the pandemic

During the COVID-19 crisis, churches and faith-based organisations have provided food assistance to people living in poverty to an even greater extent than before. What kind of new practices have emerged in faith-based food assistance in Finland and how has the pandemic influenced church social work and people living in vulnerable situations?

### Food assistance in times of the pandemic

In a secularised welfare state of 5.5 million inhabitants, hundreds of thousands of Finnish people receive charity food assistance every year. The majority of food assistance agencies are faith-based organisations or Christian churches. In spring 2020, the pandemic hit Finland and profoundly changed the provision of food assistance. The number of people asking for Church social assistance grew rapidly and the number of recipients in food assistance even doubled. Churches and charities began to distribute so-called 'emergency parcels' instead of organising indoor communal dining and other social activities for people in need.

### New faces

In 2020, many new unemployed, low-paid, and laid-off people appeared at food banks. New people included employees working in precarious industries, for example as cultural professionals, freelancers, and cab drivers. In Finland, school lunch is free of charge and when schools moved to remote teaching in spring 2020, new families resorted to food assistance as well. Employees of the biggest church in Finland, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, were also worried that feelings of insecurity and loneliness had increased among children during the pandemic.

### #Stayhome

In spring 2020, elderly people in particular were strongly recommended to stay home as much as possible to avoid COVID-19 infection. This meant an increase in loneliness and was reflected in food banks, where recipients expressed more anger and bitterness. People lacking digital devices or competence became even more excluded when the majority of social services and communication went online. Some food banks developed an appointment system by which recipients needed to call in advance to reserve a food parcel. This made it difficult, if not impossible, to receive food assistance for those with no phone or subscription.

“People lacking digital devices or competence became even more excluded when the majority of social services and communication went online.”

### Vulnerable people even more vulnerable?

In the times of the pandemic, food assistance was reorganised in many ways. Communal dining in churches and charities was forbidden, and instead, people had to stand in line outdoors to receive their food parcels. Standing in the line where everyone can see you felt humiliating and embarrassing to many. In Finland,

attitudes towards the poor — for example, people lining up for food assistance — have harshened as the political atmosphere has changed during the last decade or so. In public debate, the deprived are more often blamed for their poverty and new sanctions against them are demanded. The most vulnerable have thus become even more criticised, lonely, and excluded, in other words, even more vulnerable.

“In public debate, the deprived are more often blamed for their poverty.”

### Will food banks endure and survive?

Distributing food assistance during the pandemic has not been straightforward for the helpers either. Even though there has been a peak in new volunteers within food assistance, employees and volunteers report puzzlement, hopelessness, and fatigue. In Finland, as well as abroad, concerns have been raised about the financial sustainability of faith-based food banks. The question arises, if — and most likely when — the pandemic prolongs, will the food banks survive financially and the staff mentally? Furthermore, food bank employees have expressed their concern about the increase of poverty, loneliness, insecurity, violence, and mental health problems of the recipients as a result of the pandemic. Will the most vulnerable endure and survive, and if not, what are the effects on our societies?

*Rosa Huotari*



# Education



## Austrian education on religion in a transformation process

In Austria, parents are legally responsible for the religious education (RE) of children. By the age of 14, children reach the status of religious majority and attain full control over their religious life and affiliation.

In state schools and private schools with a public status, RE in confessional form is an obligatory subject from the first up to the last (13th) grade. This concerns all pupils affiliated with an officially acknowledged church or religious society. Sixteen different religious communities have reached this state of acknowledgement in Austria, which entitles them to various rights and duties. These communities adhere to either the Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, or Jewish traditions.

### Rights and duties of religious communities

One of the rights of the acknowledged communities is the RE of affiliated children in schools, therefore the classes are separated on the basis of denomination. The church or religious society has to provide, conduct, and supervise the confessional education and is responsible for the granting of permissions for teachers (in the Catholic Church called *missio canonica*). The topics and aims of the classes depend on various curricula given by the denominations. For instance, in primary schools, Catholic children shall acquire knowledge in their own religion and skills in orientation in life, religion in the context of society and culture, and the diversity of religious worldviews.

The mentioned religious communities are also granted the right to hold religious activities at school. In official documents referring to religious activities in general, types of activities are mostly exemplified by church services. This can be seen as an example of the favoured position of Christian (Catholic) churches in practice. An obvious privilege aligned with the Christian churches is the requirement to place crosses in classrooms if more than half of the pupils have a Christian confession.

### RE and the freedom of religion

The right to educate children in schools about their religion is seen as a 'realisation of religious freedom in a corporate and individual form'. However, the freedom of religion also grants for the opposite and consequently there is an option to sign out from religious classes at school. Pupils older than 14, or their parents when they are younger, can deregister them from RE. In this case, there is no obligation for the students to attend an alternative subject.

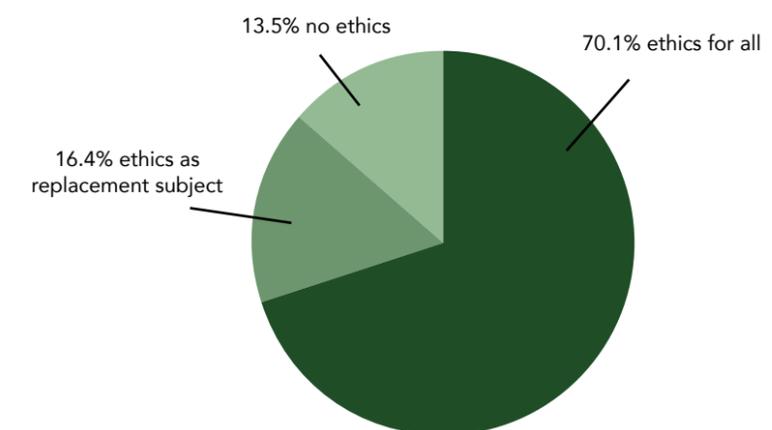
### Ethic as (alternative) teaching subject

However, in autumn 2021, a new regulation concerning ethics education will become effective. All pupils in 9th grade or higher will be obliged to attend either classes on religion or classes on ethics. In 1997, the school subject 'Ethics' started as a school pilot project in grammar schools and vocational schools, and it will soon be turned into an obligatory subject for all students who do not attend RE classes. Education in ethics should provide an engagement and confrontation with different philosophical, cultural, and religious aspects of life and encourage self-reflectiveness.

Still, the wider public seems to be unsatisfied with the new change. A popular petition was held on the vote for Ethics classes for all pupils regardless of religious affiliation, religious classes, and grade. The petition

demands "common teaching of values and integration at school — regardless of origin, worldview, or religion." In a survey in 2020, 70% of the respondents voted for Ethics as a general subject. Nearly 160,000 Austrians had signed the petition by January 2021. As a result of this high number of signatures, a discussion on the concerning topic will be held in the National Assembly.

Outcome of 2020 survey on Ethics as a subject



### An innovative project on interreligious teaching

An interreligious project in Graz, Austria's second-largest city, is proposing a different modification of the RE system. This project implies shared teaching units by Islamic and Roman-Catholic teachers within the confessional RE. It is a research project of the University of Graz called 'Christian-Islamic religious education in team teaching. Evidence-based development of local theories for a didactics of cooperative religious teaching/ learning processes' and is funded by the Austrian Science Fund until 2024.



The head of the project, Wolfgang Weirer, emphasised the importance of schools as “places where people with different ethnic, cultural and mostly also religious backgrounds encounter each other.” The main goal is to encourage integration through the personal contact of pupils which adhere to the two largest religious communities in Austria: Islam and Christianity. Teachers will play an important role in this setting as role models for the interreligious encounter. The research focuses on the shared teachings and their capabilities and limitations. It will also examine the legal possibilities, the perspectives of the teachers, and the requirements for this kind of education.

“The status of RE in Austria is currently in a transformation process.”

#### The future of RE in Austria — a lookout

The status of RE in Austria is currently in a transformation process. It remains to be seen how the new regulation on education on ethics will be established. There might also be an impact on the confessional RE itself. The voice of the malcontents is loud, but could be overseen by government parties and politicians in favour of RE and the partly powerful religious communities and churches behind it. Nonetheless, changes are bound to occur, which are not least due to the changes within Austria's society.

*Elisabeth Waldl*

## Islam and the educational gender gap in Europe

*This article was written in preparation for our round table on Politics of Education.*

### Educational gender gap: layers of marginalisation

Gender inequality when it comes to education is still a prevailing reality in Europe. According to the web dossier on equal access to education by the official website of the European Union, gender inequality persists in this area. The European University Association (EUA) also sees a disparity when it comes to women in leadership positions in educational institutions in Europe. Out of the 47 member countries of the EUA, only 12% have female rectors and only 28% of the member countries have full professors who are female. Even the process of curriculum building and the production and reproduction of knowledge are still dominated by male voices.

The gender gap is very much connected with other societal factors such as class, ethnicity, and other minority markers. Most European women who follow Islam, for example, have all of these markers in mind, especially when it comes to access to quality education and the most remarkable reminder of their being Muslim: the hijab. How then does the performance of Islamic femininity interact with European secularism when it comes to education and the building of the curriculum in the European educational system?

### Secular paternalism and Muslim women's education

In 2003, former French President Jacques Chirac set up the Stasi Commission to reflect upon the application of the constitutional principle of secularism, known in France as *laïcité*. After interviewing more than 140 representatives which included teachers, intellectuals, politicians, religious leaders, and equal-rights activists, the Commission acknowledged the tensions building up between freedom of worship and the neutrality of the State, especially in the widely public-funded French education system. Following the conclusions of the Commission, the French Parliament voted to ban all “symbols or garb which show religious affiliation in public primary and secondary schools.”

The prohibition of religious head coverings for Muslim women in France, according to Cécile Laborde, is a paternalistic performance of the French state. According to her, it is an imposition by the republic on Muslim women that mimics patriarchal impositions on women regarding behaviour, modesty, gender roles, and other cultural codes which have been taught in schools. While autonomy is being upheld by the French republican educational system, the kind of autonomy that is being reproduced by the curriculum entails a detachment from one's religious identity in order to not be ‘brainwashed’ or manipulated by religious extremists. According to the point of view of the paternalistic state, the religious head covering of Muslim women is not just a religious marker but a hindrance to intellectual autonomy and free decision-making.

Laborde sees a tension between the appeals of Muslim women to reclaim their agency by wearing their hijabs as their marker for individual expression and the classical ideal of individual autonomy expressed by the hijab ban. The presupposition of autonomy that is detached from religious identity is critiqued because religious expression can also be an exercise of one's freedom, particularly in settings where there are already wide gaps in education for women. Sandra Feder would interject that banning the headscarves in French public schools has been a major obstacle for Muslim women to even finish their education, citing that discrimination



caused by the policy became a major factor for this injustice. Limiting women's educational access due to a piece of clothing therefore becomes counterproductive when there is already a gender disparity in knowledge production for those who advocate for women's autonomy which includes freedom to express religious belonging in the public sphere.

More 'classical' French feminists, on the other hand, supported the recommendations of the Stasi Commission. Prominent French feminist intellectuals such as Élisabeth Badinter and Sylviane Agacinski claim that "always and everywhere, the veil has represented submission to male authority." According to them, wearing a hijab is a practice rooted in patriarchal notions of gender roles and women's modesty, conspicuously displayed by head covering. In certain contexts, familial and peer pressures leave many young women with no other option than to wear the hijab. Julie Muret, from the association *Osez le féminisme*, considers the hijab as a hindrance to the emancipation of women, as it is a sign of "inferiorising and delegitimising women in the public space."

Interestingly enough, French feminism seems to branch into two different trends that pursue the same end — gender equality and the fight against patriarchy — but through different means. One perspective seems to look at a particular religious expression as a hindrance to the emancipation of women and an imposition by patriarchal structures. On the other hand, some of these women view the freedom of religious expression as a venue where one finds true womanhood and at the same time, emancipation from societal impositions.

While the debate is far from being settled, Belgium provides us with a practical example to contribute to the ongoing conversation. After some years of appealing to the education authorities by Islamic interest groups, Belgium rescinded its ban on the hijab in educational institutions in Wallonia (French-speaking part of Belgium), which is a stark contrast to the laïcité applied in France. Francophone Muslim women in Belgium welcomed the relaxation, with one of them saying that it will impact them in such a way that they will be able to be financially secure and determine themselves. Note that she did not even mention freedom of religion in her statement regarding the matter. If the state's goal is human flourishing, and that goal is shared by Islam, then this shared ideal can be a crucial principle for policy-making for marginalised and disadvantaged sectors which includes religious minorities.

"French feminism seems to branch into two different trends that pursue the same end — gender equality and the fight against patriarchy — but through different means."

#### Negotiating the place of women in education

There are existing barriers to women in education. As it is, women on the basis of their sex are negotiating their place in the current structures of knowledge production in the European context and adding a barrier based on religious expression is counterproductive to the flourishing of Muslim women. These hindrances are already reinforced by the context around them, particularly by their parents and peers; life is difficult enough for

women particularly in more marginalised backgrounds. While women are determined to learn and to surpass their hurdles, it is being made more difficult for them by the patriarchal structures that have been reinforced by their cultural contexts both in their religious communities and in the public sphere.

Before even talking about women taking leadership positions in European educational institutions, addressing barriers imposed by the state for women belonging to religious minorities should be addressed. It is counterproductive for the state to impose educational sanctions on the basis of religious expression or affiliation since it is its duty first and foremost to help society progress, and religion remains to be an important sector of society. Perhaps a laïcité that is open to dialogue and includes instead of imposes barriers would be beneficial for sexual minorities and religious minorities to be able to engage with society. Doing so will provide the opportunity to elevate the discourse in policy-making and leadership particularly in the production, reproduction, and dispensation of knowledge.

No woman, regardless of religious affiliation or socio-economic background, should be left behind, especially in this regard.

*Joshua Amiel Marasigan*



## Ancient structures under fire in Belgian education

— *Author recommendation*

The Belgian education system is divided into two types of schools: municipal or official state schools on the one hand, and private schools (mainly Catholic, but also Jewish, Steiner, or Freinet schools) on the other. The first are fully financed by the state and are not based on a certain religion, whereas the latter are only partially subsidised and reflect a specific world view. For instance, such schools may reflect the Catholic religion, or the non-confessional Steiner philosophy. The existence of this 'double' system is quite unique and a product of a long history.

### The origins of this tangled web

Until the 18th century, the Catholic Church had a monopoly on education. However, the arrival of secularisation forced the Church to reorganise itself and, therefore, the bishops created the Catholic 'column' of religious schools and associations. This system of different 'columns' is quite unique in Europe and has remained important until today in Belgium. Starting in the second half of the 19th century, the Christian column, for instance, consisted of schools, hospitals, libraries, newspapers, sports clubs, and even marching bands. Later on, socialists and liberals followed this example. People thereby stuck to one column in their choice of free time activities and segregated pillars were created. The gradual disappearance of the three major ideologies and the modern secularisation, however, caused this system to fade away. Nevertheless, the traces of this structure are still visible in the competition between the municipal and the Catholic schools.

After the Second World War, the tensions between Catholic and municipal schools increased and gave rise to discussions around topics such as subsidies for free schools and the teaching of religion at official state schools. Around 1850, these tensions came to a climax and erupted in the so-called 'Schoolstrijd' or 'battle of the schools'. For over a century, Christian parties in the parliament debated against liberals and socialists about the power of the Church in schools. Finally, in 1956, the School Pact was signed. This pact mainly determined that free schools receive around 60% of their expenses in subsidies, and that both types of education have to be equally accessible all over the country.

### State of affairs and challenges

Some may be surprised by the fact that Catholic schools still form the biggest column in Belgium: in the Flanders region, over 700,000 pupils attend a Catholic free school. It should be noted that only 10% of the Belgian population declares themselves practising Catholic. In many cases, the two hours of RE a week drifted into more pluralistic, moral, and philosophic classes. Knowledge of the Christian faith thereby declined even more. In 2019, as a consequence, the conference of bishops presented an updated version of the attainment targets in which they stressed the importance of theoretical knowledge. The Bishop of Antwerp, Johan Bonny, explains that religion classes should not become an hour of cosy chat, but that a basic 'toolbox' of terms is necessary to start discussing religion. There will also be room to discuss other religions, but the bishop states that Belgian society has to be vigilant about the knowledge of its own Jewish-Christian heritage.

At municipal schools, every pupil receives classes about the recognised belief (Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Anglicanism, Judaism, Islam, or non-religious moral class) he or she prefers. The organised structures of the chosen beliefs themselves (such as the Bishop council for the Catholics) thereby choose the teacher and organise the classes. For example, the Muslim executive is responsible for all Islamic teachers at municipal schools.

Jewish and Muslim schools in Belgium represent the smallest groups of schools that offer religious classes. The 25,000 Jews in Antwerp, for example, have established special schools in their Jewish neighbourhood. Nevertheless, these schools are controversial. For instance, a Jewish school was warned for providing barely any sexual education. Equivalently, a new Muslim school in Genk did not receive recognition as the state judged that they fell short in terms of honouring children's rights, meaning that the school does not have the authority to grant degrees and cannot receive state subsidies. However, the overwhelming majority of Muslims follow classes in Catholic or municipal schools as there are only four Islamic schools in the country.

*"Jewish and Muslim schools in Belgium represent the smallest groups of schools that offer religious classes."*

### Visions for the future

Religious education in Belgium is a complex phenomenon and the question arises whether this model will continue to exist. Indeed, the power of the Catholic Church in education and the right to attend religious classes in a rapidly secularising society, are regularly questioned. It is argued that the model of competition between the Catholic school network and the municipal one is inefficient and that this idea of 'columns' is not relevant anymore in the 21st century. On the other hand, the wish of Belgium's Muslim community to organise their own schools and the firm reaction of the bishops on the declining level of religious knowledge at Catholic schools, shows that religion still plays a key role in Belgian education.

*Luca Van Cleempoel*



## Christianity and controversies in Norwegian education

### Christianity fueling debate in Norwegian school system

In Norway, religious subjects in school used to be confessional and focused on a Lutheran approach to Christianity. In 1993, Norway changed its focus on Christian-based lessons to a more nuanced subject that includes other religions and philosophy due to the country's religious decline. However, a strong focus on Christianity remained.

Religion as an obligatory subject in school has caused a lot of public debate in Norway, mostly because children used to only be allowed to abstain from the classes under very specific circumstances. In 2007, the European Human Rights Court sentenced Norway for breaking human rights because they favoured Christianity in their supposedly neutral religion subject. Norway was criticised for its strong focus on Christianity and for not allowing equal access to freedom of religion in the classroom. Additionally, Norway was criticised for making the subject of religion obligatory and not allowing parents to withdraw their children, as is the case in e.g. Denmark. Since then, there has been a stronger focus in Norwegian education on religion being more critical and nuanced. The critique also fueled a lot of debate in the other Nordic countries, which subsequently investigated the way in which their own education systems taught religion.

“Norway was criticised for its strong focus on Christianity and for not allowing equal access to freedom of religion in the classroom.”

### Lack of religious freedom in the Norwegian school system

Today, Norwegian schools focus more on teaching religion from an objective angle and the Norwegian state has changed the religion curriculum in public schools in accordance with the European Human Rights Court's recommendations. The country also officially separated church and state in 2017, which has potentially impacted its RE structure. Though Norway has multiple Christian faith schools, the country has not allowed a single Muslim faith school to be established. This has been justified by stating that Muslim faith schools would 'halt' integration efforts and segregate the Norwegian Muslim community from Norwegian society.

Many critics have argued that this is discriminatory against the Muslim community. However, several other Scandinavian countries have used Norway as an example in opposing Muslim faith schools. For instance, the Danish social democrats used the same integration argument, with reference to Norway, in order to argue against state funding for Muslim schools in Denmark.

### Just a Norwegian issue?

Though Norway has had its distinct issues with religion and education, it seems that the issue regarding secularisation and education is a hot and contentious topic in all of the Scandinavian countries. As a consequence, all of these countries have a different approach to RE. As Scandinavia is generally known as a very secular part of the world — Sweden was for instance named 'the most secular country in the world' — it seems that the topic of faith schools and the role of Christianity impacts many debates in all three countries.

Christianity is also vital to the more conservative or nationalist rhetoric in Norway, despite the more secular approach to religion, as it is a part of the country's cultural values and history. Christianity's influence and impact on cultural and social values cannot be ignored, despite religion's general decline in Scandinavia. It could be questioned if the controversies concerning Muslim faith schools could be tied into Scandinavian politics, and the right-wing parties' growing anti-Islam rhetoric. This would suggest that the discussions regarding faith schools are not just a Norwegian issue, but rather a larger issue rooted in Scandinavian culture and history.

*Hannah Macaulay*



## Balanced religious education at Portuguese public schools

### Religious education at public schools

In Portugal, religious education (RE) at school is neither mandatory nor forbidden. Portugal is a non-confessional state, meaning that State and Church are formally separated. Therefore, RE is not confessional. The Portuguese Constitution of 1976 ensures the freedom to learn and to teach and also guarantees that this freedom is extended to all private schools. As established in the Portuguese Act on Religious Freedom, '[m]oral and religious education classes in public schools are optional and not an alternative to any curriculum area or subject'.

### State, religion, and religious freedom

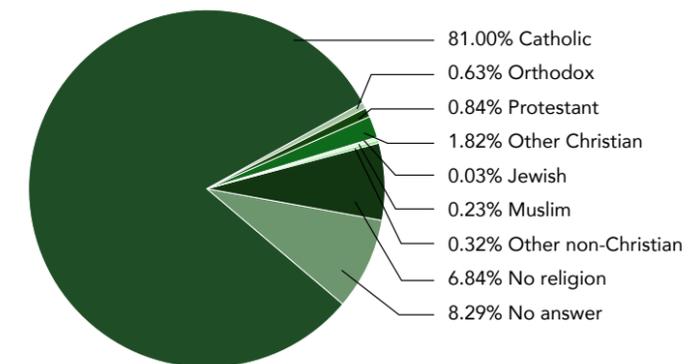
According to the Act mentioned above, churches and other religious communities are free to carry out their religious activities without interference from the State or third parties. Pupils under 16 years of age wishing to attend classes on RE must express this wish through their parents. RE programmes, teacher training, and class materials must be provided by the religious communities. However, for these classes to run, a minimum number of pupils must attend. This means that teaching of a particular religion may be impacted based on the higher or lower prevalence of a religion among the population. On the other hand, for Catholic RE, the training and recruitment of teachers, as well as the elaboration of the programmes, are paid for by the state. Therefore, the Portuguese State assumes as its obligation the task of religious denominations, which contradicts its laicity and the principle of separation between Church and State. In practice, the principle of equal treatment of the different religious denominations is also not observed.

### Religious communities...

According to the last Portuguese population census held in 2011, the majority of Portuguese people identify as Roman Catholic (81%), though only about 19% practice their faith and go to Mass regularly. Nevertheless, there are also many other religions, mainly due to the migratory flows that have occurred since the 1970s. Among the other religious communities, the following stand out: Orthodox, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Evangelicals, formed almost entirely by immigrants and their families.

However, the most recent Catholic Church statistics released by the Bishops' Conference, from 2014, put the percentage of Portuguese who call themselves Catholic at 77.03%. At the same time, there is an increase in the number of those who profess other religions and those with no religion. According to Alfredo Teixeira, Associate Professor at the Theology Faculty of the Catholic University of Portugal, this trend continues to this day.

Religion in Portugal for the population aged 15 and over (2011)



### ...and religious education

Besides the Catholic Church, only three more religions exercise the right to provide RE in public schools: the Aliança Evangélica Portuguesa, the Bahá'í, and the Buddhist communities based in Portugal.

Nevertheless, for André Folque, a member of the Commission on Religious Freedom, as RE in public schools is optional, there is "a significant gap in the [Portuguese] educational system" when it comes to teaching and learning about religion in general. That is why Portuguese researcher Fernando Catarino says that RE in Portuguese public schools remains almost exclusively Catholic and claims that there is a lack of a subject that addresses religion in a "cross-cutting and balanced" way.

### The link between religion and public school

In the Portuguese case, as is the case for other European countries with a close connection between the Roman Catholic Church and national culture, there is still a strong link between religion and education. However, in recent years, there has been a discussion on the need to create a more inclusive and transversal subject at school. For some political parties, removing the subject of Catholic RE from public schools is one of the goals, not least because in May 2018, there were more non-practicing Catholics (48%) than practicing Catholics (35%) in Portugal. Rather than asking what link there might be between religion and public school, José Brissos-Lino, Doctorate in Psychology and Specialist in the Science of Religions, proposes a reflection on what school is for. As suggested by him, if schools really want to prepare pupils for life, they should replace classes on RE of religious denominations with a subject on 'Introduction to Religions and Spiritualities'. Such a subject would deal with the religious phenomenon, without forgetting the agnostic and atheist perspectives.

*Maria Inês Nemésio*



## From state atheism to religious education

After a three-year trial, Russia officially introduced religious education (RE) in September 2012 as a compulsory subject in public schools. The subject is taught in the fourth and fifth grade (ages 9-11), but Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), has declared to be in favour of making RE mandatory for grades two through ten.

During the Russian Empire, a strictly Orthodox education in catechism was provided. However, the Russian Revolution in 1917 heralded decades of state atheism, during which all religion was frowned upon, and atheism was propagated in schools. During the Perestroika (the reform program instituted in the mid-1980s, which aimed at restructuring the Soviet economic and political policies), careful steps were taken to revive the relationship between the state and the ROC. In the light of this campaign, the introduction of RE in some schools across the Russian Federation can be seen as a means to attract citizens to the Russian Orthodox Church. However, since the implementation of a Federal Law in 1992 which prescribed that all education had to be secular, the ROC has lobbied for reinstating RE. Although today the ties between Church and State seem to have almost returned to their pre-revolutionary strength, it has taken much deliberation to push through the educational reform in some bureaucratic structures which are still deeply secular.

### Religious flavours

In what way do you organise a subject as RE from scratch in a country in which Orthodoxy, which can be seen as the state religion, exists alongside approximately 23,000 recognised religious institutions? The Reformers were faced with the dilemma to either return to something that resembled pre-revolutionary Orthodox catechism, or instate non-confessional religious schooling similar to those in various European countries. The model that was chosen ('Foundations of Religious Cultures and secular Ethics') was a disappointing compromise for the Russian Orthodox Church that had initially pushed for a more or less confessional subject. The current model offers compulsory classes for fourth and fifth graders, but in six religious 'flavours' which parents can choose from: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, secular Ethics, or world religions.

### Types of RE in Russia



According to a study from 2014, Russians have increasingly affiliated themselves with the Russian Orthodox Church since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2008, 72% of the Russian population identified as Russian Orthodox, while only 18% of the population stated that they did not identify with any religion. However, in 2012, nationwide only one-third of the children took the Russian Orthodox track, while the topic chosen by most parents for their children's religious education was 'secular Ethics'. In reaction, the Russian Orthodox Church published an appeal on its official website in which it warned parents that 'secular Ethics' is "an atheistic curriculum," disguised as an ideologically neutral subject. According to the ROC, the material taught in this class is opposed to "the foundations of religious culture," and therefore to the "spiritual and moral education that has been traditional in Russia."

### Theology in higher education: a contested subject

Similar to religious education in elementary schooling, theology was introduced only recently as a subject in higher education. Since 2015, theology has been taught at 48 institutions of higher education in Russia. However, the decision to accredit theology as an academic discipline incited debates about its scientific status, but also about the separation between church and state. In an open letter to President Putin in July 2007, members of the Russian Academy of Sciences voiced their concerns about the considerations to add theology to the academic curriculum (and introduce religious education in elementary schools), stating that any scientific discipline should operate with "facts, logic, evidence, but by no means faith."

### University cathedral

Meanwhile, on the premises of the 265-year-old Moscow State University, the largest university in Russia, the construction of a 46-metre-high, multi-domed cathedral is to start in 2021. Although the announcements of the constructions were received with little enthusiasm amongst the students, the rector stated that the new cathedral had been requested by more than 2,000 university employees. The church is designed to accommodate 1,000 worshippers and will house the parish premises and the spiritual centre of Moscow State University. A petition for the construction of a Pastafarian instead of an Orthodox church has already been signed nearly 5,000 times.

### Religious vs secular = Church vs State?

Although RE has become a compulsory subject in public schools, and theology has been accredited to an academic status, religious education in Russia remains to be a strongly contested topic in the public debate. The discussion can be boiled down to a concern about the separation of Church and State, roughly dividing the public opinion into two camps. While the proponents profess that an Orthodox upbringing is fundamental to the sustenance of the Russian culture and mentality, the adversaries are of the opinion that RE in schools presents a danger to the development of independent and conscientious individuals through religious indoctrination. For now, the demarcations between 'secular' and 'religious' might be as obscure as those between 'Church' and 'State', and — as one author aptly remarks — unless there is a consensus on what 'secular' actually means, its interpretation and implementation will continue to be very different in each specific case.



## Dutch Religious Education: A fine line?

### Dutch 'public' versus 'special' education

When looking at the relationship between religion and education in the Netherlands, we can see that it is quite clearly defined. While 'public' education is not based on any religious perspective, 'special' education schools are allowed to teach from a specific ideological point of view. This ideology can be either religious or more pedagogical in nature. Schools that educate from a certain religious perspective can compel their teachers to share that particular perspective. However, no school is allowed to discriminate, by rejecting certain students or teachers, for example.

The religious form of 'special' education is called 'confessional special education', and the non-religious variety is called 'general special education'. While the Netherlands is a secular state, both public and special education are financed by the government, as long as they adhere to certain quality standards.

### Facts and figures

The statistics paint a somewhat surprising picture, because the vast majority of Dutch schools actually teach from a religious or ideological perspective. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 69% of all primary schools and 72% of all high schools taught from a certain religious or ideological perspective in 2019-2020. When looking at the number of students attending those schools, one sees a very similar distribution, with 71.6% of all students attending special education.

### Schools with religious or ideological perspectives in the Netherlands (2019-2020)



69% of all primary schools



72% of all high schools

### Explicitly religious education

As discussed above, only 'confessional special education' is explicitly religious. If we look at the last decade, we see a slight decline in the number of Catholic and Protestant schools, while the number of Islamic schools has grown by 60% in the same time period. There are only three Jewish schools in the Netherlands, which are all situated in Amsterdam. One of them has both a primary and high school, and has an orthodox orientation, where students are taught Jewish law, habits, and customs. The other two are both secular schools; one primary school and one high school. All three schools have been in the news multiple times because they were targets of terrorism and antisemitism. While there are currently no Buddhist schools, there are about five explicitly Hindu primary schools in the Netherlands.

"There are only three Jewish schools in the Netherlands."

### Formative education

Besides all the options mentioned above, a third type of education is 'formative' education. This consists of extracurricular religious classes that parents can request for their children, in order to provide them with certain religious principles in their personal development. This form of education also receives government funding. While the Catholic, Protestant, and Humanist varieties of this are by far the most popular, the Netherlands currently also has two Hindu teachers and five Buddhist teachers providing formative education in a number of schools. One of the strict rules is that teachers who provide formative education cannot evangelise or pressure children to convert.

### What does Religious Education entail?

There is a difference between a 'confessional special school' — teaching from a certain religious point of view — and religious education as a subject in school. As seen in the numbers above, there are many confessional special schools in the Netherlands. Students of these schools will receive an education based on the dogmas of that specific religion. Most of the time, students will also come from a family that follows that religion, although these numbers are declining at many schools. In school, learning about other religions is also included, but the extent of it can differ per school.

In public schools, especially in primary school, classes on ideological movements in the Dutch multicultural society are mandatory. It is not explicitly stated that all religions should be taught. If classes do incorporate religion, the five main religions covered are Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Humanism is also part of the curriculum.

### Is Dutch education influenced by religion?

As seen above, the majority of schools teach from a religious or ideological perspective. Thus, one could say that religion and ideology have a great influence on education in the Netherlands. Christian schools (both



primary and high school combined) are the largest group with 4,243 schools in total. These numbers match with the fact that Dutch culture has strong Judeo-Christian roots.

However, the balance between freedom of religion and freedom of education, and the necessity to make students feel safe at school, is sometimes under pressure. In 2020, education Minister Arie Slob led to national discussion because he said that orthodox Christian schools were allowed to ask parents to sign a document describing the 'core values' of the school, which included denouncing homosexuality. Parents who refused to sign were not allowed to send their children to that school. As many as one in five Dutch Christian reformed schools thinks it is 'morally unacceptable' to be in a gay marriage, but the schools are still obligated to treat students equally. After receiving a lot of criticism, the minister took back his words.

Christian reformed schools are not the only schools to receive negative news coverage. In September 2019, it was reported that Islamic schools in the Netherlands teach that Allah denounces homosexuality, that boys and girls should not look each other in the eye, and that people who have other religious beliefs should be killed. These Islamic schools follow the Salafi tradition: a fundamentalist and reactionary branch of Islam. Moreover, many of the organisations that these schools were part of were financed by the Gulf States, who promote their Salafi interpretation of Islam around the world. The Dutch inspection of education has recently started looking into this issue.

In conclusion, it can be said that religion has a strong influence on education in the Netherlands. The majority of schools teach from a certain religious or ideological perspective. Of that majority, especially more orthodox-oriented schools have the greatest impact and, as seen above, are most frequently reported on. The Dutch reputation of being a highly secular nation is therefore only partially justified, since the state not only allows but directly subsidises the teaching of religious ideologies to its children. In the end, theory and practice do not necessarily meet.

*Astrid Hamberg and Timo Pieters*

## Coping with diversity in Religious Education in Germany

— *Author recommendation*

Religious education (RE) is the only school subject mentioned in the German Basic Law (constitution). It is a mandatory subject given by religious communities at public schools in almost all German federal states, except in Berlin, Brandenburg, and Bremen. RE is also subject to recurring discussions, which have mainly revolved around the issue of dealing with religious diversity in the past decades.

### On the legal context of RE

The special status of RE is defined by the Basic Law: it is a regular school subject to be taught "following the principles of the concerned religious communities." This means that the formal and financial framework for RE is provided by the state, while the content of RE and the accreditation of teachers are left to religious communities. The achievements attained in RE are just as relevant for moving up to the next grade as in other subjects. The state must be strictly neutral in terms of religion and worldview and ensure that RE follows the fundamental educational aims established in state laws on the subject.

Owing to the standing of religious freedom as a basic constitutional right, students have the right to opt out of RE. Nevertheless, those who do not want to take part in confessional RE must attend Ethics or other substitute lessons. In most federal states, students aged 14 years and above can make this decision without parental consent.

### Exceptions to mandatory RE in German federal states





### Diversification of RE in Germany

In contrast to most other federal states in Germany, where confessional RE is a mandatory subject, it is offered as a voluntary subject in schools in Bremen, Berlin, and Brandenburg. Pupils in these federal states can also attend teachings given by worldview organisations, such as Life Lessons provided by the Humanist Association. Non-confessional teachings on religion in general, such as the subject 'Life Plans — Ethics — Religious Knowledge' (in Brandenburg) or 'Religion' (in Bremen) are offered in public schools as well, whereas lessons in Ethics were introduced as a compulsory school subject in Berlin in 2006. Since the Basic Law only recognises confessional RE, RE in these states is not exactly defined as RE by the law, but is still treated the same.

In the other 13 federal states, confessional RE is a mandatory subject, at least on paper. In practice, there are quite big differences concerning both the regulations and offers from state to state. For example, pupils in Sachsen-Anhalt must participate in RE classes or ethics lessons, while students in North Rhine-Westphalia are obligated to take part in either RE classes or (Practical) Philosophy. In some federal states (Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Baden-Württemberg), RE even takes place on a denominational-cooperative basis, such as the cooperation between Catholics and Protestants. Since the early 1990s, a non-denominational model of dialogical interreligious pedagogy called 'RE for All' has been practised in Hamburg.

### Recent developments and controversies in the context of religious plurality

Up to the 1960s, RE in public schools was taught in close cooperation with established churches (the Catholic and Protestant churches), which aimed to introduce the gospel to the pupils as the liberating Word of God. Today, 60 years later, every institution which carries a share of responsibility for RE in schools faces the challenge of accommodating religious diversity and cultural heterogeneity in and through religious education.

The debates about RE in the context of religious diversity have led to two major changes. On the one hand, so-called substitute subjects for confessional RE were introduced, which reflect dialogue-based concepts. On the other hand, there is more diversity in RE offered, including, in addition to the Catholic and Protestant churches, numerous other Christian communities, the Jewish community, as well as Buddhist, Christian Orthodox, Alevi, and Islamic religious communities, and the Humanist Association.

While interreligious dialogues in and through confessional RE are considered desirable by religious communities, several researchers from philosophy and religious studies take a different position. They reject the confession-oriented approach and call for a respectful and distanced attitude towards religions. For them, non-confessional teachings on religions would enable students to learn together respectfully and peacefully, regardless of their religious affiliation. This argument is also supported by some student representatives. For example, the Rhineland-Palatinate State Pupils' Association (LSV) calls for the abolition of confessional RE, saying it prescribes a certain worldview to the pupils and excludes other religious convictions and criticism of religion. However, this initiative has been strongly criticised.

### The challenge of Islamic Religious Education

Of all the changes, the establishment of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) received the greatest amount of

political, media, and academic attention. IRE is regulated differently in Germany: some states have introduced IRE as a regular school subject (e.g. North Rhine-Westphalia, Hessen, or Lower Saxony), whereas other states launched first trials for specific school types or areas (e.g. Baden-Württemberg or Bavaria). Several states, such as Brandenburg and Saxony, entirely lack regulation.

IRE is considered an important instrument of integration and a preventive measure against radicalisation and segregation of the Muslim community. According to the information provided by the federal states, almost 60,000 students took part in IRE in 2020. The discussion around IRE, however, is that it is unclear which religious communities the state can or must cooperate with. On the one hand, Muslim organisations are not recognised as an official religious community in most federal states so far. On the other hand, some of them — like the Turkish Ditib — are financed from abroad and thus open to foreign (political) influences, as critics argue.

“IRE is considered an important instrument of integration and a preventive measure against radicalisation and segregation of the Muslim community.”

### The challenge of Islamic Religious Education

The question of how religions and worldviews should be taught in schools, as well as the question of whether an (inter)religious or religious studies approach should be used, is the subject of heated debate in Germany. Advocates of both approaches use increasing religious diversity in society and classrooms as an argument for their respective form of teaching: while some see the distanced teaching on religion in general as the silver bullet, others argue that the ability to speak about one's faith is a prerequisite for learning to deal with religious diversity respectfully. Nevertheless, both sides face the challenge of operating in a spirit of interreligious understanding, irrespective of whether it takes place in confessional or non-confessional RE.

*Han Chang*



## A secular teaching of religious facts

In France, as President François Hollande stressed in 2015, religion has no place in schools, but this does not preclude discussing it through secular teaching of religious facts. Indeed, unlike most European countries, schools in France are secular, and this has been the case since the first secularisation laws of 1882 which pushed religious education outside the walls of the 'School of the Republic'. Consequently, there are no specific courses on religion, except in private religious schools — under an association contract with the State or outside a contract. However, this does not mean that religion is absent from the curriculum.

### Teaching religions from the perspective of faith is an exception in France

The exceptional status of the Alsace-Moselle region testifies to a former Republican way to reject theocracy and monitor religious authorities. Up until today, schools located in East France have been under a special status. Before addressing the situation at the national level, it is interesting to briefly outline this exception, its historical roots, and recent evolution.

In 1801, Napoleon Bonaparte established a treaty with Pope Pius VII to re-affirm Catholicism as one of the main faiths in France, and subject it to the laws of the Republic. This Concordat was abolished in 1905, when the State decided to withdraw from any religious concerns. Since Alsace-Moselle was German territory at the time, it was not affected by this separation between churches and the State. Up until today, the Concordat remains effective in East France. Under that status, four denominations are seen as traditional and supervised by the State: Catholicism, Reformed Protestantism, Lutheran Protestantism, and Judaism. The clerks of these denominations are paid as civil servants, and denominational education in schools is compulsory. However, parents can refuse to enrol their children in those denominational courses. This education is gradually tending to become a religious culture course rather than a catechism one.

### Acting against growing religious inculturation

In the rest of France, as early as the 1990s, the problem arose of how to deal with the lack of religious culture among a growing number of students who, for this reason, found it difficult to understand symbolic references, artistic works, or historical events. In 2002, the Debray Report, entitled 'On the teaching of religious facts in secular schools', addressed to the Minister of National Education, echoed this issue and proposed several measures that promote the secular teaching of religious facts. This teaching has subsequently been gradually introduced by the Ministry.

*"The problem arose of how to deal with the lack of religious culture among a growing number of students."*

### The school does not transmit faith, it transmits knowledge

This teaching favours an objective approach to religion, based on a claimed distinction between the sphere of beliefs (which should not be taught in school) and the sphere of knowledge. Therefore, religion is taught instead as historical, social, and cultural facts through transdisciplinary teaching: history, literature, history of

the arts, music education, art class, and philosophy. In other words, the teaching of religious facts (e.g. rites, founding texts, customs, symbols, social events, and artworks) aims to present the diversity of representations of the world to better understand societies of the past and the cultural heritage of today. It is therefore a cultural and intellectual issue.

### Teaching religions and laïcité: a political challenge

From 2015 onwards, due to the Islamist terrorist attacks and the trauma they cause throughout society, the teaching of religious facts in schools, combined with moral and civic education, became a political issue. Laïcité is a legal-political principle that regulates and protects cultural and religious diversity. This fundamental principle of the French Republic is in fact based on fundamental freedoms and a common rule that allows the differences of each person to be transcended and nourishes the republican ideal of the French nation: plural but one. A vision of the nation that is hardly compatible with a multiculturalist vision and rejects all separatism. The teaching of religion in a secular framework is designed to contribute to training in citizenship, living in harmony with one another, respecting the freedom of expression of religious and cultural identities, and promoting dialogue in a spirit of respect and responsibility. On the 16th October 2020, the assassination of Samuel Paty, a history and geography teacher who showed his pupils a caricature of the Prophet Mohammed during a civic and moral education course, tragically reminded the population of the urgency of this issue.

### In the face of teacher reluctance and training challenges

Despite this, the teaching of religion, unlike moral and civic education, is the subject of much reluctance on the part of teachers or political representatives, which affects its quality. This situation can be explained by anti-religious reflexes, the fear of talking about sensitive subjects, or the feeling of not being sufficiently equipped to deal with religions in schools. In fact, almost two-thirds of teachers feel that they are insufficiently trained to teach religious or secular facts in schools, and more and more French feel that religious facts should be taught more often in schools.

Teacher training is now seen as a priority by public authorities, but the challenge is considerable. However, private initiatives can sometimes help. For example, this is the case of the association Enquête which, since 2010, has been designing and disseminating pedagogies and playful tools for teachers to educate about laïcité and religious facts, in order to develop a more peaceful and thoughtful relationship with children on these subjects.

*Laurent Tessier and Clémence Sauty*



## Insights from the dashboard: Education across Europe

— *Author recommendation*

The EARS dashboard is a collection of summaries from European media articles on religion and society. Between 14 July and 14 October 2021, 864 article summaries were added by our analyst team. 37 of these, or 4% of the total, consider the topic of *education*. From the debate on the relevance of Christian Religious Education to the question of whether schools should offer Islamic education, the dashboard covers it all.

### Teaching religion in schools

The role of Religious Education in schools varies among countries. For example, developments from Poznań, Poland, show that students' interest in taking elective religion or ethics classes has been decreasing. In Sweden, Roland Samuelsson, who ran for the Social Democrats at the Church of Sweden elections, also spoke out on the topic. According to him, the fact that schools teach less about Christianity is one of the reasons for the declining number of Church members.

Finally, Austria has established 'Ethics' as a mandatory subject in secondary schools. This course includes not only philosophy and psychology but also parts of religious studies.

### Islam at school

In addition to 'regular' Religious Education, several countries are also struggling with accommodating Islamic studies at school. For instance, Greece has proposed prohibiting Muslim students and teachers from carrying out their religious rituals at school. This was immediately followed by an official request from the Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister to cancel these measures.

On the other hand, in Spain, all public and charter schools are required to offer teaching of the Islamic faith during Religious Studies classes, if a minimum of ten families who have children at the school request it. Therefore, leaders of the Islamic community in the city have actively encouraged families to request the teaching. There are 310,000 Muslim school students in Spain, but only one in ten receive school education on Islamic religion.

### Collaboration

Even though religion and education seem opposed in several of the countries described above, this is not the case everywhere. For example, La Sapienze University of Rome and the Vatican are collaborating on cultural and scientific issues. The two institutions will cooperate on topics such as digital collaboration and transhumanism. This shows how education and religion can also find ways to strengthen each other.

*Anne Clerx*

## The commercialisation of knowledge: Challenges and opportunities

*This article was written in preparation for our round table on End of Humanity(s).*

Universities in North America and Europe have long been grappling with the commercialisation of the knowledge that they create. It has increasingly become the dominant narrative for knowledge transfer, whereby researchers sell their newly created knowledge to a private company as early as possible. While this process stops further research in the university, it does allow companies with the funding and resources to continue the research, even if not as originally intended. These companies then turn this knowledge into products for their own commercial benefit. But the public also benefits, it is said, who through commercial transactions are able to access the benefits of that knowledge. Nevertheless, many experts question the veracity of this narrative, in which the inventor, the company, and the public, all end up benefiting from the commercialisation of knowledge. They argue that it may be equally harmful, not only to the inventor and the public, but also to knowledge itself.

### Commercialisation: opportunities and challenges

Commercialisation does create opportunities for knowledge. For some types of new knowledge, commercialisation is the best way to ensure that it reaches the public and advances society while also benefiting the creators of the new knowledge. Taken this way, commercialisation is a key mechanism to help knowledge have real-world impact. Litan et al. argue that the ultimate aim of scientific research is to improve the human condition, so aiding the transfer and commercialisation of knowledge serves the interests of not only the inventor but also society. The impacts of this commercialisation have been most palpable in the case of technology. Gulbranson and Audretsch highlight that modern society responds more to advances in technology than to basic science. The digital transformation of society is a crucial example, with Microsoft, Apple, and Google producing technologies that were at first glance received by people as lifestyle choices but really represent digital services that act as a 'lifeline'. Services, such as a search engine or mobile broadband, not only created basic connectivity but also provided access to a host of other 'services for society', including health, education, and finance for the first time for many people. Beyond easier access to these services, the rise in connectivity also offers a range of other strong opportunities to society, including better sharing of information, greater political accountability, greater social activism, and stronger institutions of news and media. Commercialisation, particularly in the context of universities, has also allowed academics to financially benefit from their work and to also see their research advance more rapidly than would have been possible within the limited investments in universities.

Notwithstanding these social goods, there are also significant challenges. The debates in Europe and the US around the private ownership of publicly-funded innovations such as the Internet highlight how the monetisation of the Internet was not the way to deliver the social good of universal broadband access. It can also be felt in the context of hard-to-afford or debt-incurring education in prestigious universities, and the commodified provision of life-saving medical treatments in private healthcare systems across Europe and the



US. The most recent example of the social harm commercialisation of knowledge can bring is the case of the COVID-19 vaccine. Intellectual property rules for COVID-19 vaccines have meant that the global manufacture and distribution of vaccines needed to stop the pandemic is not possible. Nine out of ten people in most poor countries likely will not receive a vaccine this year. This has generated significant moral outrage. 175 former heads of state and Nobel laureates recently called on US President Biden to back a waiver on World Trade Organization (WTO) intellectual property rules for COVID-19 vaccines during the pandemic to “expand global manufacturing capacity, unhindered by industry monopolies that are driving the dire supply shortages blocking vaccine access.” Signatories included former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and economist Joseph Stiglitz. A coalition of 250 organisations, including Amnesty International, Public Citizen, and Doctors Without Borders, also issued a similar plea to the WTO.

#### **Commercialisation: a harm to moral progress?**

Beyond its direct benefit or harm to society, commercialisation also has a transformative impact on knowledge itself. With universities in North America and Europe increasingly licensing their new knowledge to private companies, the knowledge that cannot be readily transferred from research to product, and therefore, does not offer clear commercial benefits, comes under fire. This is indeed the case, particularly in the case of the humanities. The humanities are increasingly being perceived to be less vital to society, and therefore, less eligible for investment than the fields that offer material and economic progress. Educational institutions increasingly recognise knowledge as a tool for economic productivity, and this does not bode well for the good of any society. This emphasis on material and economic progress makes the moral progress necessary for morally-grounded society impossible, as the American Muslim scholar Joseph Lumbard notes: “A society that mistakes material progress, economic progress, and technological progress for moral progress cannot but create monsters and monstrosities.” The instrumentalist, as opposed to moral, view of knowledge that commercialisation fosters not only threatens social good, but also invites us to reexamine whether, as historian David Edgerton argues, commercially-mediated transfer of knowledge really does create the social change we actually desire.

The economic and technological pressures of commercialisation and their harm to moral progress are exemplified in the challenges theological education faces across different religions. In the case of Christianity, for example, the commercial need to accredit online theological training has raised strong concerns about ministerial formation. In South Africa, the use of commercially-available courses on theological training proliferated during the 1990s and accelerated in recent years with the onset of online modes of teaching. As Kelebogile T. Resane notes, this has led to not only unreliable or even fraudulent Christian ministries being set up across the country but also the “presentation of the Biblical message either as a commodity for sale for material gain or as an object of investment for personal aggrandizement.” Drawing a parallel with 20th-century television evangelists such as Billy Graham, Kenneth Copeland, Oral Roberts, and Kenneth Hagin, Resane cites the cases of publically popular South African religious leaders such as Bishop Keith Hurrington and Archbishop Prof. Emanuel Ketsekile to highlight this concern. Both Hurrington and Ketsekile claim scholarship from fictitious or unaccredited institutions, and award doctorates “to many naïve pastors.”

#### **Commercialisation: between the learner, learning, and knowledge**

It can be argued that no matter what its outcomes, the commercialisation of knowledge fundamentally changes the relationships between the learner, learning, and knowledge. In *The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity*, Stephen J. Ball argues that the commodification of knowledge “de-socialises” these relationships. Instead of meaningfully engaging with students, teachers “perform” according to targets, indicators, and evaluations. As “performative” and “enterprising” workers, teachers are forced to set aside “personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation.” This, Ball concludes, leads to a loss of real relationships, particularly within universities. The resulting construction and maintenance of fabrications get in the way of ‘real’ academic work or ‘proper’ learning. If Ball is correct, then the humanities, and within it the study of theology and religion, have a bleak future in the midst of commercialisation. As Julia Reinhard Lupton argues, “at the heart of the humanities ... lies a withdrawal from utility.” Universities need to be able to broker the relationships — between the learner, learning, and knowledge — that enable this pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge.

*Muhammad Faisal Khalil*

# Sustainability





## Preaching to save the earth

Over the past six years, the call to fight against climate change and save the earth has become louder within religious circles. For the first time ever, on September 1st 2021, Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby joined forces in a collective statement to address climate change. The last sentences of the statement read: 'Caring for God's creation is a spiritual commission requiring a response of commitment. This is a critical moment. Our children's future and the future of our common home depend on it.'

In Western, secularised society, the interference of religious institutions in the debate on climate change raises some interesting questions. What is the role of religion within public debates like this? And what are religious institutions doing to prevent climate change? Focusing on the Netherlands, this article will explore these questions.

### Secular or post-secular society?

Should religion be allowed within the public debate? German philosopher Jürgen Habermas is well known for his theory of a post-secular society. He criticised secular societies for not allowing religious views within the public debate. According to Habermas, there should be mutual respect and room for dialogue between religious and non-religious people. Within a secular society such as the Netherlands, there is a widespread conception that arguments should be supported by scientific proof. Because of this belief, religious people feel left out. In order to be taken seriously in public debates, they need to provide scientific proof for their religious points of view. A way of doing this is translating their religious ideas into secular terms in order to reach a broader audience. How does this work within the debate on climate change?

### A creation of God

When looking at the debate on climate change, a difference in reasoning can be found. As can be seen in the quote from the collective statement, Christians see the earth as God's creation. Dutch political scientist and member of the Christian political party SGP, Cor Verkade, argues that "humankind should preserve God's creation instead of exploiting it." However, when asked whether sustainability should be the top priority for churches, he disagrees. The primary mission of the church remains to preach the holy gospel, says Verkade.

Within Islam, sustainability is also essential. One should not waste anything, says Sobana Sheikh Rashid. Human consumption is ruining the earth, and greediness is bad for the soul since it drives you away from what really matters, she argues. Rashid is part of the foundation 'Groene Moslims', which translates to Green Muslims. The organisation focuses on sustainability from a religious point of view. Rashid aims to develop educational resources to discuss sustainability at Islamic primary schools.

Dutch Jew Elias Polman says principles from the Torah lead him to an interest in sustainability. A leading principle of Judaism is having a strong sense of responsibility. We are responsible for how we leave the earth for future generations, argues Polman. When asked why the Jewish community is not more visible in the fights against climate change in the Netherlands, he says: "antisemitism is still alive in the Netherlands. That is one of the reasons that the Jewish community is not so quick to take a stance as a group or at public events."

### Raising the alarm

In March 2021, right before the Dutch elections, religious organisations shared a collective call for action: voting for the climate. In the shared letter, they asked people to vote for parties that not only talk about sustainability, but will also act upon it. However, unlike in the past, they refrained from advising which party to vote for. The open letter was signed by twelve different religious organisations, including Christian, Muslim, and Jewish voices. By sharing this letter before the elections, the religious organisations very clearly positioned themselves within the public debate.

### Could religion save the planet?

The Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PKN) supported the climate march in the Netherlands earlier in 2021. The march started and ended in the church. The earth should become better for future generations, says René de Reuver, secretary of the PKN. Just like the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, the Protestant Church in Switzerland is trying to become more sustainable as well.

The Dutch organisation 'Groene Kerken' (Green Churches) aims to help churches become more sustainable. They offer a toolkit with steps on where to begin and how to go from there. Groene Kerken believes religious communities should have a visible and positive role in the way to sustainability. A Green Church is expected to take one sustainable step each year. Within the Netherlands, there are currently 331 Green Churches.

Are such initiatives useful, one might ask. One of the arguments on the importance of religious institutions to conquer climate change is that it motivates and inspires communities. Scientific facts about climate change are not always enough for action. However, religion taps into intrinsic values and beliefs. Religious institutions also set an example for the people in their community. If the institutions are involved in living a more sustainable life, other people will be more likely to follow their lead.

### Sustainability: a shared responsibility

In conclusion, religious voices matter when it comes to debates about sustainability. Christians, Muslims, and Jews all share the notion that the earth is sacred and humans should take their responsibility. Several churches in the Netherlands have taken the first steps in working toward a more sustainable future. While preaching might not be enough to save the earth, religious institutions can set the right example. Whether you believe Earth is God's creation or not, one thing is certain; there is no planet B.

*Laura Waardenburg*



## Reformed churches versus the climate crisis

— *Author recommendation*

### Earth Overshoot Day

The NGO Global Footprint Network declared the 29th of July 2021 as Earth Overshoot Day. Every year, this NGO calculates the date when humans have used all the resources the earth can provide in a year. In 1970, Earth Overshoot Day was on the 29th of December, and in 2000 it was on the 23rd of September. This clear decrease in natural resources mostly comes from the increase in our carbon footprint.

In 2020, due to the COVID-19 crisis, the carbon footprint slightly decreased and Earth Overshoot Day was delayed by three weeks. This date gave hope during the pandemic as humanity saw the positive ecological impact of using less transport. However, our carbon footprint is not the only factor in the current ecological crisis. There are many different elements today that make this crisis an urgent one, such as the acidification of oceans, less biodiversity, and the destruction of natural habitats. In response to this crisis, Reformed churches are currently addressing this global issue.

### The Reformed tradition in the ecological discussion

Sociologists, such as Karl Marx and Brad Gregory, determined that the Reformation influenced capitalism and the individualisation of society. Therefore, should the Reformed tradition address the issue of the ecological crisis if its thought might have influenced society toward mishandling the earth?

Since Calvin developed the idea of loans with interest, Switzerland has been a wealthy country. Even though this idea might have influenced capitalist society, the Protestant Church in Switzerland does not restrain itself from acting for social and ecological justice. On the contrary, this church focuses on Zwingli's theology to develop an eco-theology. According to him, the earth is not our house but God's house, and Christians have a shared responsibility to take care of it. Another Reformation theologian, John Calvin, invited Christians to an attitude of modesty and thankfulness for a true contemplation of God's work. With these two ecological reflections, the Protestant Church in Switzerland declares the need for a transformation from Calvin's position as member of the audience, to Zwingli's position as actor in God's house.

“Should the Reformed tradition address the issue of the ecological crisis if its thought might have influenced society toward mishandling the earth?”

### From theology to action

The Protestant Church in Switzerland is taking various actions to reduce its carbon footprint. On a local level, churches aim to use recycled paper and less heat. Through these actions, more than 20 parishes have already received an environmental label called 'Grüner Güggel'. This label has existed since 2015 and was created by the association 'oeku Church and Environment' to encourage Swiss parishes to take ecological actions. On a national level, every Reformed church is asked to participate in the international and ecumenical movement

called 'Season of Creation'. This movement was created by the World Council of Churches and has the purpose of commemorating God's creation. To help national churches in the commemoration, this movement offers resources such as ecological liturgies, information about the climate crisis, and Bible studies.

The oeku Church and Environment association and the Season of Creation movement are examples of how the contemplation of God's work (through liturgies and reinterpretation of the Bible) brings the understanding of a shared responsibility by acting as ecologically responsible in parishes. The Protestant Church in Switzerland developed this eco-theology in order to explain the need for Christians to act on this climate injustice.

“The Protestant Church in Switzerland is taking various actions to reduce its carbon footprint.”

### Fighting the crisis

In conclusion, the short timeline between the development of eco-theologies and the subsequent actions of churches highlight their interconnected relationship. In the Reformed tradition, there is a close relationship between theology and action. Reformed Christians act according to their interpretation of the Bible. Thus, a reformed eco-theology gives tools to understand the ecological message in the Bible: from simple contemplation to shared responsibility on the ecological matter. Through eco-theology and actions, the Reformed tradition participates in the ecological debate and helps fight against this ecological crisis.

*Emma Van Dorp*



## World religions calling for climate action at COP26

### What is the UN Climate Change Conference?

The UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) is the 26th conference of the United Nations to address the topic of climate change. It is a formal meeting between all the United Nations that aims to assess the progress that has been made to combat climate change. As part of the conference, nations negotiate the Kyoto Protocol — that is, they make legally binding agreements between developed countries to lower the emissions of greenhouse gases. But what role do world religions play in this conference?

### The appeal of world religions before COP26

In October 2021, before the beginning of the UN conference, some of the most important religious leaders around the world met at the Vatican and, together with scientists, signed an appeal that called on “the international community to raise their ambition and step up their climate action ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference COP26.” Around 40 faith leaders signed the appeal. The religions represented in the appeal were the Christian denominations, both Sunni and Shi’a Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and Jainism. The appeal states: “The world is called to achieve net-zero carbon emissions as soon as possible, with wealthier countries taking the lead in reducing their own emissions and in financing emission reductions from poorer nations. All governments must adopt a trajectory that will limit the global average temperature rise to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.”

A previous appeal was signed in September 2021 by leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Anglican Communion. In this previous appeal, the leaders exhorted people to pray for world leaders before the COP26 conference.

### COP26: church bells ring in the UK for climate change action

Besides this formal appeal, many religions and religious communities around the world called for action. In the UK, the eve before the COP26 conference, hundreds of churches rang their bells as a call for action in the fight against climate change. The bells — according to environmentalist Edward Gildea — were supposed to warn the delegates of the conference in Glasgow about the importance of taking action on climate change.

“Hundreds of churches rang their bells as a call for action in the fight against climate change.”

### The German Catholic Church report on climate change

In October 2021, the German Catholic Church published its first report on climate and environmental protection. The report underlines the importance for the Church to act in favour of the climate. The auxiliary bishop of Münster, Rolf Lohmann, responsible for the pastoral care of the creation of the German Bishops’ Conference (DBK), stated: “We take our responsibility for creation seriously. As a Catholic Church, we should not sit on the last chariot, but rather be at the forefront, if possible.”

### The participation of the Episcopal Church at the conference

At the conference itself, a delegation of the Episcopal Church participated virtually. Ahead of the conference, the delegation stated: “As delegation members, we stand in solidarity with smaller nations, such as those in the Pacific Ocean, who already feel the leading-edge effects of climate change. We also bring our values and beliefs into the room at the COPs.”

### Vatican delegation

A Vatican delegation also arrived in Scotland for the conference. The delegation came to represent Pope Francis’s preoccupations for the future of the planet. The delegation was headed by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State for the Holy See who, at the end of the conference, stated that there is still a lot to do in order to achieve the maximum warming limit of 1.5°C by 2100. According to him, it is fundamental to be serious in the implementation of the promises made at the conference by different states.

### Jewish Rabbi at the conference

The Jewish Chief Rabbi in the UK, Ephraim Mirvis, has been critical towards the place religious leaders have been given in the COP26 conference in Glasgow. According to him, leaders have not been given enough room and opportunities to talk and be heard. He argued that this is a big problem since religious leaders influence millions of people around the world. He also added that climate change is a “religious subject, and God calls upon us to respond in a religious way and to take a religious lead for all of our society.”

### Do religious people feel responsible for climate change? Can they make a difference?

It emerges that religions, religious leaders, and religious people feel it is their responsibility to act with respect to climate change and to try to make a difference. All religions feel that the world is the place of creation of God and that it should be protected as such. Will they be able to make a difference?

*Ghila Amati*

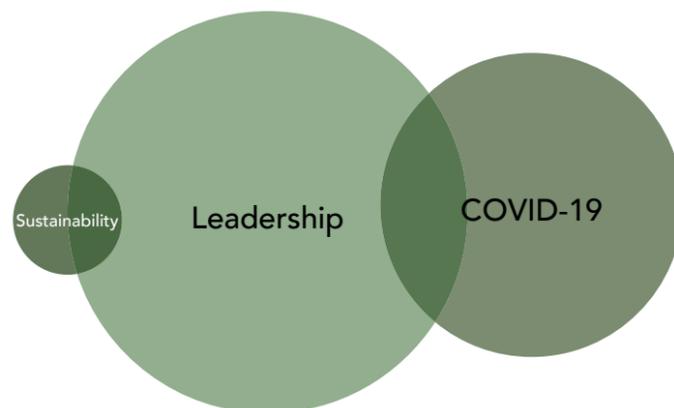


## Insights from the dashboard: What are religious leaders doing about sustainability?

Over the past year (1st July 2020 – 30th June 2021) 4,681 articles were uploaded to the EARS Dashboard. Of these, about 1% (44 articles) featured the topics of both *leadership* and *sustainability*.



Many religious leaders have spent the last year focused on dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. This is clear from a simple EARS dashboard search:



However, sea levels have continued to rise and the ocean is still choked with tonnes of plastic every day. People living in low-lying areas, many of whom live in poverty (especially in Bangladesh and islands in the South Pacific), are facing life and death decisions.

The EARS dashboard highlights that some religious leaders have not forgotten about the environment and continue to use their platforms to encourage change.

### Pandemic a trigger for environmental action

Pope Francis made by far the most headlines. The pope has indeed pushed the environment up the agenda of the Catholic Church. In papal audiences and other statements, Francis has denounced humanity's "predatory attitude" towards the planet, and even said that the world faces another "great flood" if the climate crisis continues to worsen. Just as the first flood came as a result of humans' injustice and immorality, so our exploitation of the planet and each other will bring another. The pope also recently ordered the very first electric popemobile, complete with carpets made from recycled plastics found in the ocean. Elsewhere, Francis has stressed the importance of renewable energy for the planet's wellbeing.

Pope Francis's biggest contribution to the discussion surrounding sustainability was the publication of his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* in October 2020. Released just before the US election, it was widely interpreted as a criticism of the leadership style of Donald Trump, and a tacit commendation of Joe Biden. But *Fratelli tutti* also built upon Francis's previous encyclical about caring for the environment, *Laudato Si'*. In both, the pope criticised the world's "throwaway culture" and "limitless consumerism," which leaves people isolated and the planet broken. We are all "children of the same earth which is our common home."

It is likely that Pope Francis is overrepresented in the media because of his worldwide celebrity status. Whereas nearly anything he says makes headlines across the world, other religious leaders need to act more dramatically to draw attention. This bias is naturally reflected in the EARS dashboard's findings.

"Religious leaders have not forgotten about the environment and continue to use their platforms to encourage change."

### Not only Francis...

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Bartholomew I of Constantinople spoke about the threats facing the environment on the International Day of Prayer in 2020 (1st September). The main reason we are in such a terrible situation, he said, was because we worship ourselves, not God. The nuclear bomb is a symbol of how humanity has come to believe itself omnipotent like God, with the power to destroy vast territories at will. He stressed that since all people depend upon the environment to live, caring for it should be the responsibility of us all.

Several priests from various Christian denominations were arrested in the Extinction Rebellion climate protests in October 2020, and former archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams was among the demonstrators.



They were presenting a united Christian demonstration that the exploitation of the planet for profit and greed is against the principles of their faith, and demanded government intervention.

“Since all people depend upon the environment to live, caring for it should be the responsibility of us all.”

#### **Pandemic a trigger for environmental action**

While the dashboard shows that COVID-19 has brought religious leaders into the spotlight more than sustainability, it also suggests that the pandemic has acted as a trigger for environmental action, not a distraction. For example, according to Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, president of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union, the pandemic demonstrated the need for European countries to make amends for their exploitation of African nations. He said that much of Europe’s wealth was taken from Africa, throughout decades of colonial oppression and resource-grabbing. If the cardinal’s propositions were implemented, Europe would rebuild the environments that they once desecrated, and the refugees who are fleeing Africa for Europe would be able to remain in their home countries.

Crises often contain hidden lessons. The pandemic has highlighted how interconnected all countries and people are with one another. Planet Earth is another thing that links every single human being. So what is the moral of the story according to religious leaders?

Many, but especially Pope Francis, have considered it their duty to speak out about the impacts selfishness and greed are having on the environment. Otherwise, it is future generations and the poorest communities that will suffer the worst consequences.

*Frazer MacDiarmid*

# Politics





## The far-right on the rise in Romania

### The far-right on the rise in Romania

Prior to 2020, despite becoming major forces in many Eastern European countries, far-right political parties had not managed to gain significant representation in Romanian politics. However, as has been the case across the globe, the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic has shaken up politics and created the political environment in which the Alliance for the Romanian Union (AUR), a far-right party, gained a surprisingly high 9% of votes in parliamentary elections in December 2020.

In order to explain this success, it is imperative to understand the importance of the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) in deepening hostility against the government and building the basis for the AUR's gains. Throughout 2020, the conflict between the ROC and the government over coronavirus restrictions has built upon previous clashes over social issues. This article will seek to give more detail about how this situation has developed.

### Social divisions

Throughout 2020, the ROC had clashed with the now-defeated government of Ludovic Orban and the Liberal Party. These clashes centred around disagreements on both social issues and the application of coronavirus safety measures.

As for the social issues, the ROC has been a key part of an 'ultra-conservative' movement that has brought together influential members of parliament, senators, religious figures, and pressure groups to campaign on a variety of issues. These have included challenging abortion, criticising the 'gender ideology' of women's rights campaigns, and fiercely opposing LGBT movements in the nation. Perhaps the most prominent of such campaigns was a successful push to greatly reduce the teaching of sexual education in Romanian schools, which was actively supported by the Catholic Church as well as the ROC. However, the coronavirus pandemic opened new fronts of confrontation between the ROC and the former government.

The potential for conflict between the traditions of the ROC and the pandemic was evident in a controversy over posters depicting nurses and doctors as saints in April 2020. As Romania dealt with the first wave of the virus, a series of posters were put up in Bucharest as part of a Europe-wide campaign that portrayed doctors and nurses in a style that 'mixed comic book elements with religious art'. However, the ROC responded by demanding the posters be removed and stating that they were blasphemous and an insult to Christian iconography.

Hostility only worsened as the arrival of the second wave of the coronavirus once again caused a collision between the practices of the Church and the needs of the wider society. Of particular significance was a series of high-profile rows over bans placed on religious pilgrimages by the Romanian authorities. Tensions turned into outright confrontation after the authorities banned the Saint Demetrius pilgrimage in Bucharest and the Saint Parascheva pilgrimage in Iasi, the two largest pilgrimages in the Romanian Orthodox calendar.

The banning of these pilgrimages caused sharp criticism, with the Church's press agency accusing the government of "arrogance, decisional autarchy and moral self-centredness." As well as this institutional response, the most senior figure in the ROC, Patriarch Daniel, went even further by suggesting that there would be divine punishment for politicians who banned pilgrimages, saying that God "does not allow himself to be mocked" and sometimes he uses "bitter medicines" to bring people back on the right path.

### The rise of the AUR

Within this context of hostility between conservative and traditionalist elements of the Church and the Liberal government, it is easier to understand how religion has played a role in the rise of the far-right AUR party.

The relationship between the AUR and the Church's position on social issues dates back to before the party's creation. The co-founder of the new party, Claudiu Târziu, first came to national prominence when he was one of a group called the Coalition for Family, which initiated a referendum to ban same-sex marriages by the constitution in 2018. Although the referendum failed due to a low turnout, the overlap between the new party and the Church's opposition to gay marriage on religious grounds is evident.

Furthermore, during the campaign, the AUR leadership were clear to stress the religious aspect of their party's platform. In particular, they stated their policies were based on 'four pillars: family, country, faith, and freedom'. Therefore, it is evident that there is a significant degree of shared ideas and values regarding the social conservatism and hostility to coronavirus limitations between the ROC and the AUR.

It is difficult to distinguish definitively to what degree the ROC's politics in 2020 contributed to the AUR's rise. However, it is important to note that in the run-up to the scheduled parliamentary elections, the ROC did release a statement in which, without endorsing a specific party, they called on Christians to consider the "country's good and the promotion of Christian values in society" when choosing who to vote for in the parliamentary elections. In addition, they referred to the importance of believers voting for those who "promote the traditional, natural family, made up of man and woman," a reference to the ROC's opposition to gay marriage.

The shared political goals between the AUR and the ROC can therefore be seen in the electoral results from the December elections. The AUR had the greatest degree of success in the North-Eastern region of Romania, where the ROC has its strongest support and adherence.

### The Church and the far-right across the region

The unity of the social and political values of the Church and ultra-conservative political groups is a concept that is not unique to Romania and has been seen in other parts of Eastern Europe. Perhaps most notably this has been evident in Poland, where the Catholic Church's fierce opposition to abortion and to LGBT rights campaigns has been shared by the governing Law and Justice party. Similarly, in Hungary, Christian values have become a 'centrepiece' of Viktor Orbán's attempts to solidify his political power.

As for Romania, observers interested in the overlap between religion and politics in the nation will be interested to see how the ROC interacts with this new political force and whether they seek to distance themselves from, or align themselves with, the AUR.

*Freddie Scott*



## The power of papal trips

In early March 2021, Pope Francis became, despite health and security warnings, the first pope to visit Iraq. Francis spent four days in the country, travelling from the capital, Baghdad, through former ISIS-held cities, like Mosul, and ending in the historic city of Erbil. From an initial glance, the pope's visit may appear somewhat surprising as Iraq has a small Christian population of about 200,000 that continues to decrease. Why then did the pope visit? This article will explore historic papal trips — by Pope Francis and his predecessors — in order to shed light on the motivations and goals for this historic COVID-era journey.

### The end of 150-, 1000-, and 2000-year traditions

In 1964, Pope Paul VI made history with a visit to Israel. His trip marked the end of a 150-year streak during which no pope had left Italy. The last pope to have done so was Pius VII, who was kidnapped and taken to France by French forces during the Napoleonic Wars. In fact, most popes in the century before Paul hardly left the Vatican. Paul's trip carried additional historical weight, too, as it marked the first time a pope flew on a plane and the first time a sitting pope had ever left Europe.

Beyond these milestones, Paul's trip also reflected a careful geopolitical balance, a trend that has continued to run through successive papal trips. Firstly, Israel's establishment on the international scene was still hotly contested, without a single Arab nation having recognised it. Given the controversial nature, the pope framed his trip as a pilgrimage, where he hoped to visit sites integral to the life of Christ.

Though Paul did not acknowledge Israel as a country by name during his trip, the visit coincided with some of the first official movements by the Catholic Church towards normalising relations with members of the Jewish faith. The trip took place during the historic multi-year Vatican II Conference, from which came *Nostra Aetate*, a Catholic declaration that, amongst other things, rejected antisemitism and underlined Judeo-Catholic similarities. The trip also marked the warming of relationships between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, as Paul met with Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras I. The next year, the two would officially end the nearly 1000-year Great Schism that had divided eastern and western Christianity since 1054, when Church leaders on both sides excommunicated each other over long-simmering theological and political disagreements.

### Historic successes and indecisive failures

Paul's excursion from Italy would mark the beginning of a newfound era of papal trips around the world. While many trips, like those to Brazil or the Philippines, make sense simply on a numbers basis, i.e. the pope travels to these countries to interact with large numbers of Catholic faithful, popes have also continued to wade into geopolitics with their visits.

Perhaps most famously, Pope John Paul II made several trips to his native Poland in the 1970s and 80s and, in doing so, helped stir up anti-communist sentiment amongst his fellow Poles. In his first visit in 1979, he expressed support for political self-determination for Poland. A series of worker strikes would ensue, ultimately culminating with Lech Wałęsa, the leader of the labour union, signing a set of accords with a pen that depicted John Paul II. In the decades that have followed, John Paul is often credited as serving as an important figure in hastening the decline of communism's grasp over parts of Eastern Europe. Yet, papal visits are not

always recorded as diplomatic or humanitarian successes. Notably, John Paul II's 1983 trip to Nicaragua has been remembered as one that stirred up more disunion than peace. Several of the pope's actions, including publicly criticising the actions of prominent leftward leaning priests who served in the government, only widened the gap between the Church and the Sandista government. Similarly, despite normally generating significant Latin American support, during a trip to Chile in 2018, Pope Francis struggled to connect with Chileans and was heavily criticised for his seeming lack of empathy for victims of clerical sexual abuse.

### A rough classification

Overall, there appear to be several, often interconnected, motivators for modern papal trips: supporter interaction, relationship improvement, and humanitarianism.

Francis's years as pope provide examples of each. In 2015, Francis visited the Philippines, during which he held a mass that boasted the largest papal outcome in history, with between 6 and 7 million followers in attendance. This is a clear-cut example of supporter interaction. A year later, Francis stopped in Havana, Cuba. There, he met with Archbishop Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church and signed a historic joint declaration that expanded on shared beliefs and similarities between the historically oppositional institutions. While this certainly represented a progressive step in Catholic-Orthodox relations, others have proposed theories of deeper political meaning, especially given the Russian Orthodox Church's close ties with the Russian government. Either way, the trip serves as an example of one driven by improving relationships.

Within months of his trip to Cuba, Francis spent a day on the Greek island of Lesbos, where he expressed support for the immigrants and hoped to raise awareness for their collective plight, thereby using his travels for humanitarian purposes.

### Iraq trip — a combination

In light of this all, Francis's trip to Iraq seems less out of character: it combines several of the main papal trip goals. On the one hand, Francis was able to visit with Iraqi Catholics in their home cities, something no pope has ever done before. Additionally, he also carved out time to meet with the Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Together, the two released a declaration decrying extremism and declaring Iraq as a safe space for Christians as well as Muslims. Finally, Francis used his time on the trip to highlight several humanitarian issues: not only the Christian victims of violence in territory held by the Islamic State, but also the Yazidi who suffered immensely under Islamic State control. Symbolically, Francis's visit also helped establish Iraq as more stable of a country than one may think: a place capable of safely hosting a Catholic pontiff during a severe pandemic.

*Tyler Mikulis*



## Should Swiss churches be involved in politics?

In November 2020, Madam Karin Keller-Sutter, a federal councillor, stated that “Churches have nothing to say on today’s politics!” She expressed her point when Swiss citizens had to vote on the matter of responsible business. If this law passed, Swiss companies would not be allowed to be involved with international companies that violate human rights or harm the environment. However, during the campaign period, some churches put up a banner on their church tower to show that they supported the passing of this vote. Should Swiss churches engage themselves in political debates during these voting periods? What is the relationship between churches and politics in Switzerland today?

### Politics and Christianity in Switzerland today

The Swiss population votes four times per year on specific political matters, and every four years they elect representatives in the Cantonal Council and in the National Council. With this political system, the Swiss are used to voting and to discussing politics around a kitchen table. But do these discussions also take place in churches?

Switzerland is a secular society in a non-secular country. First, the Swiss constitution states the Christian background in the first sentence: “in the name of God Almighty.” Second, a Protestant or a Catholic Church is affiliated with the state depending on the canton’s political decisions. For example, the Protestant Church in Geneva is not affiliated to the state but the Protestant Church in Zurich is. Even if these two points reveal that Switzerland is not a secular country, the Swiss society is a secular society in general. A small majority of the Swiss population is Christian and most of them do not practise their religion on a daily basis. For most politicians, the Christian tradition in Switzerland is seen as a cultural background rather than a practised religion. Due to this secular landscape, politicians and church members have different points of view about the relationship between the church and politics.

### In current Swiss society, churches should not play a role in politics...

One opinion is to keep politics and church life separated. The liberal radical youth political parties from Bern, Argovia, Saint-Gallen, and Thurgovia expressed that churches should focus on the spiritual needs of the people rather than politics. On that note, Michael Baumann — pastor at the Protestant Church in Wiesendangen — agrees with the political party, arguing that the church does not have to change society because Christians should not try to bring the Kingdom of God on earth. Michael Baumann indicates that churches should focus on ethical and spiritual questions. According to the youth parties and Michael Baumann, the church should not get involved in politics.

### ...but churches are on the political front with the ‘marriage for all’ vote

However, in November 2020, Christians got involved in politics when the National Council voted on a law on ‘marriage for all’. This law would open marriage for couples of the same sex and permit lesbian couples to get a sperm donation. On this matter, Swiss Christians manifested their political positions. In April 2021, 61,027 signatures (of the 50,000 needed) were certified to ask for a referendum on the ‘marriage for all’ law. A major part of these signatures was signed by members of the Federal Democratic Union (EDF), the Democratic Union of the Centre (UDC), and the Evangelical Party (PEV). These three parties are known to find Christian

moral values important for Switzerland. Due to this initiative, the Swiss will have to vote on the law ‘marriage for all’ in September 2021.

But not all Swiss Christians agree with this referendum. The initiative brought conflict in the Evangelical Party as the majority of the members signed the initiative and others, such as Michael Wiesmann (pastor in Zurich), did not agree with it. He decided to leave the party and focus on his work of pastoral care for all human beings. Then, the Swiss-German theologian feminist group (Die IG feministische Theologinnen) declared that reading the Bible with a theological perspective helps people to understand that homosexuality in biblical times did not have the same connotation as today. With their public statement, the group affirmed their support for the law. Also, the Protestant Church in Switzerland declared that they support opening marriage for all back in 2019. However, they have not made a statement on the recent ‘marriage for all’ law.

“Political discussions are present in churches but differ from one church to another.”

### Political discussions will continue in churches

Political discussions are present in churches but differ from one church to another. We see two ways in which Christians are involved in political debates in Switzerland. First, as a church through public statements. Second, as individuals through political parties or social groups (such as the feminist theologian group). These two ways show that Christians, as individuals living in Swiss society, cannot be apolitical. With the new voting period coming up in June 2021, the Protestant Church in Switzerland answered Keller-Sutter’s remark this way: “But all the citizens are concerned by the state affairs and the common good. This applies to the individuals as well as to the collectives. And so, as actors in society, the churches also have the legitimacy to express their views on political matters.”

*Emma Van Dorp*



## The Hill We Climb: A prayer for unity sowing division?

On January 20, 2021, the world watched a self-described “*skinny Black girl descended from slaves*” ascend US President Joe Biden’s inaugural platform to proclaim a message of “unity, collaboration and togetherness.” Amanda Gorman, according to commentators, “stirred hope and awe,” inspiring “the poetry of democracy” with her spoken-word poem ‘The Hill We Climb’. However, the translation of a poem that calls for “unity and togetherness” seems to have laid bare the very divide that it set out to bridge.

### Dream translator?

Throughout Europe, publishing houses competed to translate Gorman’s message, which “everybody should be able to read.” In the Netherlands, publishing house Meulenhoff won the translation rights, announcing a special edition of ‘The Hill We Climb’, introduced by Oprah Winfrey. Meulenhoff claimed to have found the “dream translator” in the International Booker Prize winner Marieke Lucas Rijneveld. Although Amanda Gorman herself had approved Rijneveld, being also a successful author who had come to fame at a young age, the choice for a white, non-binary writer sparked an international discussion. Dutch journalist and activist Janice Deul called Meulenhoff’s choice “incomprehensible.” “To say the least,” she stated, the publishing house “missed an opportunity” by not considering one of the black female spoken word artists struggling for acknowledgement in the Netherlands. Would an “unapologetically Black” translator not have empowered Gorman’s message, which is shaped by her experiences and identity as a black woman — a “*skinny Black girl descended from slaves*”?

The question of entitlement in the Dutch translation of ‘The Hill We Climb’ subsequently kindled an international debate. Should a translator be “an invisible chameleon,” as Russian-Dutch translator Arthur Langeveld commented? Or, rather, does every translator “bring their own experience to a text,” as Italian-to-English translator Aaron Robertson believes? The controversy resulted in a reconsideration of Gorman’s appointed translators. Some were dismissed because they did not suit the right profile, sometimes even after having finished their translation. Victor Obiols, Gorman’s 60-year-old Catalan translator, was asked to step down in favour of a “young activist, preferably a black person.” Obiols objected that if a translator’s identity must compare to the author’s, he could also not translate Homer or Shakespeare, not being respectively an Ancient Greek poet, or a 16th-century Englishman. Correspondingly, the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) stated that “if translators felt authorised to translate only those with whom they share an identity, it would be damaging to literary translation as a practice and as a profession.”

### False framing

The controversy about the translator’s identity raises thought-provoking questions about literary translation that previously might have been overlooked. However, as ALTA states, these questions are a “false framing of the issues at play.” In this heated debate, the translator seems to function as a lightning rod. The focus on identity deflects attention from the actual flashpoint of the discussion: the gross underrepresentation of black people in literary translation — a result of underlying patterns of discrimination. According to a recent survey, only 2% of the American translators that participated are black. The issue that sparked Janice Deul’s reaction was not necessarily that a black person was not asked to translate Gorman’s poem, but that Rijneveld is trusted

to “convey this culturally significant work in another language — trust which is not generally afforded to people of colour.” Only after acknowledging this underlying problem, the translator’s profile and the question of entitlement can be considered.

For this debate does open up the floor for an investigation of the translator’s identity. We could, for example, consider whether Gorman’s work might be translated by an “unapologetically Black,” but categorically non-religious woman. Should the translator’s religious identity be deliberated? Judging from testimonies of her fellow parishioners and priest, Father Kenneth Keke, Gorman’s Catholic background could be regarded as an equal source of inspiration as her African-American heritage. According to Father Keke, ‘The Hill We Climb’ reflects the redemption and deliverance that is preached at his parish of St. Brigid’s in Los Angeles. The call for social justice, which is at the heart of Gorman’s poem, is deeply rooted in her faith: her animated recital was marbled with biblical references, giving the poem the effect of “a rousing sermon.” It was this “incantatory power,” the sermon-like structure of her recital that strengthened believers from different religions, but also managed to inspire confirmed atheists in a prayer of unification.

### Identity as qualification?

This consideration shows that the references to Gorman’s African-American heritage are not the only identity markers in her poem. Highlighting this aspect of her identity as the defining characteristic of her work is problematic in its own right. This kind of thinking is in itself “not free of racist characteristics,” as it reduces both Gorman and her translator to their membership of a certain group and “makes skin colour a defining characteristic of what they can and may do.” Nuria Barrios, one of Gorman’s approved translators, states that the quality of the translation in this debate was “the least-important thing: what mattered was the identity of the translator: the colour of their skin, their age, their militancy.” French-Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou responded that exclusion cannot be fought by “reinventing new ways of marginalising people;” the vetting of a translator’s identity is also a form of “discrimination” and “racism.”

Although this controversy revolves around a paramount issue that must be addressed — the systematic marginalisation of Black people — a lingering issue concerns the subtle connotations and meanings that might be ‘lost in translation’ when a work is approached through the lens of identity politics. Whether this lens is ethnic, gendered, religious, or otherwise; such an approach may not necessarily result in an inclusive product.

We might ask whether a ‘dream translator’ exists — someone who ‘ticks all the boxes’, as Meulenhoff suggests. Perhaps not. Meanwhile, Rijneveld responded to the commotion over their resignation as Gorman’s translator in the poem ‘Everything Inhabitable’, and Meulenhoff has followed Deul’s advice to “be the light, not the hill,” announcing a collaboration with the young publishing house Wilde Haren. Let us hope that such an approach will finally make the hills we climb inhabitable to all.

Warja Tolstoj



## What are the religious roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

### The Israel-Palestine conflict

The Israel-Palestine conflict is a historical conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over the Land of Israel and some territories taken by Israel as a result of the Six-Day War. Palestinians considered these territories to be occupied. In general, the whole country of Israel is considered as controversial property by the Palestinians.

While the Palestinians accuse Israel of “colonisation, expulsion and military occupation,” the Jewish people in Israel see their return to the Land of Israel as a return to the “land of their forefathers” after ages of persecutions around the world in general, and after the Holocaust, more specifically. Yet, Israelis still do not feel safe in their new state, since they are being threatened both internally and by confining countries to be wiped off the map, and live with a feeling of constant danger and threat.

Different countries have attempted to resolve and put an end to this conflict as part of what is called the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. But is there a religious foundation to this conflict? How does religion play a role? In this article, we will focus less on the territorial conflict and more on the religious foundations of the conflict.

### It is all about Jerusalem

The most recent escalation of violence in Israel happened in May 2021. One of the many reasons that brought about this new escalation was caused by religious controversy in the area centred on the Al-Aqsa Mosque/ Temple Mount. One of the reasons that started this last war — many argue — was that the head of the terrorist organisation, Hamas, warned Israel to remove its police forces from the Al-Aqsa Mosque (Temple Mount for Israelis) and threatened that failing to do so would bring a “heavy price.”

### Why is Jerusalem so important?

A fundamental issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the issue of control over Jerusalem. This is a very delicate issue as both Jews and Muslims claim to be the one that deserves sovereignty over the city. Why is Jerusalem so important?

Jerusalem is one of the most important and sacred places for all the three monotheistic religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For Christians, Jerusalem is the place in which Jesus was crucified and the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

For Jews, Jerusalem is the holiest city as it hosted the Jewish Temple that was found on the Temple Mount (before its destruction) and is often called the ‘Holy Temple’ by Jews. Even today, Jews pray facing towards the Holy Temple and pray for the messianic reconstruction of the destroyed temple.

The Temple Mount and the entire Old City in Jerusalem were captured by Israel in 1967 during the Six-Day War. Since then, Jews have been allowed to visit the holy site — although with many restrictions imposed by the Israeli government. For instance, Jews — on the contrary of Muslims — are not allowed to pray while they are on the Temple Mount. This decision was taken by the Israeli government in order to avoid violence escalations and conflicts with Muslims in the area and to keep its peace agreement with Jordan in place.

For Muslims, Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa Mosque in particular are the third-most sacred site. The Al-Aqsa Mosque is considered as the place of destination of the Prophet Muhammad’s night journey which is described

in the Quran. The Al-Aqsa Mosque is also the place of Muhammad’s ascent heavenwards thereafter. Muslims consider the Temple of Jerusalem as something they have inherited. While according to the Jews, the Al-Aqsa Mosque is built on the top of their old temple, for Muslims the mosque is the Third Temple that came as a substitute for the old one.

“A fundamental issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the issue of control over Jerusalem.”

### The power of religion

We have seen how a single city can be one of the most important and holy places for multiple religions. In the case of Israel, it appears that Muslims and Jews are not succeeding in finding a balance and collaboration. While Muslims believe that the mosque on the Temple Mount is one of the holiest places in their religion, Jews believe that the mosque was built exactly on the ancient place of their Holy Temple, while they dream of its reconstruction.

This religious conflict is quickly politicised by both Jews and Muslims and often leads to outbursts of violence and escalation in the area. This situation is therefore an example of how powerful religious beliefs can be, even in the 21st century. Moreover, it shows that ancient conflicts are still unresolved today. Only time will tell if — at the end of the day — Jews and Muslims will find a way to co-exist in this highly problematic area and with the background of their entangled histories.

*Ghila Amati*



## Should Biden be given the Eucharist?

A recent debate arose amongst American bishops regarding denying American President Joe Biden the Eucharist because of his pro-abortion views. Several US Bishops are arguing that Biden should be denied the traditional communion. Therefore, they composed a new draft statement that — if approved — will deny Biden the sacrament of the Eucharist.

### Why is communion so important?

At the roots of the denial of Biden's communion stands the symbolic and religious importance that the Eucharist has for the Catholic way of life. Communion, or Eucharist, is a religious ritual in which Catholics are given bread and wine and, through eating and drinking them, become one with Jesus Christ. The Eucharist has always been associated with ethical and moral behaviour. For instance, communion is supposed to enhance the faith of the individual and their closeness and devotion to God. To receive the Eucharist, an individual must be in a 'state of grace' in which they are cleansed of all their sins.

According to the Code of Canon Law from 1983, the Holy Communion cannot be given to those "who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin." Sins included in the code are murder, adultery, and public negation of one's faith. The more these acts are known publicly, the more the sin is considered severe. Some US bishops consider Biden — because of his positions on abortion — to be a persistent sinner according to this code. Since he is such a public figure, his sin is seen as even more severe.

### Abortion and the Church

The fact that Biden is pro-abortion is an incredible sin for the Catholic Church. According to Archbishop Gomez, "abortion is a direct attack on life that also wounds the woman and undermines the family. ... It is not only a private matter, it raises troubling and fundamental questions of fraternity, solidarity and inclusion in the human community." The Roman Catholic Church considers abortion as murder and those who commit this sin are automatically excommunicated by the Church. As a consequence, many bishops are afraid that Biden is in a way legitimising abortion and promoting an untruthful understanding of Catholicism.

"Many bishops are afraid that Biden is in a way legitimising abortion and promoting an untruthful understanding of Catholicism."

### The Vatican's position

In 2004, the Vatican office stated that a politician "consistently campaigning and voting for permissive abortion and euthanasia laws" constitutes "personal formal cooperation" in grave sin. Yet, today its position on the issue appears to be different and in opposition to the US bishops. Before the US bishops voted on the issue, the Vatican published a warning against the drafting of a new statement that would deny communion to Biden and would allow priests to deny communion to other Catholic politicians who oppose fundamental principles of the Catholic Church. Cardinal Ladaria, Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, wrote to the US bishops that the Church should not divide itself over the issue of

abortion. He also added that abortion and euthanasia should not be seen as the only and most important matters of the Catholic doctrine. On his side though, Pope Francis decided not to express himself on the issue.

### Church and State

This debate between the US bishops and the Roman Catholic Church in the Vatican appears to be connected to a larger debate regarding the connection between Church and State. While it appears that the US bishops are siding for a strong relationship between Church and State, the Vatican seems to argue that the State should be independent of the Church and make its decisions regardless. By denying Joe Biden the communion, the US bishops are in fact pressing him to act according to Christian principles, thereby trying to influence political decisions through religion. On the other hand, the Vatican seems to be siding for a more strict separation between Church and State and is less willing to use religious principles to influence political decisions — even though these decisions go against its beliefs. For now, the US Bishops are avoiding the Vatican's advice. We will need to wait and see what their final decision will be in November, when the US bishops will hold a vote on the matter. In order to make the changes and draft new guidance for American priests on the Eucharist, the bishops will need a two-thirds majority.

*Ghila Amati*



## Are church and state really separated? The cases of Italy and Sweden

— *Author recommendation*

### State church or churchly state?

In present-day Europe, there are different interpretations of what the separation between state and church implies. In addition, politics and religion can still affect each other. In 2021, Italy and Sweden have given examples of how churches and secular states can have a say in each other's work.

In Italy, the Catholic Church is very much present in the life of the country and its politics. In Sweden, on the other hand, politics are part of the activities of the Church of Sweden through the elections to the General Synod, taking place every four years. Let us take a look at how these two types of influence can look like in practice.

### Religion and politics in Italy

The separation between church and state in Italy took place in 1929 through the Lateran Treaty. In 1984, the Italian state and Vatican revised the treaty in order to adapt it to the needs of the secular state. However, in some cases, Italian politics and religion can still show an interest in each other. Political parties such as La Lega view themselves as the protectors of Catholic values. For this reason, they seem to stress the connection between their political programs and the views of the Vatican.

At the same time, the Catholic Church participates in the social and political debates taking place in Italy. When a petition for the legalisation of euthanasia collected hundreds of thousands of signatures, the Vatican condemned the practice. During spring 2021, the Catholic Church criticised a bill against homophobia discussed in the Italian Parliament. The Vatican feared that the bill would prohibit a number of Catholic views on same-sex couples, limiting the freedom of speech and that of religion.

Are church and state really separated? These examples show that the Catholic Church is still involved in the political and social debates in Italy. On the other hand, Italian politicians seem eager to stress the connection between their views and those of the Vatican.

### Politicised religion and religious politics in Sweden

The Church of Sweden became independent from the Swedish state in 2000. However, every four years, the members of the Church of Sweden elect representatives to its highest national institution, the General Synod. Both politically connected and politically independent groups participate in the elections. The Church of Sweden sees the elections as a way for its members to democratically influence the work of the Church on a local, regional, and national level.

At the same time, an increasing number of people have begun to question the role of political parties in the Church elections. In addition, in 2021, the goals of different groups might go against the teaching of the Church of Sweden. On the one hand, many groups would like to introduce a policy that forbids newly ordained priests from refusing to marry same-sex couples. Such a decision, however, would go against the

teachings of the Church and Swedish law, according to which each priest has the right to refuse to marry a specific couple. On the other hand, some people think that political parties are using the elections within the Church as a way of preparing for the national elections.

Finally, some would like to change the election system, going from direct elections to indirect ones. In other words, the members of the Church of Sweden directly elect their representatives on a local, regional, and national level. With indirect elections, however, members would elect their representative to the parishes (local level), while the parishes would elect representatives to the diocese (regional level) and the General Synod (national level).

Are church and state really separated? Even though the Swedish state and the Church of Sweden have been officially separated since 2000, politics still play an important role in shaping the life of religious communities on a local, regional, and national level.

“An increasing number of people have begun to question the role of political parties in the Church elections.”

### Are church and state really separated?

The examples of Italy and Sweden show that even though both countries are secular, religion and politics still influence each other. While the Catholic Church shows an interest in the Italian social debate, secular politics have a say in the work of the Church of Sweden. Church and state are separated. Politics and religions, however, can still be connected.

*Annamaria Laviola-Svensäter*



## France: Fighting Muslims or Islamist separatism?

### The ban

On 7 April 2021, the French Senate approved the proposal to ban Muslim prayer at universities across the country. This ban is part of a larger bill, 'Strengthening Republican Values', introduced by President Emmanuel Macron to fight 'Islamist separatism'. Beyond the banning of prayer in universities, the bill will allow the government to intervene in the administration of mosques, prevent Muslim families from giving their children a home education, prohibit patients from choosing doctors based on gender for religious or other reasons, and ban girls under the age of 18 from wearing a hijab in public spaces. Although Left Party senators and Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer criticised the bill for targeting Muslims, it was accepted with the help of right-wing senators' votes. The legislative process, however, is not over. The bill has to go to the French National Assembly before it becomes law.

### The reason

France announced the bill after the gruesome murder of the French teacher Samuel Paty in October 2020 by an 18-year-old Muslim student. Even though the bill did not directly mention either Islam or Islamism, it was announced as part of the French fight against Islamist separatism. The bill, according to Prime Minister Jean Castex, was "not a text against religions or against the Muslim religion in particular." It was "a bill of freedom, a bill of protection, a bill of emancipation from Islamist fundamentalism." A key target of the bill were Muslims living in 'banlieues', working-class suburbs. "We have created our own form of separatism," Macron declared while referring to France's 'banlieues'. Many experts and critics, and even right-wing French mayors, have accused the French president of attempting to pander to right-wing voters and the French media. Indeed, Macron's language of "Islamist separatism" is eerily similar to Marine Le Pen's far-right cry against "Islamist globalisation."

### The missing link

The key concern of experts and critics alike has been whether there are any direct links between religious extremism and the everyday religious life of Muslims. The Socialist Party Senator Didier Marie, for example, said that the bill is "dangerous" for assuming a link between "the veil, political Islam, radicalism, separatism, and even terrorism," while French legal scholar and commentator Rim-Sarah Alouane said this bill was not addressing a counter-extremism bill but one that controlled Muslims: "How can you explain to me with a straight face that this [bill] will help fight terrorism and radicalization? The government and lawmakers are using the [national security] argument to target and restrict civil liberties, and to reshape state-religion relations."

Human rights organisations like Amnesty International agree with Alouane, calling the bill a "serious attack on rights and freedoms in France." Amnesty International's Europe researcher Marco Perolini argued that "time and again, we have seen the French authorities use the vague and ill-defined concept of 'radicalization' or 'radical Islam' to justify the imposition of measures without valid grounds, which risks leading to discrimination in its application against Muslims and other minority groups."

"France's fight against Islamist separatism at first sight appears understandable, given how it has been regularly subjected to brazen religious extremism."

### Weaponisation of laïcité?

France's fight against Islamist separatism at first sight appears understandable, given how it has been regularly subjected to brazen religious extremism. But if critics are to be heard, drawing a link between ordinary Muslims in France and religious extremism is not only false but also dangerous.

Moreover, critics such as Alouane argue that it is not only dangerous to French Muslims but also to French secularism itself. She argues that this bill to strengthen republican values is actually weakening them. The bill, she explains, violates the core of laïcité: the division between private religious life and public secular life. For example, Muslim parents targeted by the bill are not civil servants and as a consequence, religious neutrality can be not imposed upon them. That's "laïcité 101 for you," Alouane says while adding that the bill amounts to "weaponization of laïcité." France, she explains, is using laïcité to limit the visibility of religion in public, particularly Islam. The more Muslims participate in the civic and social life of France, the more the country's political establishment sees them as a threat. "Sadly, for many in our political elite (across the political spectrum), a good Muslim is an invisible Muslim," Alouane concludes.

*Muhammad Faisal Khalil*



## A harmonious relationship? Angela Merkel and the German Jewish community

On the 26th September 2021, federal elections were held in Germany to elect members of the 20th Bundestag. The current chancellor, Angela Merkel, decided not to run again. This decision will subsequently bring an end to Merkel's 16 years as the head of government and chief executive of Germany. But more specifically, the completion of Merkel's term as chancellor marks the end of a special relationship between Merkel and the German Jewish community.

Throughout her time in power, Merkel was a "steadfast ally" to German Jews and Israel and the news of her departure has been a cause of sadness for many members of the German Jewish community. Moreover, there are concerns about how the new coalition will approach their relationship with German Jews. This article will assess the motivations behind Merkel's attitudes towards the German Jewish community and how harmonious the relationship was in reality.

### Merkel's motivations

From 2000 to 2018, Angela Merkel was the leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), a centre-right party that is conservative on social issues. She served as the Leader of the Opposition for three years until becoming the chancellor of Germany in 2005.

There are a few factors that may have motivated Merkel to champion the needs of German Jews during her time as chancellor. Firstly, Merkel was raised Lutheran in Communist East Germany where her father served as a pastor. A Lutheran member of the Evangelical Church in Berlin, she has always been open regarding her belief in God and seen religion as her "constant companion." Therefore, her Lutheran faith may well have played a role in her desire to do good and support minority religious communities.

Secondly, born in 1954, Merkel grew up in a society that did not recognise Israel and took no responsibility for the Third Reich or the Holocaust. Judy Dempsey, the author of a Merkel biography, says that Merkel's past shaped how she viewed the world and emphasised that "Germany has this enormous responsibility to always protect Israel." Clearly, the historical climate and the legacy of the Holocaust had an impact on Merkel's choice to champion the German Jewish community. She was "highly aware of the gaps of memory" and made sure to make this a central part of her political message.

"Merkel grew up in a society that did not recognise Israel and took no responsibility for the Third Reich or the Holocaust."

### Ally to German Jews

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, the president of the Conference of European Rabbis, remarks on how during her 16 years in power, Merkel was an ally to German Jews "not only in rhetoric but in decisive action." In 2012, a German court criminalised the non-medical circumcision of boys. Merkel disagreed with this decision and said

that it put Germany at risk of becoming a "laughing stock." She explained how she did "not want Germany to be the only country in the world where Jews cannot practise their rituals." As a result, parliament ensured the practice remained legal. Furthermore, in order to recognise the positive contribution of Germany's Jewish community, in 2021, Merkel's government launched a series of ceremonies and lectures entitled '321-2021: 1,700 Years of Jewish Life in Germany'.

However, many of Merkel's actions to support the German Jewish community seemed to be focused more on Israel than the specific religious and cultural needs of German Jews. In 2008, Merkel became the first German chancellor to address the Israel Knesset, where she said that the "Holocaust filled her people with shame." This was a significant acknowledgement of Germany's historical wrongdoings, but Merkel herself continued to maintain a particular pro-Israel stance throughout her time in office. For example, in 2019, the CDU passed a resolution that called the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement as an antisemitic movement. Considering this, it is worth reflecting on whether Merkel was motivated more by domestic aims, such as a need to protect Jewish life and identity in Germany, or international goals, by promoting a pro-Israel agenda and good relationships with the then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

### Did Merkel do enough?

It is clear that during her time as chancellor, Angela Merkel worked hard to promote a pro-Jewish, pro-Israel rhetoric. For many German Jews, this rhetoric was positively received. The resolution that labelled BDS as antisemitic was widely supported by German Jews who felt the same way. Moreover, many Jews believed that Merkel was the last influential German politician who was committed to Israel as "a matter of the heart." So much so that, in 2010, Merkel was awarded the Leo Baeck Medal, awarded to those who have worked to preserve the "extraordinary spirit" of German Jews in academia and politics. In her acceptance speech, Merkel said she saw the medal as "both incentive and obligation" to remain committed to building a "harmonious relationship" with the Jewish community.

However, there has been concern surrounding Merkel's role in the rise in antisemitism, particularly Muslim-led antisemitism, in Germany. In August 2015, Merkel opened the nation's doors to a large number of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. While this has been positive in many ways for Germany, a 2016 survey of hundreds of German Jews who had experienced antisemitic incidents revealed that 41% said the perpetrator was "someone with a Muslim extremist view."

Many German Jews feel that Merkel has not only been too quiet in the fight against antisemitism but, as Pavel Feinstein explains, "she [Merkel] is responsible for it." This connection between an influx of Muslim migrants and the rise in antisemitism has been downplayed by the German government, a belief reflected in a 2018 EU survey that showed 74.8% of German Jews felt their government was not doing enough to combat the problem. Therefore, perhaps the relationship between Merkel and German Jews was not as harmonious as it first appeared.



“Perhaps the relationship between Merkel and German Jews was not as harmonious as it first appeared.”

#### The end of an alliance?

What is clear is that throughout her stint as chancellor, Angela Merkel dedicated a considerable amount of effort and time in trying to strengthen relations with the German Jewish community. Whether she was more preoccupied with international relations with Israel rather than domestic concerns, such as antisemitism, many German Jews still felt she had the right intentions.

However, it remains to be seen how the new coalition will approach their relationship with the German Jewish community. The AfD received 10.3% of the electoral vote and will have a seat at the decision-making table, albeit a small one. Yet, the presence of the AfD, a party that the Central Council of Jews in Germany branded “a hotbed for antisemitism, racism and misanthropy,” will be a cause for concern for many German Jews. Only the future will tell what the relation between the government and German Jews will be, but it is likely that the relationship will not be as harmonious as it has been for the past 16 years.

*Martha Scott-Cracknell*

Wellbeing





## Does religion make you happy?

— *Author recommendation*

*The Lord has promised good to me*, says the popular 18th-century hymn *Amazing Grace*. But does believing in a certain religion actually make you a happier person?

According to a global survey by Pew, the answer is roughly yes. Those who attended a religious meeting at least once a month, were happier than religiously inactive or unaffiliated in more than half of the surveyed countries. But what is it exactly in religion that affects the happiness of religious people? And what could explain the differences between countries?

### **Intrinsic religiosity leads to greater life satisfaction**

Religion can affect wellbeing indirectly and directly. Indirectly, religion can affect habits, behaviours, and attitudes that are positively related to wellbeing, like lower levels of substance abuse, commitment to marriage, coping mechanisms, optimism, social support, and finding purpose and meaning in life. Directly, religion can have a positive effect on wellbeing by the relationships formed in a religious community, as connectedness and sense of belonging are important factors contributing to wellbeing.

However, not all religiosity has the same effect on wellbeing. Different traditions have a different set of beliefs, practices, and emphases that affect happiness. Religious beliefs and customs between individuals are also varied.

Religiosity can be classified into institutional, ideological, and intrinsic religiosity. The least impact on wellbeing has been found in institutional religion, meaning participation in religious rites and extrinsic religiosity. Ideological religion, which contains religious attitudes and beliefs, slightly affects life satisfaction and self-actualisation. The biggest impact on wellbeing has been found in intrinsic religion, which involves emotional commitment and inner certainty. It has a positive effect on mental health, life satisfaction, and self-actualisation.

### **Different religion — different outcome**

Some types of religiosity seem to have a greater effect on religious wellbeing than others. In a study comparing the wellbeing of Roman Catholics, Orthodoxes, Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, others (e.g. ancestral worshipping), and the nonreligious, significant differences between religions were found. This study divided wellbeing into life satisfaction (a person's own evaluation of their life) and happiness (emotions, feelings, and moods). In terms of happiness, Protestants and Buddhists were the happiest groups, whereas Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Buddhists experienced most life satisfaction. The lowest level of life satisfaction and happiness was found among Orthodox Christians. The study concluded that religions that promote values such as freedom of choice, freedom of emotions, gratitude, and social connections, can improve the sense of wellbeing of their members.

“Some types of religiosity seem to have a greater effect on religious wellbeing than others.”

### **Happiness has no easy answers**

The relationship between happiness and religion is a complex one. For example, Orthodox Christians in Latin America are happier than those in Eastern Europe, and Spanish non-religious people are happier than the religious.

Wellbeing consists of a number of factors, such as state of health, financial satisfaction, freedom of choice, mental health, life satisfaction, self-actualisation, social connections, and belonging to a group. Religion is one, but not the only, factor that can contribute to happiness. According to twin studies, biology and genetics make up around 50% of a person's happiness, and 40% comes from a person's own attitudes and habits. Interestingly, studies found that only 10% came from health, nationality, wealth, and marital status. Religion, especially the intrinsic type of religiosity, affects attitudes and habits, and can play a role in health, wealth, and social connections as well, thus contributing to overall wellbeing.

So, then — can happiness be found in religion? Well, maybe. Religion can be a major contributor to one's perceived wellbeing. But, not all types of religiosity have the same effect. It might be worthwhile to examine if you are satisfied with how your religious affiliation affects your life.

*Pietari Hannikainen and Meri Hannikainen*



## Spirituality as a tool to battle mental illness

— *Author recommendation*

### Mental health care and religion

Throughout history, religion and spirituality have not played much of a role within mental health care. While there are several Christian mental health care institutions in the Netherlands, research showed that 50% of the patients within secular institutions feel the need for spiritual counselling as well.

### The soothing role of religion

Psychiatrist and pastor Piet Verhagen argues that religion and spirituality are beneficial for your health. People living within religious communities tend to live longer, according to Verhagen. Therefore, religion and spirituality should have a more prominent place within the (mental) health care system. The focus should not only be placed on the illness, but also on questions such as “what does this mean for me?” or “how will I get through it?”

More than half of the patients within secular mental health care long for spiritual guidance, according to research conducted last year by Joke van Nieuw Amerongen-Meeuse. One of the participating patients admitted she had doubts about her faith in God, and wanted the opportunity to discuss this within a community. However, she needed help to do so. Other patients wanted guidance on the relationship between their mental illness and their faith, for example when God feels far away during a depression.

Such questions show the need to include spirituality within mental health care. There are multiple reasons why religion and spirituality can be soothing for patients with mental illnesses. First of all, religion can lessen one’s concerns about mental health, which makes them calmer and helps them to cope with their condition. Religion also offers a set of rules to live by, which encourages a balanced lifestyle. The Bible, for instance, condemns intoxication. This might prevent Christians from alcohol addictions.

“More than half of the patients within secular mental health care long for spiritual guidance.”

### Creating space for spirituality

This having been said, how can religion or spirituality be integrated within secular mental health institutions? The patients who took part in the research expressed their struggle to open up about their spiritual needs within a secular clinical setting. They were afraid of being misunderstood and hospitalised, deriving from a lack of understanding of religiosity by professionals. A Dutch study among 755 patients within a secular institution showed that two-thirds of the patients who thought their problems were connected to their spirituality or religion, found little opportunity to bring this up during therapy sessions. By creating space for spirituality within treatment, patients have more room to discuss their beliefs and how it affects them. Ways of integrating spirituality include providing spiritual counselling, praying together, and facilitating religious services or activities with patients.

### Bridging the gap with spiritual healing

Because there is a gap between a patient’s spiritual needs and the received treatment in secular mental health care, some people visit practitioners of alternative medicine. Spiritual healers look at someone’s condition from a religious perspective, but also offer practical advice from a psychological perspective. Spiritual healers can be found in many religions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, but also in smaller religions such as Winti. These practitioners divide illnesses into two categories: those with a natural and those with a supernatural cause. Patients often choose to combine treatments within the normal health care system with alternative medicine practices.

### Praying in therapy

Altogether, there has been little room for spirituality and religion within Dutch mental health care. Religion has been perceived as being out of place in the traditional health care system by psychologists for a long time. This has resulted in a sense of shame in patients. However, research has shown that spirituality and religion offer health benefits. Therefore, providing space for spiritual counselling, praying together, and discussing religious beliefs in therapy can be helpful in the treatment of mental illnesses.

*Laura Waardenburg*



## Leaving religion behind

What if you are born within a certain religion, but no longer want to be part of that religious community? In the Netherlands, the story of writer Lale Gül, who left the Orthodox Islamic faith behind, sparked a much wider public debate. Gül wrote the autobiographical book *Ik ga leven* (I am going to live), a story about a Turkish-Dutch woman who rebels against the strict Islamic society in which she grew up. After the publication of her book, she received multiple threats on social media.

Around the same time, broadcasting company HUMAN aired a documentary series called *Vrijdenkers* (Free Thinkers). The documentary follows six young people who left their (orthodox) religion behind. Their stories all have one thing in common: after leaving their religious community, they received a lot of negative comments from family and friends who did not understand their choice. With religion playing such a big role in someone's life, leaving creates a personal struggle that can lead to mental health problems.

“With religion playing such a big role in someone's life, leaving creates a personal struggle that can lead to mental health problems.”

### Loss of safety

Leaving a religion or religious community behind is also known as apostasy or deconversion. German researchers Heinz Streib and Barbara Keller pointed out five different dimensions of deconversion. The first dimension is the loss of specific religious experiences, for example losing the purpose of life. The second is intellectual doubt, denial, or disagreement with specific beliefs. The third dimension is moral judgement. The fourth consists of emotional suffering, for example feeling a loss of safety or losing social contacts. The final dimension is resignation from the religious community, such as no longer participating in meetings.

These five dimensions usually result in leaving the religious community behind entirely. They show that apostasy is not a one-time event or a simple choice, but rather it is a process. It should also be noted that apostasy does not always result in atheism, but can also lead to a change of faith or to leaving the church as an institution but still believing in God.

### Creating dialogue

In the documentary *Vrijdenkers*, Inge recalls her mother saying, “I would have preferred that you died,” after sharing with her that she wanted to leave the Liberated Reformed Church. Her family received flowers and cards from the religious community, because having a child leave their religion behind is one of the worst things that can happen to a parent. Inge's story is a clear example of how apostasy can have a negative impact on family relationships. It is similar to the experience of Sofyan, who left his Islamic faith and consequently felt a distance from his parents. Sofyan mentions how he did not speak to his parents for several years.

Moreover, the fear of losing one's family can sometimes make people live a double life. This is the case for Fatima and Danah, two women who left Islam but experience difficulties living life as ex-Muslims. Fatima shares how she is torn between her parents and her personal happiness. Both young women still wear their headscarves to keep their parents happy. Feelings of guilt towards family and friends can be harmful to one's

mental wellbeing, and living a double life can be emotionally draining. According to Inge, there should be more space to create a dialogue between the parent and the apostate. The dialogue should not only focus on the apostate's feelings, but also on those of the parents.

### Punishment of the devil

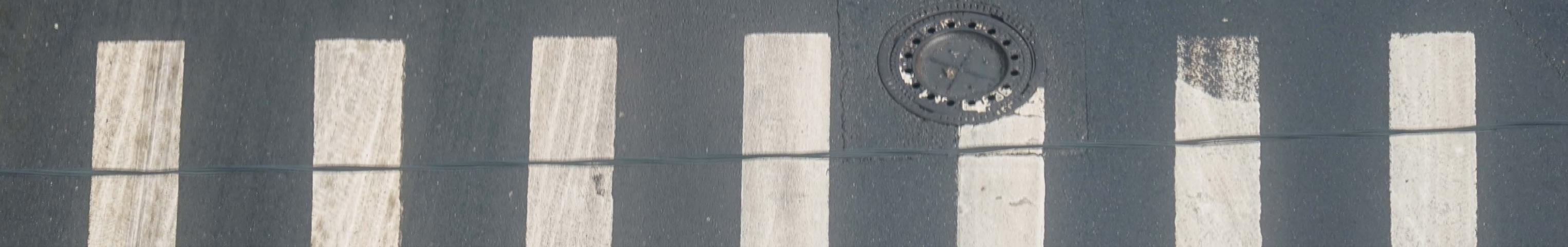
Changing your belief and having to leave your social network behind may increase the risk of vulnerability, psychological problems, and loneliness. Loneliness seems to be an especially relevant problem. According to Oliver, as shown in *Vrijdenkers*, the most difficult thing to do is leave people behind. Besides loneliness, apostasy can also cause anxiety, depression, and the idea of constant failing. Apostates often feel scared to discuss their doubts with other people, and experience high levels of shame and guilt. These feelings might cause them to isolate and withdraw themselves from their family and friends, which can lead to depression. Religious communities might argue that leaving your religion will cause you to end up in hell and be punished by the devil, like Saïd Elhajj was told. The fear of being punished after leaving your faith can trigger (existential) anxiety.

### Fighting loneliness

Certain factors can lessen the impact of apostasy on mental wellbeing; social support, self-help, and helping others can protect against mental health problems such as loneliness and depression. Finding other apostates and sharing your experiences also helps in fighting off loneliness, which is why the Dutch Humanist Association created the ‘Vrijdenkplaats’, a platform that brings together people who left their religion behind.

Leaving behind the religion in which one grew up, leaving behind the community and having to re-find oneself, is not an easy process. Family members and friends might not accept the decision, and feelings of guilt, shame, and loneliness can affect mental wellbeing. But there are groups and organisations, like the Vrijdenkplaats, that bring together people who left their faith. Their message? “You are not alone.”

Laura Waardenburg



## Inquiries into past abuses in the Catholic Church

On 5 October 2021, an inquiry into cases of abuse by clergy in the French Catholic Church was published. The report, which found 216,000 cases of paedophilia since 1950, has made international headlines. For the Church, these headlines illustrate the double-edged sword of such inquiries.

On the one hand, the fact that such inquiries are being conducted and abuses are finally being discussed more openly is a positive sign of a Church that is willing to criticise itself and its clergy. On the other, the revelation of such widespread abuse furthers doubts about the actions of the Catholic Church in the past.

However, this is not only a question of historical cases, but also about the current position of the Church. In different European countries, the questions of inquiries and investigations about past abuse have been dealt with differently. The differences in this process are revealing. Therefore, in this two-part article, we will aim to review the development of the issue in different Western European countries.

### The role of the Vatican

During the 1970s and 1980s, cases of paedophilia in the Catholic Church made occasional headlines. However, it was not until the 1990s that the first widespread investigation into the problem took place in Ireland. This was followed by a major investigation into the American clergy by the *Boston Globe* newspaper in 2002, which led to more accusations of abuses in churches across the world, particularly in Europe.

Many people, both believers and non-believers, have looked to the Vatican for direction in how to approach the allegations of cover-ups of abuses. According to a 2016 article in *The New Yorker*, under the leadership of John Paul II, the issue was intentionally played down. This attitude began to change under Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis has continued a process of recognition of the need to investigate the problem.

Since becoming pope in 2013, Francis has made a series of decisions that have been intended to demonstrate his willingness to face up to allegations of abuse. These include the creation of a Vatican committee focused on the question of sexual abuse in the Church, and a public apology for the Vatican's past role in failing to take action against abusers. However, the pontiff has also received criticism from some bishops that progress had been too slow. These criticisms contributed to a 2019 decision to make it mandatory for Roman Catholic clergy to report cases of clerical sexual abuse and cover-ups to the Church. According to the BBC, this clarification "was seen as a message to the Church hierarchy that no-one will be exempt from scrutiny."

Whilst this leadership from the Vatican is important, it is clear that the changes are more focused upon what can be done in the future, rather than exploring the past. This is partly due to the fact that the investigation of past wrongs has fallen to the leading clergy in each nation, rather than the Holy See. As a result, there is significant variety between different European nations on how they have tackled the problem.

### Accepting the need for investigation — the Sauvé report in France

The question of investigations into abuses in the Catholic Church has hit the headlines across Europe in recent weeks as a result of the publication of the Sauvé report in France. The Sauvé report was a result of the work of an independent commission that was set up by Catholic bishops in France at the end of 2018 to investigate sexual abuses by priests and other clerics within the institution.

The report, which was published on 5 October 2021, discovered that 216,000 people had been victims of sexual abuse by members of the clergy whilst under the age of 18, dating back to 1950. More widely, the number increased to 330,000 when taking into account those who were associated with the Church but not priests themselves.

Yet, as an article in *Politico* stated, although the extent of abuse was indeed shocking, the fact that the report had identified so many cases was, sadly, not a surprise. Over the last 20 years, the "steady drumbeat of cases" made it clear that the Church had a serious long-term systemic challenge on its hands. As the article described, what was more surprising was that the extent of the problem was, for the first time, being said out loud, with bishops in attendance at the event held to discuss its findings.

For a Catholic Church that for many years sought to cover up the existence of the problem, the greater degree of honesty and openness that the Sauvé report has brought is an important and difficult step towards progress.

"The question of investigations into abuses in the Catholic Church has hit the headlines across Europe."

### An example to follow?

There is no doubt that the publication of the report represents a moment of great shame for the French Catholic Church. However, the fact that this type of report has been conducted and discussed openly is evidence that the leadership of the French clergy has accepted the need for independent investigation into past abuses.

As Jean-Marc Sauvé, the former judge who led the investigation, said himself, France has comparatively fewer abusers compared to other major Catholic countries. Therefore, it is actually, in his words, "at the lower end of this scale." It will be important to contrast the investigation in France with the progress of such investigations in Germany, Italy, and Spain and to look at how the publication of the French report has led to similar demands elsewhere in Europe.

*Freddie Scott*



## Breaking the silence: Awareness of spiritual abuse in UK religious communities

— Author recommendation

### Domestic abuse and religious communities

Throughout history, every world religion has faced challenges when addressing the existence of domestic abuse within their faith communities. Reactions to domestic abuse have varied from half-hearted acknowledgement to silence, and, at worse, complete denial that such a horrific crime could occur within their community. Academic Naomi Graetz explains how a 'phenomenon of evasiveness' is often upheld by religious leaders in the Jewish tradition regarding domestic abuse, a stance that is commonly taken within other religious traditions.

As COVID-19 restrictions swept Europe in March 2020, victims of domestic abuse found themselves locked inside with their abusers and, tragically, cases of abuse rose exponentially. Religious leaders could not ignore this evidence and within the UK, they have begun to take steps to further acknowledge abuse within their communities as well as provide support to victims. An essential aspect that has further prompted the response of religious leaders within the UK has been the acknowledgement, from the late 20th century onwards, that domestic abuse is a highly complex phenomenon. Leaders have begun to realise that abuse goes beyond just the physical to include emotional, psychological, sexual, financial, and, most crucial to religious communities, spiritual abuse.

This having been said, this article will look both at the work being done by religious communities in the UK to raise awareness of spiritual abuse since COVID-19 began, while also reflecting on why it has taken a global pandemic for religious communities to listen to and help those suffering from spiritual abuse.

### What is spiritual abuse?

In many ways, spiritual abuse can be quite difficult to define, alongside the fact that spiritual abuse is likely to be understood and manifested differently within each faith community. However, the term can be broadly defined 'as any attempt to impair an individual's spiritual life, spiritual self or spiritual well-being' and can cause lasting damage to a victim's 'sense of identity, wellbeing and mental health'. Examples of spiritual abuse include using religious laws and teachings to justify abuse, telling someone that God hates them, forcing a woman to have sex while menstruating (forbidden in conservative Judaism and Islam), and criticising someone while they pray.

### Why has progress been so slow?

Yet, despite these highly upsetting examples, until recent years, many religious traditions have made little progress in recognising and addressing abuse within their communities, due to a variety of theological, societal, and hierarchical reasons. One of these reasons is the fact that some religious leaders deny that spiritual abuse in and of itself exists as a separate form of abuse. For example, Lee Gatiss, director of the UK Church Society, believes that the accuracy of the term spiritual abuse is "debatable" and that it is not its own distinct

form of abuse. Moreover, another UK commentator suggested that "there is no such thing as spiritual abuse" and that the term is only used as a "euphemism."

Alongside those who believe that spiritual abuse is not a legitimate, individual form of abuse, there are also some religious leaders who remain silent on the issue. For example, within some Muslim communities, an apparent 'wall of silence' is formed by preachers and community leaders that protects the abuser, while the victim becomes a target and is "ostracised for speaking out" about the suffering they experience.

Moreover, there are also theological explanations that make it very challenging for spiritual abuse to be recognised. For example, in Judaism, the concept of *shalom bayit* (meaning 'peace at home' in Hebrew) is understood as domestic harmony and good relations between husband and wife. Given it is a holy principle, there is great societal pressure to uphold *shalom bayit* which can play a significant role in stopping victims of spiritual abuse from speaking out and deterring leaders from intervening, for fear of bringing shame to their community.

"Some religious leaders deny that spiritual abuse in and of itself exists as a separate form of abuse."

### The tide is turning

Inevitably, reluctance or even opposition from religious leaders to acknowledge, accept, and intervene in spiritual abuse will always exist and the restrictions to progress outlined above must be taken seriously. However, within the UK, it is clear that the coronavirus pandemic has acted as a wake-up call to many religious leaders. The existence of all forms of abuse, including spiritual, has been startling and unavoidable, which has prompted some religious communities to address the issue. For example, Jewish Women's Aid, a UK charity that supports Jewish women affected by domestic violence, launched a campaign in July 2020 entitled #AMaskWontProtect to draw attention to the increase of abuse within British Jewish communities due to the pandemic. Chief Rabbi in the UK, Ephraim Mirvis, endorsed the campaign and noted that while many Jews like to believe such "illegal and shameful conduct does not afflict our Jewish community," sadly, the reality is very different.

Moreover, following the concerns of many UK Christian activists and charities that "spiritual abuse of LGBTQ+ people is a 'ticking time bomb' for churches in the UK," 400 church leaders from different UK Christian denominations took part in a discussion on the issue in October 2020. The discussion acknowledged the influential role of the church and the guilt it should feel for sometimes inflicting spiritual abuse of LGBTQ+ Christians or failing to properly address it.

Alongside these statements made by individual religious communities, a joint statement signed by UK faith leaders in May 2020 as part of the campaign entitled #FaithsAgainstDomesticAbuse represented a significant



and unified voice against abuse. Leaders from Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Sikh communities in the UK noted that due to COVID-19, all forms of abuse had become more widespread. Moreover, they stated that while at their best, faith communities “nurture healthy relationships and strengthen society,” reports of abuse (including spiritual) from within faith communities do exist and must not be ignored. This united acknowledgement of and stance against abuse is a strong and positive force that hopefully will continue to translate into effective help to victims of abuse.

#### **What does the future hold?**

It is evident that progress is being made and that awareness must continue to be raised within religious communities in order to better protect victims and prevent future cases of abuse from occurring. However, British evangelical Christian and LGBTQ+ activist Jayne Ozanne suggests that this acknowledgement needs to also be extended beyond just faith communities and that spiritual abuse needs to be officially recognised by the UK government as another form of abuse alongside “physical, sexual, emotional and neglect.” Moreover, the joint statement signed by UK faith leaders stressed the need for the UK government to provide more funding for all domestic abuse services. Therefore, perhaps further collaboration between faith communities and the government would be the best way for not only the UK, but also other European countries, to most efficiently tackle spiritual abuse within religious communities.

*Martha Scott-Cracknell*

# Inclusivity





## Is there room for Jewish and Muslim traditions in Europe?

— *Author recommendation*

### Is halal and kosher slaughtering painful for animals?

The religious practice of slaughtering has been the subject of harsh debate in Europe in the past years and the debate was recently reopened by a new EU ruling against the practice of slaughtering. According to Muslim and Jewish law, animals need to be slaughtered, without being first stunned, with a razor-sharp knife in order to be permissible to eat. Meat that has been slaughtered according to the specific rules of Judaism is defined as kosher, and according to the rules of Islam is defined as halal.

Animal welfare organisations argue that the practice causes excessive and unreasonable pain to the slaughtered animals, and urge the practice to be stopped. Yet, not everybody agrees with this argument. For instance, scientist and activist Temple Grandin has argued that in reality, the religious practices of slaughtering actually cause relatively little pain to the animals. Rather, she says, terrible and inhumane treatment of livestock is often performed irrespective of kosher or halal rules. She writes: "When the [slaughtering] cut is done correctly, the animal appears not to feel it."

### European Court of Justice's recent ban

Nonetheless, despite Grandin's argument, many European countries still remain convinced that ritual slaughtering is a practice that needs to be stopped. In 2013, Slovenia banned ritual slaughtering without pre-stunning. In Sweden since 2012 and Denmark since 2014, animals can only be slaughtered if they have been previously sedated.

Yet, in this article, we will focus on the more recent European Court of Justice ruling (ECJ), approved in 2020. According to this new ruling, all members of an EU state are allowed to require the stunning of the animal before slaughtering it. This, according to the ruling, will not contradict the rights of Muslims and Jews.

### The disappointed reactions to the ruling

The new EU ruling caused uproar in both Muslim and Jewish communities. Daniel Mariaschin, the CEO of B'nai B'rith International, has argued that this new decision will impact the religious freedom of Jews all over Europe. The President of the State of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, reacted to the ruling by sending a direct letter to the leaders of several European countries and to the presidents of the European Commission and the European Council. In the letter, Netanyahu underlined the terrible impact this decision could have on the life of Jews in Europe and argued that the "decision threatens the religious freedom of Jews throughout Europe." Jews will not be able to practice their traditions if slaughtering is banned in Europe.

Voices of discontent have also been heard from the Muslim world. Mehmet Üstün, President of the Exécutif des Musulmans de Belgique (EMB), underlined the community's discontent regarding the new ECJ ruling. He argued that a different solution to the problem of slaughtering and animal welfare should be found, and that the EU ruling does not solve the issue. Moreover, Abdassamad El Yazidi, from the German Central Council of Muslims, posted on Twitter that halal and kosher slaughter support animal wellbeing. In a TV interview, he also argued that Muslims will not be able to feel at home in Europe if access to halal food is difficult.

Finally, there is a possibility that the new ruling will lead to a 'domino effect', and that activists that are against Muslim and Jewish slaughtering practices will use the new ruling as an excuse to re-open the debate on slaughtering in their own countries. For instance, soon after the new ECJ ruling, a British woman started a petition in favour of the banning of ritual slaughtering in the UK.

"Jews, in fact, will not be able to practice their traditions if slaughtering is banned."

### Is there a way to find compromise?

The new ECJ ruling may have harsh and far-reaching consequences for Jews and Muslims around Europe in the near future. The ruling gives legal legitimacy to all European countries to undertake restrictions and bans to ritual slaughtering, thereby freeing them from the worry of violating the rights of the freedom of religion. Yet, the question remains how it will be possible for observant Jews and Muslims to live in countries that make it so difficult to eat according to their religious rules and traditions. Will they be able to find a compromise with their individual countries? Or will they — eventually — need to leave?

*Ghila Amati*



## How empowering can theology be? Europe and Black theology

— *Author recommendation*

Since the Bible was first translated into everyday language, it has become a battlefield for recognition and influence. Accessing and reclaiming sacred texts is a way to challenge religious authorities. It has been, from Martin Luther translating the New Testament in 16th-century German to let every European read for themselves that God saves all people of faith, regardless of their obedience to the pope, to contemporary feminists asking whether new translations should use gender-inclusive language.

During the 1960s, non-European communities have also found justifications for revolt in the Bible. Latin American Catholic theologians created the notion of 'liberation theology', drawing comparisons between the stories of oppressed nations in the Bible and the situation of poor peoples in countries of the South. From then on, readings of the Bible that were favourably biased towards the oppressed became increasingly legitimate in theology.

Black theology especially questions European theology. It was developed in the United States by African American Christians, who perceived that traditional theology failed to respond to the humiliations and aspirations of black people. What could Europeans learn from Black theology?

### All theologies are contextual

Black theology was initiated by theologian James Cone and further developed by his students. Cone witnessed that African Americans still experienced injustice, a century after slavery was banished. In the early 1970s, he came to the conclusion that traditional theology was helpless.

He believed that the core message of the gospel was universal (i.e. that God had saved the world), but that Bible interpretations were always specific. For instance, Cone noted that traditional Christianity had always 'forgotten' that Jesus was not white. This 'erasure' of skin colour and race in the mainstream Christian narrative parallels the erasure of black lives and sufferings in Christian theology. Therefore, Cone explained that all theologies stem from a specific context.

If all theologies are contextual and all theologies are biased, so is traditional theology. Black theology pushes for the relativisation of Western Euro-centric Christianity, meaning that it should no longer see itself as the only way to interpret religious texts. Furthermore, Black theology asserts that traditional theology harbours a worldview that specifically suits those with privilege. That is, a worldview unable to account for the spiritual and social experience of the 'other'; otherness, usually equating blackness in the US. Cone elaborated a theology that is deliberately oriented towards black liberation.

For example, his famous argument that "Jesus was black because he was a Jew" is twofold. It is not so much the actual skin colour of biblical characters that interests him, as their belonging to oppressed communities. Jesus was a Jew in a time of Roman occupation, and biblical stories account for his always siding with the 'other'. Had he lived in late 20th-century America, says Cole, he would have been black.

### Theology can involve healing and resistance

Black interpretations of the Bible provide communities with symbolic and emotional support. African Americans see God's involvement in their struggles reflected in the gospel. But these readings also provide confirmation that there is no natural hierarchy between racial groups because all are equal in the face of God. Black interpretations bring argumentative and religious authority to the black liberation movement.

Healing and resistance, comfort and combativeness, these are the aims of Black theology. The work of 'Nap Bishop' Tricia Hersey and 'black liturgist' Cole Arthur Riley is particularly significant of this combination. Both women use creativity to preach appropriate theologies that do not perpetuate the overworking and exhaustion of black people. In a 'love note to black folks', Hersey explained: "You don't have to keep trying so hard. You are enough now without any extra labor. You are divine. You can rest." Similarly, Riley encourages black Christians to not try to work their way into dignity.

Simultaneously, they support African American expressions of fear, grief, and anger. "Anger at injustice is not a burden; it's an undeserved gift to those who need shaken out of the illusion of their heroism. It's an honouring for those whose dignity is worth fighting for. Remember: if anger isn't holy, then neither is God," writes Riley.

Black theology explores notions like weakness, growth, and liberation in terms that are foreign to traditional theology, resulting in different notions of dignity. While both define it as intrinsic worth of every human, based on their creation by God, some rather focus on their 'right to life' and others focus on their 'right to live'. Learning from Black theology, Europeans could broaden their attention, focusing not only on bioethical questions, but also on socio-economic living conditions.

### Theology and activism are related

Religion is much more political in the US than in Europe. The rise of militant Christianity has antagonised nationalist and liberation activists. That being said, Black theology can be a sign for Europeans that theology and activism are related. Martin Luther King Jr. was a leader of the anti-segregation protests in the 1960s as well as a pastor. The Black Lives Matter movement that has arisen since the 2013 murder of black teen Trayvon Martin also has rich religious and spiritual dimensions.

Liberation theology is empowering. Knowing that all religious interpretations are contextual makes room for new voices and testimonies. Whether it prompts political action or not, theology can be a tool for reclaiming beliefs about one's own dignity.

While Black theology is a response to Western Euro-centric Christianity, it is up to Europeans to receive it and learn from it.

*Juliette Marchet and Clémence Sauty*



## Inclusion on whose terms? The Church of Sweden and the Roma minority in Sweden

— *Author recommendation*

### From abusive to inclusive

The relationship between the Church of Sweden and the Roma is an unbalanced one. On the one hand, as a former state church, the Church of Sweden (henceforth referred to as the Church) has played a role in discriminating against Roma. Between 1934-1976, for example, the Swedish state imposed forced sterilisation on people considered physically or socially vulnerable. Those Roma who had no fixed domicile were often sterilised and Roma children were taken away from their parents. On the other hand, during the past decades, the Church has taken different initiatives to make amends for its abusive past and make the life and languages of Roma visible in its liturgy. The translation of the Common Worship Liturgy Book into four different Roma dialects is an important step towards a renewed relationship between the Roma and the Church. How is this reconciliation set to continue and what are the possible pitfalls?

### Reconciliation on whose terms?

In 2000, the Swedish gave five different groups the status of national minority: the Jews, the Roma, the Sami, the inhabitants of Tornedalen, and the Finnish-speaking Swedes. The Swedish government recognises five groups of Roma that arrived in Sweden in different centuries and from several countries. Due to their different backgrounds, these groups can have various religious affiliations. In addition, some groups, such as the travelling one, have often experienced a higher degree of discrimination, compared to the other Roma communities. In 2000, the same year as they became a national minority, archbishop K.G. Hammar led a mass of reconciliation for all Roma communities. Even though the mass was appreciated, the representatives of the Travelling Roma pointed out that reconciliation is something that happens between two sides that have done wrong to each other, while the Roma have done no wrong to the Church. Since then, the Church has taken a number of initiatives to include and make the Roma minority visible in its life and activities, both on a national and local level.

“The Church has taken a number of initiatives to include and make the Roma minority visible in its life and activities.”

### Initiatives

Mapping from 2012 showed that practising Roma religiosity within the Church of Sweden was difficult. This was due to the lack of knowledge about Roma, the absence of material translated into the Roma languages, and numerous prejudices. Between 2014 and 2016, the Church decided to continue improving its relation to the Roma through different projects. In May 2021, the Church of Sweden presented a translation of the Common Worship liturgy book containing prayers and liturgies in four different Roma dialects. On May

23rd 2021, masses were celebrated in both Uppsala and Linköping Cathedral using the newly adopted Common Worship liturgy book, with representatives from the Roma communities taking part in both masses. On August 19th the same year, the translation of the Common Worship liturgy book was introduced in the diocese of Vesterås.

At the moment, however, there seem to be no long-term plans to involve the Roma communities in the activities of the Church. While there are confirmation groups focusing on young Sami, there seem to be no such groups for young Roma. Moreover, while parts of the website of the Church can be viewed in several minority languages, no parts of it are translated into any Roma dialects. In addition, the Roma minority still experiences discrimination when making contact with the Church. For example, it seems to be difficult to book local churches to celebrate baptism. These examples show that even though the Church of Sweden shows willingness to include the Roma minority on the national level, on the local level discrimination still takes place.

### Going forward

Religion is an important part of Roma's life and tradition. In Sweden, quite a number of Roma are members of the Church and have a strong desire to remain so. The examples in this article show that there is a need to take into account the wishes and religiosity of Roma communities and to do so with a long-term plan.

The translation of the Common Worship liturgy book, the will to make amends for a discriminatory past, and efforts to make the life and traditions of Roma communities visible are positive steps. However, in order to work for a shared future with the Roma minority, the Church needs a long-term budget that will secure practical activities on a grass-root level. This way, the needs of the Roma communities and those of the Church can continue to meet each other on both a local and national level.

*Annamaria Laviola-Svensäter*



## Cancel culture: An introduction

— *Author recommendation*

*This article was written in preparation for our round table on Cancel Culture.*

Cancel culture is a specific way of behaving towards someone who may have said or done something that was considered offensive. In its most familiar form, it presents itself in the form of a group of people, often on social media, excluding someone from social or professional life. At its core, cancel culture's act of exclusion is concerned with accountability: to hold someone accountable for a wrongdoing.

### The brief history of cancel culture

As a mainstream phenomenon, cancel culture is relatively new. The act and the term 'to cancel' have their roots in social justice movements in the United States, specifically the civil rights boycotts of the 1950s and 60s. Cancellation then was an attempt by minority civil rights activists to reject figures or works that spread harmful ideas. The key effort was to ignore the public status of a figure or work while drawing attention to its harm.

This form of accountability was immensely attractive, arguably prescient, and popularly possible, when social justice movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo needed to overturn the dominant narrative about publicly accepted figures or extant social systems. These social systems or figures had failed marginalised people and communities, either on the basis of race or gender, but had evaded accountability. Cancel culture made this accountability possible, by delivering collective demands for consequences.

It can be argued that during this time, a key shift occurred in identity politics of minorities that were historically failed by society. The need to have their positive identity respected, on the basis of race or gender for example, led minority groups to form a new, negative, identity based specifically on the exclusion of the wrongdoers. This negative identity gave minority individuals as well as groups a perceived onus to deal with the wrongs of the majority by excluding them.

*"As a mainstream phenomenon, cancel culture is relatively new."*

### A second wave?

Mainstream cancel culture, as a collective tool of accountability, was initially used by social justice movements left-of-centre. As it spent more time in the mainstream, however, cancel culture diversified across other ideological positions or identities as well. Now, it has become a popular ideological tactic of both the far left and the far right. Some believe this is in fact the 'second wave' of the cancel culture, in which cancel culture has shifted from precepts of accountability to entrenchments of culture and politics. A key arena where this second wave has played itself out is on the question of free speech.

LSE Professor Shakuntala Banaji, co-author of the forthcoming book 'Social Media and Hate', argues that far-right individuals and organisations have punished forms of identity and self-expression through a range of hateful and dehumanising practices on and offline. Notably, she explains, the right have politicised and

weaponised 'free speech'. By using "the idea that a self-indulgent, censorious band of woke liberals and left-wingers ... were interfering with the rights of true patriots," the right is barring scholars and students of colour or other minorities from expressing their academic work freely, or by shaming activists, journalists, and scholars for their calls for justice on issues such as Palestinians or Muslims.

Culture writer and novelist Kat Rosenfield, on the other hand, speaks of "a militant faction on the Left," which has imposed a radical set of sensibilities on influential public institutions, including the academy. Rosenfield effectively makes an inverted case to Banaji's. Similar to Heather Mac Donald's case 'The Diversity Delusion', she speaks of how identity politics led by "[l]eft-wing authoritarianism" has overrun open-minded inquiry and expression in the academy. There is a "sudden appearance of preferred pronouns in bios and email signatures; the obsession with diversity, representation, and racial or sexual identity in popular culture." She claims that the academy is hit hard by cancel culture because most academics are overwhelmingly left leaning.

A key way cancel culture has become increasingly prevalent across all kinds of ideological positions is its increasing ability to perform within the binary rubric of right-versus-wrong. The concern is not whether we can hold one another accountable, but to assess and act — judge — towards someone from a position of disagreement. Cancel culture has, therefore, become a double-edged sword. Cambridge University cognitive neuroscientist Rocco Chiou explains that while cancel culture can positively hold someone accountable for their misbehaviour and raises awareness about injustice, it can also become 'vigilantism' in the digital space as well as the physical world: "a way of judging and rejecting anyone who holds a different socio-political viewpoint." Cancel culture is now creating the very problem it once fought and still does fight: bigotry. By creating new forms of 'moral righteousness', it is increasingly allowing people to believe it is morally justifiable to denounce someone who they believe to be "morally inferior and deserves the criticism."

### Cancel culture in Europe

As alluded to by Banaji, Rosenfield, and Mac Donald, the forms and consequences of 'moral righteousness' created by cancel culture are harmful to academic practice. It can, as many academics have publicly warned, lead to intellectual prohibitions that harm the academic freedom deemed necessary to the creation of knowledge.

European universities in many ways have borne the brunt of this harmful variant of cancel culture. In France, for example, 'de-platforming' of speakers and speech has become increasingly prevalent. Public intellectuals and political leaders such as Alain Finkielkraut and former French President François Hollande respectively were recently prevented from speaking at French universities, in Finkielkraut's case at the Sciences Po and in Hollande's case at the University of Lille. These, and other de-platforming events, stand at odds with the French rally cry of "it's forbidden to forbid," and have raised alarms about the national spirit of academic debate in France, once described by philosopher Michel Onfray as "Rabelaisian freedom, Voltairean critical sense and Cartesian reasoning."

The French critic Pascal Bruckner is not surprised at what is happening in France. He argues that cancel culture is part of the transactional relationship between the United States and France. Much of what emerged



as cancel culture in Europe is the result of influential works of French thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida. “We’ve invented this, and now it’s coming back,” he says.

The ease with which cancel culture has entered the European academy may also be because of Europe’s “traditional Christian repertoire and heritage.” French political scientist Olivier Roy indeed argues this. Cancel culture, Roy explains, “insists on repentance to allow forgiveness, but not forgetfulness.” It invokes Christian ideas of “repentance and atonement, confession of sins and the fact that the original sin is transmitted from generation to generation, and can be washed out only if individuals take the responsibility of the guilt on their own shoulders.” This is arguably analogous to the typical process of cancellation, which unfolds from the public identification of a wrongdoing by a person to the admission by and punishment of the person believed to be responsible for the wrongdoing.

It can be argued, then, that cancel culture is part of a larger — or underlying — process where religion is increasingly becoming a secular tool or reappearing in secular forms. To be sure, while European society may not use categorical markers of traditional religiosity in many settings any longer, the influence of Christianity on their identity reveals a “liminal religiosity” where religion has a “fuzzy” existence in everyday life. The influence of this liminal religiosity, for example, helps explain not only cancel culture then, but more systemic processes of exclusion such as the bans on Muslim clothing, practice, and symbols in countries like France and Switzerland.

#### Is defining cancel culture enough?

The unfolding of cancel culture in Europe, and its history and development in the United States, raise the question of whether cancel culture’s concern with accountability is upheld by how it is essentially performed. Who defines what is offensive or wrong? What is the difference between something offensive and something that other people do not agree with? What kind of exclusion is justified for a specific offence? Does any group of people have the right to exclude someone? Are forums of exclusion, such as social media or universities, the right places to assess and exclude someone? Should persons who have offended not have the opportunity to privately learn from their mistakes? Despite its commitment to accountability, its collective act to exclude an individual leaves many other concerns unanswered.

*Muhammad Faisal Khalil*

## Tolerance and reluctance: Afghanistan and the Catholic Church

— *Author recommendation*

The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, greatly accelerated by the Taliban takeover, has led to a variety of responses from Christian leaders across Europe. Whilst calls for empathy for the Afghan people are widespread, a unified message of how to respond to a potential refugee crisis has yet to materialise.

#### The message from the top

Since ascending to the position of pope in 2013, Francis has consistently pushed for Catholics to follow a message of tolerance and welcome with regards to refugees. Therefore, it is unsurprising to see that the pontiff has been clear in his calls for countries to open their arms to refugees, stating that he prays “many countries welcome and protect those seeking a new life.” Interestingly, Francis’s comments in his St Peter’s Square on September 5th 2021 did not make reference to the Taliban’s takeover directly, but instead focused on the call for nations to allow Afghan refugees to “live with dignity, in peace, in brotherhood with their neighbours.”

Senior bishops from across Europe have also been clear in their demand that Europe facilitates the arrival of refugees fleeing Afghanistan. This response was most clearly evidenced by the comments of the head of the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), the Archbishop of Luxembourg, Cardinal Hollerich. He said that countries must “do everything possible to save as many people as possible and also to welcome them inside EU member countries.”

Hollerich’s comments are consistent with the COMECE’s previous positions regarding migration. The group has regularly called for European countries to be tolerant to refugees, for example supporting sea rescue missions in the Mediterranean or making pacts on migration and asylum.

In both the case of Pope Francis and the senior bishops in COMECE, the dramatic situation that has rapidly unfolded in Afghanistan is a reaffirmation of their message that refugees come to Europe not to take advantage of the continent, but instead because they are forced to flee oppression in their own nations.

#### Different nations, different approaches

In contrast to Francis’s and COMECE’s explicit calls for Europe to open its arms to refugees, many churches in European nations have been more reserved in their responses.

In France, a statement by the Conference of Bishops of France was restricted to calling for the country to “welcome onto national soil” those that had helped French forces during the war.

These comments come in the context of the upcoming 2022 French election in which immigration and multiculturalism are key issues. This political consideration informed Macron’s much-criticised response to the unfolding humanitarian crisis in which he said France needed to “anticipate and protect itself from a wave of migrants.”

The degree to which this wider political atmosphere informed the response of the French bishops is hard to say, but it illustrates the importance of internal considerations for the bishops’ conference of each nation.



### Another step in the culture war — Spain

Meanwhile, in Spain, the initial response from the spokesperson of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, Luis Arguello, focused less on the humanitarian crisis and more on ongoing political debates in Spain. On 18 August 2021, just three days following the fall of Kabul, Arguello wrote on Twitter that the situation in Afghanistan was evidence of the “inconsistency of the relativist notion of ‘cultures’.” Expanding on the point, he said that not all “deserve the same ‘multicultural’ respect” and that ideologies and actions must be judged by their service to each individual’s “life, conscience, freedom and equality.”

This comment was the only one made by Arguello regarding Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover. It shows that the crisis has been seen by some leading clergy members as an opportunity to make political points rather than solely humanitarian appeals.

“The crisis has been seen by some leading clergy members as an opportunity to make political points.”

### ‘Good Samaritans’ — United Kingdom

Finally, turning to the United Kingdom, the country’s leading Anglican religious figure, the Archbishop of Canterbury, also restricted his focus to those who had helped British troops during the war. When commenting on refugees during his speech in the House of Lords, he focused on the need to offer support to Pakistan to be able to take them in, rather than call for the UK to take large numbers.

These comments come in the context of criticism that the UK has committed to settling just 20,000 Afghan refugees over a period of five years, despite their heavy involvement in the conflict.

Linked to this is the fact that despite Afghanistan providing a clear example of why people become refugees in the first place, the UK government plans to impose even stricter legislation on those trying to escape to the country.

In particular, this includes plans to introduce a new bill that will implement legal penalties for people who are found to have helped migrants who get into trouble whilst trying to cross the English Channel by boat. This proposed legislation led 12 Church of England bishops to join together in signing an open letter in which they criticised the government for the “criminalisation of the Good Samaritan.” Paul Butler, the bishop of Durham, pointed to how the situation in Afghanistan had led people to understand the horror that causes people to flee their homelands, and said that if we knew more about the stories of those seeking to reach Britain, then “levels of sympathy and compassion would increase.”

### A patchwork of interests

To conclude, this overview of the differences in the responses of Christian clergy across Europe opens up a number of key questions for consideration.

First of all, it would be interesting to see further analysis of to what extent the comments of clergy across Europe are influenced by ongoing political debates within their country. Comparing different countries, rather

than looking at them solely on their own, could help us to understand the nuances between the comments of clergy in each nation.

Secondly, it would also be interesting to consider whether ‘international’ clergy figures, like Pope Francis or the COMECE, are more free to speak up on progressive issues such as migration than those in individual nations. Whilst this may be the case, it should also be considered that perhaps Francis and the COMECE bishops in fact represent a more liberal part of the Catholic Church.

As the initial reaction to the withdrawal from Afghanistan by NATO subsides, it will be possible to analyse two key questions. On the one hand, will the stories and pictures emerging from Afghanistan change the opinion among Christians regarding migration? And on the other, will this lead to greater support for the liberal position Francis and senior clergy have held towards refugees since 2013?

*Freddie Scott*



## Do religions objectify people with disabilities?

“Disabled children aren’t burdens — or angels.” Journalist s.e. smith say it all in their blog post: the way disability is currently discussed is harmful. Tolerating or admiring people with disabilities as if they were ‘living lessons’ is dehumanising. Not making space for their own needs, wants, wishes, and dreams, “talking over and about” them as if they were things, is objectifying.

Religions have long provided meaning to sufferings of all kinds. Those caused by disabilities, like isolation, were also interpreted and made sense out of. Do these narratives successfully take into account the humanity of disabled people? This would be the case if religions found a middle ground between idealisation, well-meaning indifference, and rejection.

### Disability in myths

Anthropologist of disability, Henri-Jacques Stiker, identified different interpretations of disability within Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. Disability is either understood as an indication of transgression and sin, or as a mark of purity. In the Bible, it is also a sign of divine election. In fact, biblical characters with a disability have exceptional destinies. Some characters with a disability are even patriarchal references for God; the God of the Bible is known as ‘God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’, while Isaac was blind and Jacob limped.

Stiker explains that “[impairment] underlines that these characters and the people they are the founders or leaders of, are branded with the identifying marks of limit, lack, strangeness, weakness, that are the very condition of their extraordinary nature; the very condition of their people’s life.” In other words, in these myths, disability is a metaphor for the human condition.

The Muslim tradition also links social leadership, extraordinary relationship to God, and disability. The prophet is described as a beautiful, strong, and very smart man, who had some peculiarities. Firstly, reports have acknowledged that he was of frail health. Secondly, there were stories to suggest that Muhammad had had an open-heart surgery by an angel to purify him, that he had a small hump on his back, that he had remained ‘petrified’ after a fight with angel Gabriel, and got into trances.

### Disability in beliefs

These religious stories describe disability as if it meant ‘standing out of the crowd’. The interpretations of these narratives form religious beliefs. Such beliefs are part of collective representations that participate in alienating people with disabilities. This is the hypothesis formulated by Catholic theologian Talitha Cooreman-Guittin, as numerous disabled people of faith have asked her: “Why does no one want to be friends with us?” She assumes that the deficiencies, in themselves, are only partly responsible for the isolation they experience.

For Cooreman-Guittin, it is the way religious people define perfection that needs addressing. The belief that humanity was created perfectly ‘in God’s image’ is used to demonise disability. Interpreting the myth of the world’s creation by God, Jews and Christians have assumed that sin caused all sorts of disorders and misfortunes, including disabilities. From then on, some people conformed to God’s image, while others failed. Cooreman-Guittin remains optimistic, arguing that once this belief is pinned down, it can no longer be perpetuated. People with differing mental and physical capabilities will no longer be seen as deviations from God’s image.

Diverse theologies of disability are now on the rise. They unify around the renewed belief that deficiency is an integral part of being human. Disability is reframed as being normal: after all, it is common. For example, around 10 million French people have at least one disability. As a comparison, 5.5 million French viewers watched Barbara Pravi reach second place in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2021, making disability almost twice as common as being a Eurovision fan.

“Around 10 million French people have at least one disability. As a comparison, 5.5 million French viewers watched Barbara Pravi reach second place in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2021, making disability almost twice as common as being a Eurovision fan.”

### Towards ‘disability-friendly’ theologies?

So, do religious myths and beliefs successfully take into account the humanity of disabled people? Characters, as literary beings, are not humans: they are great people (whether real or fictional) transformed into stories. It turns out that characters with disabilities, in religious stories, have exceptional destinies. This could have caused religions to idealise those concerned.

On the contrary, stories of disabilities have been overlooked. Beliefs around disability have rather demonised and alienated people with variant capabilities. This is, however, beginning to change as theologians point out that disability and vulnerability in general are part of the human condition. The objectification of disabled people in theology is therefore regressing.

The erasure of women in religions has lost ground ever since theologians became aware that there were women in their sacred texts. Stiker suggests that as soon as they notice there also are disabled characters, they will gradually become able to take disability into account when talking about God.

*Clémence Sauty*



## The LGBTQ+ community: Loved or unaccepted by evangelical churches?

Pope Francis and the Catholic Church have been in the spotlight once more after newspapers all over Europe reported about the pope's statement on LGBTQ+ couples in October 2020. The pope had stated that "homosexual people have the right to be in a family." Though this statement initially seemed to reflect a willingness to change the Catholic Church's view on the LGBTQ+ community, the Vatican ultimately responded that this was not the case. This incident sparks a larger question: how do other denominations of the Christian Church behave towards the LGBTQ+ minority? In this article, evangelical churches across Europe will be discussed.

### "Gay marriage is a sin"

Several European evangelical churches could be considered conservative in their stance towards the LGBTQ+ community. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Estonia (EELK) does not tolerate gay marriage. The EELK is open to laws recognising same-sex partnerships, as long as marriage is officially recognised as the bond between one man and one woman. Furthermore, members of the LGBTQ+ community are not allowed to become a priest within the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

In Switzerland, there is a division between what politics aim for and what the Evangelical Church says. The Evangelical Party, a political party that aims to adhere to Biblical values, is against gay marriage. Besides, some individual churches go further than 'just' renouncing gay marriage: some people within the Evangelical Church of Switzerland believe LGBTQ+ people should be 'healed' through therapy. However, there are also many churches in the country that do accept homosexual orientations. The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (SEK), for instance, voted in favour of marriages between two people of the same sex in November 2019. Although this was decided nationally, regional SEK churches have the final say about this decision in their own canton. A national decision does therefore not dictate local churches' practice on the matter.

A difference in opinion between some churches and the state is also seen in the UK. Here, churches have been warned by campaigners, among which are church leaders, about harmful rhetoric that some send out towards the LGBTQ+ community. Evangelical (and more charismatic) churches are accused of using rhetoric that is discriminatory and harmful, such as calling members of the LGBTQ+ community "an abomination." As this is a very conservative stance towards the LGBTQ+ community, UK politics is aiming for changes. For instance, Prime Minister Boris Johnson wants so-called 'gay conversion therapy' to be banned. Furthermore, the Sheffield City Trust cancelled the visit of a US evangelist who sees gay marriage as a sin.

Lastly, the globally-established Hillsong Church — a church with its roots in Australia — is a charismatic church that also has a conservative stance towards the LGBTQ+ community. The founder of Hillsong, Brian Houston, stated that the church denounces a "homosexual lifestyle." Besides, leadership roles are only to be performed by heterosexuals.

### Discussions without solutions

In Finland, the church seems to be neither extremely conservative nor very progressive on this topic. Leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, a mainly Protestant church but with evangelical movements as well, do

not agree on the topic of LGBTQ+ marriage. Since 2018, they have been discussing the issue of marriage being for one man and woman only or accepting same-sex couples as well without a final decision. Same-sex marriage is legal by Finnish law, but several pastors have been seriously warned by diocesan chapters for marrying gay couples. Of course, having multiple movements within one church does make it harder to come to an agreement. However, there are others in and outside the church who would like to make a stand, as there is still much hate speech towards the Finnish LGBTQ+ community. Emphasising the prevalence of hate speech, theologian and composer Leena Julin wrote traditional-sounding church music, which she combined with hate speech lyrics. In this way, the contradiction inherent between the two is used in order to raise awareness.

### Fighting for rights

In contrast to the cases described above, the Evangelical Church in several countries is rather progressive regarding LGBTQ+ issues. For example, the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia is quite progressive, having Rusudan Gotsiridze as a bishop, who, beyond being the first and only female bishop of Georgia, fights for LGBTQ+ rights. However, she is targeted with hate mail and death threats from several leaders of the country's Orthodox Church.

In evangelical churches in the Netherlands, the topic of LGBTQ+ issues had been taboo for a long time, but the Theologian of the Fatherland of 2020 Samuel Lee — leader of an evangelical church — has called for change. According to Lee, members of the evangelical churches must ask for forgiveness for all the harm that people have caused the LGBTQ+ community. Christians that hurt others are no sign of God's love, he stated.

In conclusion, the stance of different evangelical churches on the topic of the LGBTQ+ community varies across Europe. Whereas some are relatively progressive, the majority still hold rather orthodox points of view. However, it is hopeful to see that voices are being raised.

*Astrid Hamberg*



## The Vatican on gay marriage

### The Vatican's reassertion

On March 15, 2021, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), the oldest of the Vatican's Curia — administrative bodies composed of Church officials — formally addressed the question: 'Does the Church have the power to give the blessing to unions of persons of the same sex?' The Congregation, in a statement written by Spanish Cardinal Luis Ladaria, responded with a clearcut: 'no'. Citing speeches given by Pope Francis, Catholic catechisms, and previous Catholic letters and releases, Ladaria explained that while God blesses sinful individuals, neither God nor the Church can bless sin itself. Sin, in this instance, being a same-sex relationship or union.

Given the Church's historical views towards same-sex relations, the declaration did not come as a theological surprise and reflected a reassertion of long-held beliefs. Yet, in the days and weeks following the announcement, criticism of the Congregation's decision has abounded — from the tweets of pop stars to petitions of concern circulated amongst Catholic clergy members themselves.

### Clerical rebellion

Within days of the CDF publication, signs of clerical pushback began entering the public sphere. For instance on March 17th, the Bishop of Antwerp, Johan Bonny, published an opinion piece in which he expressed how he felt shame for the Church following its announcement. Bonny's viewpoint has been echoed by several other clerics in Europe, particularly Austria and Germany.

In Germany, two pastors, Burkhard Hose of Würzburg and Bernd Mönkebüscher of Paderborn, started an initiative of clerical signatures, aimed at collectively expressing disappointment with the Vatican's position and a desire for further discussion. By the end of March 2021, when the initiative was formally sent to members of the German Catholic Church's official forum on 'Living in Successful Relationships', it had received over 2,600 signatures. Coinciding with the initiative, the Bishop of Essen, Franz-Josef Overbeck, announced that he would not penalise priests who continued to bless same-sex marriages. Overbeck's move was not altogether unexpected, as he has forcefully called for Church acceptance of same-sex marriages in the past.

As the German initiative garnered popularity, several Austrian pastors expressed a similar level of discontent and a desire for further discussion. Along the same vein as the German initiative, a letter criticising the CDF's announcement for lacking "theological depth" had gained over 277 signatures by the end of March. Joining the criticism of the Vatican's decision, the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, claimed the CDF's response was marked by a "clear communication error." The Church, according to Schönborn, ought to act like a "mother," who blesses all of her children.

The German-speaking world has not provided the only criticism, as pockets have cropped up throughout the world — including in Italy, not so far from the source of the announcement. In a particularly dramatic move, a priest in northwestern Italy refused to bless palm branches at a Palm Sunday Mass, refusing to do so until he could bless same-sex marriages.

"A priest in northwestern Italy refused to bless palm branches at a Palm Sunday Mass, refusing to do so until he could bless same-sex marriages."

### A welcome step to some

Not all clerics or Catholic believers have responded with criticism, though. Many — including several German Catholics — have agreed with the CDF's statement. Others expressed appreciation at the clarity of the statement, as diverse opinions over blessing same-sex unions have divided the Church for years, particularly since Francis became pope.

### Pope Francis's mixed messaging

Pope Francis's opinions on gay marriage have garnered significant attention since his 2013 election. Shortly after assuming the papacy, Francis responded to questions on the presence of a 'gay lobby' in the Vatican with: "If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?" In October 2020, the issue of civil union legitimacy in the eyes of the Church shot to the forefront of discussions again when a documentary on Francis contained comments many swiftly interpreted as a lurch towards recognising civil unions. Though the Vatican ultimately asserted that such a change in policy was not the pope's opinion, speculation remained.

Even in the current situation, despite the definitive nature of the CDF's responsum, which received the pope's approval, questions remain regarding where Francis's opinions truly fall. For instance, some have wondered if a speech he gave on March 21st, in which he emphasised "closeness, compassion, and tenderness," served as an attempt to distance himself from the official, doctrinal elements of the CDF's statement.

### Far from settled

Needless to say, despite the CDF's attempts to generate a clear, universal response on the issue of blessing same-sex relationships, the issue is far from settled. Moreover, it will, most likely, require extensive discussions, clarifications, and amendments in the weeks, months, and years to come.

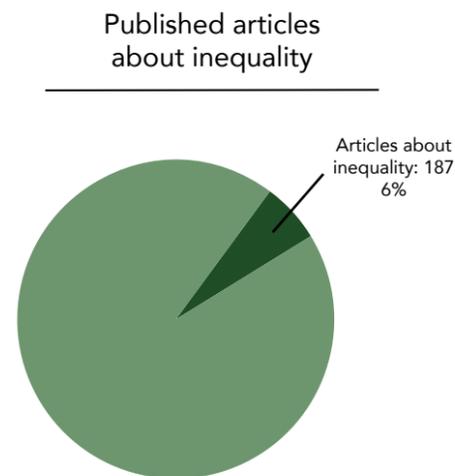
*Tyler Mikulis*



## Data from the dashboard shows inequality across Europe

The EARS dashboard is a collection of summaries from European media articles on religion and society. In the past years, over 10,000 summaries were added. Our international team of analysts keeps the dashboard up-to-date with hundreds of new summaries each month.

Between January 1st and October 1st, 2021, 187 summaries about the topic of *inequality* were added to the dashboard. This is equal to 6% of the total number of summaries added to the dashboard during that period.



From these summaries, we can see how inequality is still very much present in Europe today, although steps are being taken to close the gaps. In this article, we will focus on *gender* and *economic* inequality and their relationship to religion.

### Gender inequality across Europe

A key issue relating to gender inequality found on the dashboard is the topic of inclusivity. Many religious leaders and institutions are taking steps to reduce gender inequality. For example, an archdiocese in Ireland has published a new pastoral plan which emphasises the inclusion of women in leadership roles. Similarly, the German Catholic Women's League is demanding equal participation and voting rights for women in the episcopal synod in Rome. The League is aiming at equal treatment of all believers, regardless of their gender, due to the religious belief in the equal dignity of all baptised people.

Pope Francis has also recently addressed the issue of equal rights and chances for women. He stressed the equality of all people before God and lamented the current situation for women because there is still an "enslavement" of females. Likewise, French theologian Nathalie Becquart welcomes the change in attitudes

towards the role of women in both society and the Church. She states that women need to be represented in decision making in the Church, and that all are created equal in the eyes of God.

However, this focus on reducing gender inequality is not found everywhere. Research has found that many female ministers in the Netherlands experience sexism in the workplace. Almost 75% of respondents feel like they are treated differently by church members, and 60% claim they experience the most sexism at the hands of their male colleagues. About 5% of the female ministers are considering resigning because of this. In addition, a survey of 29 of the biggest mosques in the UK has revealed that more than 1 in 5 of these places were not allowing women in to pray during the month of Ramadan. Five of the mosques contacted do not have a women's area and six responded to say they 'cannot accommodate women because of COVID health and safety reasons'.

Finally, Pope Francis passed a resolution allowing women to formally read prayers, serve at the altar, and receive communion during religious services. This was seen as another step forward in equal women's rights in the Roman Catholic Church. However, the Church only allows men to be priests and women are traditionally only on the margins of the Vatican administration.

### Economic inequality across Europe

Besides efforts to decrease gender inequality, religious institutions are also addressing economic inequality across Europe. For instance, the world's most prominent Christian leaders have come together to persuade people to urgently address the climate crisis. According to Pope Francis, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, climate change causes the most damage to the poorest people on earth, despite them being least responsible.

Pope Francis has also called for a post-pandemic recovery plan to follow a new socio-economic model to overcome inequality. Mario Draghi, the Italian prime minister, seems to have understood the message and spoke of a growth that respects the environment and does not humiliate the human person. This includes, for example, greater fairness in taxation.

Research has indicated that membership in religious communities can improve mental health when living in poverty. The researchers found that poor mental health linked to poverty was significantly less among religious people than among non-religious people. It is unclear yet why religious belief improves mental health. For example, it could be due to the social and community interactions religious belief entails, which are widely known to improve mental wellbeing.

### Battling inequality

Even though many religious leaders and institutions are taking steps to battle both gender and economic inequality, full equality across Europe has not yet been achieved. Nevertheless, efforts such as the inclusion of women in leadership roles and representation in decision making are steps in the right direction. As for economic inequality, religious leaders such as Pope Francis are calling for new and fair systems to provide help to the world's poorest.

Anne Clerx

# Normativity





## The rule of Croatian nationalism and Roman Catholicism

### Behind the Iron Curtain, communism is the only bubble

Croatia spent the entire period from the Second World War until the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1991 under the communist regime in Yugoslavia. "Religion is the opium of the people" was the slogan of communist ideology in favour of propaganda for an atheist state without religion. Before the communist regime, Croatia was a predominantly Roman Catholic country, but when it found itself behind the Iron Curtain, the Roman Catholic Church was thrown to its knees. The Communist Party of Yugoslavia expelled the Roman Catholic Faculty of Theology from the University of Zagreb in 1952. The only judge of morally appropriate behaviour was communist ideology. For example, abortion was socially acceptable and allowed by law, homosexuality was a crime (according to the Criminal Law 1959), and church marriage was not recognised by law.

The Communist Party was the only party that reigned in Yugoslavia as well as in Croatia. The communist ideology was imposed by the state as the only correct and ethically acceptable perspective and the Roman Catholic Church was marginalised and oppressed. This made it impossible for different norms of socially acceptable behaviour to exist. Although the Communist Party attempted to create a classless society in Croatia, it did not fully succeed in doing so. There was some opposition, but it was small and very weak in relation to strong state propaganda. On the margins of society were those who were opponents of the Communist Party's ideology and moral norms. These opponents were primarily members of the old royal family and the religious community. The king was deprived of his civil rights and was forbidden to return to Yugoslavia.

### The church bells of the Roman Catholic Church are not heard behind the Iron Curtain

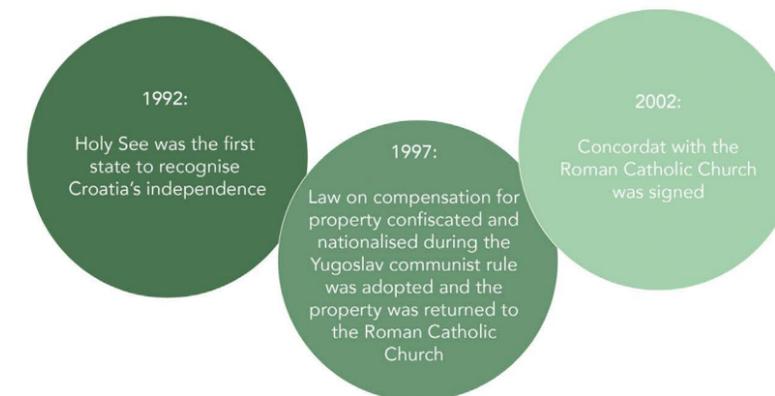
The Roman Catholic Church in Croatia in communist Yugoslavia was under the jurisdiction of the Holy See. Believers of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia expected that the pope and the Roman Curia would protect them from communist terror.

Yet, even diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Yugoslavia were severed in 1952. Believers did not feel any improvement due to these events, because apart from mutual visits of Vatican and Yugoslav diplomats, no changes took place in the life of an ordinary believer. The Roman Catholic Church was removed from the public and media sphere. It was forbidden to give sermons outside of church walls, and church holidays were replaced by working-class and Communist Party holidays. The only moral norms that existed were those prescribed and propagated by communist ideology. Since the communists did not tolerate resistance or opposition, Christian teachings were not welcome under the communist regime. Therefore, the Holy See could not do much for the Roman Catholics from behind the Iron Curtain.

### Croatia is free — a Roman Catholic religious purge follows

Croatia fought for its independence through a bloody civil war that lasted several years during the 1990s. After the fall of communism, nationalism triumphed in Croatia. The Holy See was the first state to recognise Croatia's independence on January 13, 1992. The law on compensation for property confiscated and nationalised during the Yugoslav communist rule was adopted in 1997 and property was returned to the Roman Catholic Church. Finally, a concordat with the Roman Catholic Church was signed in 2002.

## Croatia's independence



The Church has once more become financially powerful and very present in the public sphere. With the return of the Church to the public stage, the propagation of Christian morality also resumed. The Roman Catholic Faculty of Theology was returned to Zagreb University in 1990. Religious education was restored to the education system in 1991.

"Nationalism in Croatia is a strict norm, in addition to the norms imposed by the Roman Catholic Church."

### Nationalism and the Roman Catholic Church as the undisputed rulers of social norms

The strength of Croatian nationalist policy and propaganda can be seen in those who are marginalised by it: the Serbs. Although according to Croatian law, Serbs as a minority in Croatia have the right to their national alphabet (the Cyrillic alphabet), the board with the Cyrillic inscription on the city of Vukovar was broken by Croatian nationalists and a new one was never placed. Furthermore, incidents such as the looting of Serbian Orthodox churches and the writing of graffiti on their walls, as well as other acts of oppression, became an almost daily occurrence.

Nationalism was banned during communism, but it is now glorified as the greatest moral value of Croatian society. During national holidays, people celebrate Croatian nationalism by visiting the battlefields from the civil war in Yugoslavia (1991-1995), and graveyards where Croatian nationalists are buried. War veterans or 'Domobrani' are now almost unofficially in charge of defending and glorifying nationalism in Croatia.



Communism has been abandoned and nationalism is now an omnipresent norm in Croatian society.

Based on all of this, it can be concluded that nationalism in Croatia is a strict norm, in addition to the norms imposed by the Roman Catholic Church. The political elite cooperates very closely with the Roman Catholic Church. This could be seen when the President of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, awarded the highest state decoration to Cardinal Kuharić (2020). The Roman Catholic Church is very influential in the sphere of proposing and adopting moral norms. For example, it has called for a ban on abortion. In addition, it continues to cover up sexual abuse scandals and appears to be complicit in attacks on the LGBTQ+ population.

Although the Roman Catholic Church, together with nationalist movements, is unofficially in charge of moral norms, they also sometimes violate them. This was best seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. While all public gatherings were forbidden because of the pandemic, Mass in the Roman Catholic Church throughout Croatia was held without interruption and without a single punishment from the state or society. This provides a good example of the close relationship between Croatian nationalism and the Church.

Croatian society has two normative codes: one prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church and one prescribed by the nationalist movement. This morality offers a substitute for communist norms. Although the communist ideology is a thing of the past, Croatian society is again seeking to be morally solid and firm with the norms prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church and the nationalist movement.

*Marko Pavlović*

## Normativity and Catholicism in a changing Irish landscape

The Catholic Church's power in Ireland has shaped the country's national identity. Columnist T.P. O'Mahony perfectly encapsulates this influence, stating that since the Republic's creation, Catholicism has "run through the social fabric [of Ireland] like grain through wood." While Ireland is made of different religions and Christian denominations, the norm in Ireland has been defined by a predominantly Catholic identity, dictating the morals and ethics of the country.

However, Ireland has not been immune to political and social changes that have occurred across Europe since the mid-20th century. Public debates over several issues have resulted in loosening the Catholic Church's grip over the nation's morality. Discussion of how Catholicism became the norm and shaped Irish society will now take place. Moreover, focus will be given to debates about abortion. This issue highlights the shifting understandings of morality and ethics and how these have caused deep rifts within the country that are yet to be resolved.

### Catholicism and Irish identity

Under British colonial rule, the Catholic Church (henceforth referred to as the Church) was seen as a 'protector' of Irishness. As the modern Republic was established in 1922, so was a symbolic dichotomy between Irishness-Catholicism and Britishness-Protestantism. The monolithic view was that Catholic values should be 'the definers of Irish identity' despite some citizens who identified as Protestant.

In the Republic's early years, the Church held the moral authority, allowing it to shape the political agenda and veto any policies that it believed to be 'morally objectionable'. While other European countries became more interconnected in the early part of the 20th century, 'insular self-sufficiency', this being a tendency to look inwards and limit trade with other countries, was the dominant objective in Ireland. Foreign newspapers were taxed, and books and films were censored. Therefore, until the mid-20th century, a traditional, inward-looking, and morally-driven Catholic framework shaped Ireland.

### Shifting normativity

While for many Irish citizens, Catholicism "has been the social cement that provided cohesion and stability," internal and external factors led to a shift in Catholic normativity from the mid-20th century onwards. Firstly, in the 1960s, the Church's hold over Irish politics 'fractured' and the State reformed some domains previously under church control.

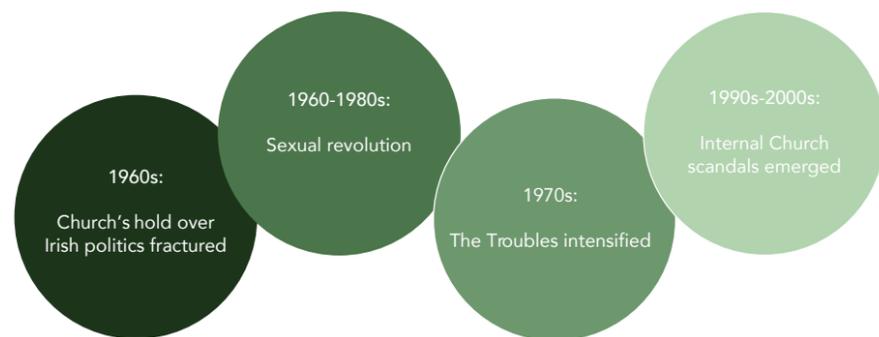
Secondly, The Troubles, which refers to a sectarian conflict between Unionists and Irish nationalists, began to intensify in the early 1970s. While the conflict mostly took place in Northern Ireland, at times violence occurred in the Republic. The Troubles were not a religious conflict but they did have an impact on religiosity and Catholic morality in Ireland. Journalist Cahir O'Doherty speaks of how "the interminable conflict ... impacted the spirit and spiritual life of the Irish over four decades." People witnessed not only the horrors of the conflict but also how "religion had fostered and hardened the attitudes" that led to the conflict. By the time the Good Friday Peace Agreement was signed in 1998, Catholic affiliation had slightly declined, suggesting that the experience of The Troubles may well have impacted both the religiosity of Irish citizens and their trust in the Church to bring peace.



Thirdly, internal scandals within the Church that emerged throughout the 1990s and 2000s ‘compounded the growing fragmentation of Irish-Catholic identity’. Cases of sexual abuse by priests and illegal adoption organised by the Church led many Irish citizens to ‘ignore the Church’s guidance on social issues’.

Alongside these internal factors, the sexual revolution that swept across Europe made a mark in Ireland and impacted the Church’s influence. Until this point, the Church had a monopoly on sexuality and women’s bodies. Yet, access to better information about sex and reproductive rights led many women to slowly turn away from the Church’s moral values and embrace more liberal teachings. With time, this trend grew and was reflected in major legal changes, including the 1979 law that allowed the importation and sale of contraceptives and the 1996 law that removed the constitutional prohibition on divorce.

### Shifting normativity in Ireland



#### The Church, politics, and women’s autonomy

No event better exemplifies the tensions between Irish society and the Church than the issue of abortion. As the sexual revolution heralded a new, liberal approach to women’s autonomy, the ‘reliance on religious doctrine to guide legislation’ was coming under pressure. Therefore, the Church and political right turned to the issue of abortion and pushed for recognition of the equal right to life of the pregnant woman and the unborn to be written into law. They succeeded and the Eighth Constitutional Amendment was introduced in 1983.

The Eighth Amendment referendum was highly divisive and faced opposition from some on the political left. However, it highlighted that through much of the 1970s and 1980s, “the Church still exercised cultural influence among Irish citizens through ... its ability to frame political debates on moral policy issues.” Moreover, it reconfirmed the moral panic over the future of Ireland.

Yet, over the next 38 years, the Church’s moral influence over political debates began to face even more criticism. When it came to abortion, many Irish citizens felt that their country remained inward-looking and out of touch with much of Europe. Meanwhile, several high-profile cases of women who died because they were denied abortions appalled Irish citizens. These reasons, among many others, led to the 2018 referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment. The Constitution of Ireland had previously prohibited abortion unless there was serious risk to the life of the mother but this new amendment, which was voted in by 66.4% of Irish citizens, permitted parliament to legislate for abortion.

#### Fundamental change?

The extended and intensely fierce debates on abortion reflect an Ireland struggling to come to terms with its changing landscape. The Thirty-Sixth Amendment highlighted how normativity in Ireland, which had once been defined by the influence of Catholic morality, has shifted. As the 2016 census revealed, religious affiliation has been declining overall, while those who identify as religious are increasingly not Catholic. Therefore, the Church’s centuries-old influence in Irish society has inevitably weakened.

However, the tensions between the Church and some of Irish society over issues such as abortion, religious education, and LGBTQ+ rights are by no means resolved. The symbiotic relationship between the Church and politics is still in existence and support for the Church from many Irish citizens remains stable. Due to this, Catholic normativity may have shifted but it has not disappeared.

*Martha Scott-Cracknell*



## Political correctness in Italy

One of the hottest and most controversial discussions in Italian society and politics is around the issue of political correctness. One criticism that many politicians, especially from the political right, make is that political correctness imposes a specific normative code on the Italian people and society and, in a certain way, undermines freedom of expression.

On the other hand, the same critics of political correctness are starting to become politically correct themselves in order to protect their own values. For instance, they have developed the term 'Christianophobia', which is supposed to be parallel to the problem of homophobia of which they are often accused. Therefore, the norm of political correctness is becoming an instrument to justify less popular views and create divisions, instead of bridges, within Italian society.

### Christianophobia

In February 2021, the Northern League, an Italian right-wing party, proposed to use public funds to establish an 'Observatory of Christianophobia'. The Northern League adviser Max Bastoni stated that "Italian and European culture" is "under attack" due to the emergence of Christianophobia in Italy and is in need of this observatory. The Observatory of Christianophobia's website states:

"Since 2000, 160,000 Christians have been victims of persecution every year. Every five minutes a Christian was killed because of his faith. All this cannot be accepted, because it constitutes an offence against God and human dignity. Moreover, it is a threat to security and peace and prevents the achievement of authentic integral human development."

### Christians are persecuted because they are not 'politically correct'

According to Bastoni, it is often the norm of the politically correct to be responsible for the development and increase of Christianophobia in Italy. He argued that in Italy, "a simple Mass in favour of the natural family or a rosary against gay marriages ends up entering the statistics of the courts." Moreover, Bastoni also argues that this is "not an exclusively confessional theme. Italian and European culture is under attack." Finally, this anti-Christian sentiment is, according to him, because of "demographic decrease" and "mass immigration" in Italy.

The position of the Northern League in the Lombardia region is not an isolated case. In September 2020, the Lazio region made a similar proposal. It was advocated by the Lazio regional councillor Laura Corrotti. Corrotti stressed the need to establish a 'Regional Observatory on Christianophobia' due to the damages done to some places of worship in Italy. She argued that attacks on places of worship represent acts of persecution against Catholics. Yet, those on the other side of the political spectrum argue that these attacks to places of worship were isolated cases and were carried out by individuals with diagnosed mental disorders.

### A law proposal against Christianophobia

The battle against Christianophobia is pursued by the Northern League at a national level as well. In December 2021, Lorenzo Fontana of the Northern League advanced a law proposal against Christianophobia. It is

interesting to note that in the same period, the Italian parliament was also discussing a law against homophobia. Therefore, the proposal is a direct response to a law that enhances politically correct values. Thus, again, it appears that the phenomenon of Christianophobia is directly connected to the Italian development of political correctness and the protection of minority groups.

### Is it a political strategy?

The question arises whether the Northern League is advancing this law and changes in order to obtain votes from religious circles in Italy. Catholics in Italy have strong political power and represent a large number of voters. Therefore, discussing Christianophobia could be a good political strategy for the League. Nevertheless, this does not negate the fact that Catholics in Italy identify with this idea of Christianophobia because it may well be a real problem.

"Discussing Christianophobia could be a good political strategy for the League."

### Bridging bubbles

In conclusion, Christians who express values that go against the 'politically correct' often feel discriminated against in Italy. As a consequence, politicians in Italy are proposing laws and reforms to counteract this phenomenon. These reforms are based on the same 'politically correct' strategies and principles used by discriminated groups. So while there is a law against homophobia, right-wing politicians are trying to develop a parallel law against Christianophobia. However, this situation risks creating bubbles and divisions in Italian society rather than bridging gaps. We will need to see in which way Italy will respond to this challenge and bridge these gaps among different Italian social groups.

*Ghila Amati*



## Awareness of normativity as a tool for dialogue

### Switzerland built on different identities

In 1291, three rural communities signed a protection agreement with each other. Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwald are the first three cantons forming Switzerland. In 1815, Switzerland became the Confederation of 22 cantons as we know it today. The first cantons of Switzerland were German speaking, and when Bern became part of the Confederation, French- and Italian-speaking communities allied with these cantons.

Each canton came into the alliance with its own confessional, social, and ethical norms. The confessional norms in the canton of St-Gallen were Catholic while they were Protestant in the cantons of Zurich and Geneva. In Geneva, for example, Calvin instituted moral rules such as the sense of modesty in clothing. These norms, present in the Confederation, show that normativity was a building block for Switzerland's founding community. Yet, how do Swiss people consider their norms today? Is the Swiss norm often taken into account in political and ethical debates?

### Normativity as a source of ethical debates

One recent event portrays the importance of norms in Swiss society and the discussions that surround them. In September 2020, there was a controversy in a middle school in Geneva. The middle school asked that two boys and ten girls wear a white XXL t-shirt provided by the school because their outfit was inappropriate. One girl was wearing high-waisted jeans with a white pullover which revealed her stomach slightly. The mother of this girl filed a complaint because, according to her, her daughter was wearing an appropriate outfit. The t-shirt provided by the school featured the symbol of a Facebook 'like' on it, in addition to the text 'an appropriate outfit'.

Following this event, it was revealed that other similar situations had occurred in other middle schools in French-speaking cantons. Many discussions followed this event, with a major focus of discussions being about the continued sexualisation of women's bodies. Debates about women's clothing are recurrent in Switzerland and mostly in Geneva, as it became a social norm. When Calvin reformed Geneva, he established many rules and morals to make better Christians out of the citizens of Geneva. These rules are not used anymore, but still shape social norms today. The main one is the norm of modesty in social contexts through clothing and ways of being. However, the example of the t-shirt in the middle school reveals how this norm of modesty disagrees with the freedom of expression of young girls today. Because of a religious norm, individuals are limited in their freedom of expression. Therefore, how can the awareness of our religious norms become relevant for freedom of expression?

### Academia in Switzerland offers tools for awareness of normativity

In Switzerland, the faculties of theology are Catholic or Protestant according to their locations. For example, The Chur School of Theology teaches about Catholic confession as Chur is the oldest city in Switzerland and became Catholic in the 4th century. Therefore, the faculties assume part of their historical identity by teaching about the confession that historically formed the canton. However, the tendency to affirm a confessional identity in a faculty is largely discussed. The majority of these faculties propose a program in the first year that is focused on learning the theology of the specific confession. Then the program invites students to learn

about other religions by going into History of Religions classes. These bachelor programs depict the debate of normativity in Swiss academia. In the field of religion, students are made aware of their religious and cultural norms, and are taught how to use these norms for a dialogue with other confessions or religions. So can this identity policy, in the field of religion, truly help in the matter of freedom of expression?

### How norms influence freedom of religion in Switzerland

In Swiss law, freedom of religion is clearly stated. But in reality, this freedom is not present in all situations. Two past votes revealed the gap between rural and urban communities in Switzerland. In 2010, all Swiss citizens had to vote on the possibility of building minarets in Switzerland. The law on banning the construction of new minarets passed with a small majority of people from German-speaking rural communities. The same event happened in 2020 with the vote on banning the wearing of burqas in public space. In September 2021, the Swiss population will vote on the matter of 'marriage for all'. But will a religious norm, which later became a Swiss cultural norm, once again not permit freedom of religion?

## Votes revealing the gap between Swiss rural and urban communities



Banning the construction of new minarets



Banning burqas in public space



Marriage for all

### Awareness of normativity for freedom of expression

These examples show how a few cultural norms that originate from the 16th-century theological discourse in Switzerland are still impacting Swiss society in the present day. An attachment to some Christian moral values and the practice of modesty influence daily decisions in Switzerland and seem to contradict freedom of expression.



However, if used differently, these norms have the potential to harmonise freedom of religion with freedom of expression. These events happened due to a lack of awareness of the different religious norms that were included in the debate. In the case of the vote on minarets and the burqa, rural communities are not often in dialogue with people of other religions. Thus, they are not aware of Swiss Muslims' cultural norms. Moreover, the t-shirt incident shows that the representatives of education in Geneva are often not aware that their cultural norm comes from Calvin's time. In Switzerland, theological faculties have grasped this issue of misuse of normativity. Thus, they try to teach about these norms in order to produce a fruitful dialogue with other religions.

These religious norms, which later became social norms, are significant for dialogue as they portray the identity of the people in dialogue. Freedom of religion starts with becoming aware of norms present in different religions. Freedom of expression would also be more respected through this awareness, as freedom of religion and freedom of expression are interconnected due to this historical shift from religious norms to social norms. In conclusion, our awareness of our normativity can be used as a tool for dialogue to harmonise freedom of religion with freedom of expression in Switzerland.

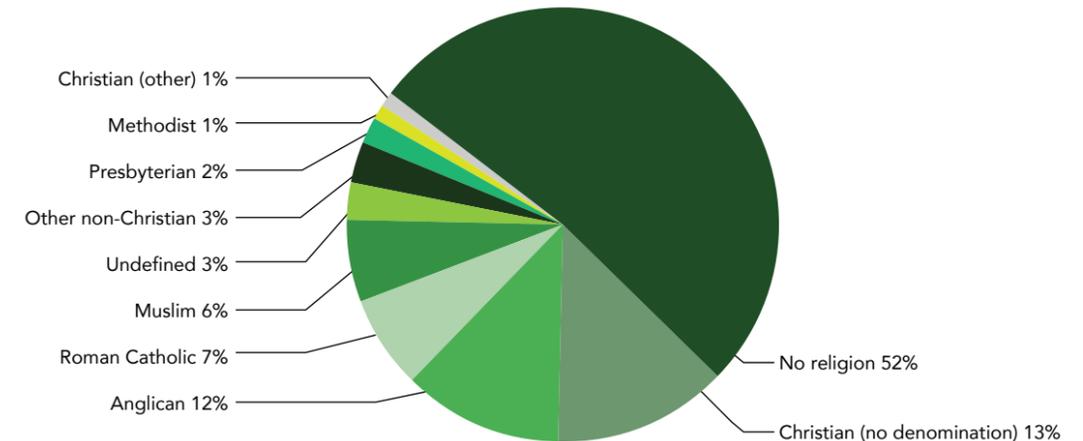
Emma Van Dorp

## Navigating religious freedoms within a secularising society

### Religious identity within the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom (UK) differs from many of its European peers as it is one of the few nations to have a state religion, Anglicanism. Despite the established status of the Church of England, the vast majority of the British populace do not consider themselves members. In fact, studies suggest around as little as 12% of the British population identify as Anglican. Overall, 38-59% of Brits identify as some denomination of Christianity, whereas 25-52% profess no religion at all.

Religious identity in the UK (2018)



Additionally, some argue that 'identifying' as one religion differs from actual religious participation. If statistics on regular church attendance are examined, the numbers drop further, with reports of about 5% of the British population attending church in 2015. For comparison's sake, the third-largest religious identification, besides Christian and 'no religion', is Muslim, with around 5% of the population identifying thusly in 2011.

### Scottish hate crime bill controversy

Given the growing lack of religious affiliation in the UK, normativity has become increasingly more secular and political. This has led, in some situations, to clashes between the government and religious institutions.



One such struggle recently arose in the form of Scotland's Hate Crime and Public Order Bill. The bill, designed to modernise Scotland's hate crime laws, would scrap unnecessary laws, such as antiquated rules that criminalised blasphemy. Other components, however, created new measures for handling hate speech, which swiftly generated controversy over freedom of speech and religion. One section of the bill would have penalised the possession of "threatening, abusive, or insulting material with a view to communicating the material to another person." Another would have criminalised "stirring up hatred," regardless of authorial or speaker intent, thereby placing restrictions on inflammatory material.

A widespread coalition from groups like the National Secular Society and the Network of Sikh Organisations criticised the law. The Catholic Church warned that those who opposed gay marriage or increased transgender rights on religious grounds could be prosecuted. The Bishops' Conference of Scotland feared that the restrictions on inflammatory writings could be interpreted to cover religious texts, like the Bible.

Not all groups united in opposition, though. Muslim Engagement and Development and the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) agreed with the Scottish government asserting that, despite imperfections, the bill ought to be passed. Acknowledging some of the aforementioned concerns, SCoJeC called for increased protections for religious beliefs, noting that some religious communities, like Jews and Sikhs, would be covered under ethnic protections, but that such protections should extend to members of all religions.

Ultimately, several of the controversial elements were removed from the bill by the time it passed into law in March 2021. That said, concerns, particularly around freedom of expression, still exist. The debate over the bill illustrates the delicate balance in the UK amongst freedom of expression, religious beliefs, and ethnic and religious minorities, an area likely to see continued debate in the years to come.

#### Gay conversation therapy controversy

A good illustration of the tension surrounding normativity in the UK has been the practice of so-called 'gay conversion therapy'. Such 'therapy' is aimed at people who exhibit sexual attraction towards members of their own sex, and seeks to change them to a heterosexual orientation. 'Treatment' often involves a combination of psychological, spiritual, and physical interventions.

A 2018 survey of LGBTQ+ people in Britain found that conversion therapy is most commonly offered by some faith communities, and is usually based upon theological reasoning. Gay conversion therapy is often justified by asserting that homosexual tendencies arise because of sinful desires or due to the influence of Satan. Homosexuality is therefore seen as an illusion, a (temporary) distortion of one's true human nature. Conservative brands of many religions have historically understood sex to be legitimate only as a means for procreation, and therefore consider gay sex to be illegitimate.

The LGBTQ+ community, medical practitioners, and human rights advocates all condemn the practice. According to them, it is a breach of the individual's right to self-determination and leads to a host of negative health impacts. It also relies upon the premise that it is normative to engage in sexual activity only with those of the opposite sex.

However, some say that the right to religious freedom is being compromised by a left-wing neo-liberal ideology that wishes to impose its own normative secular values upon everyone. A ban on conversion therapy

would be discriminatory to faith communities and may lead to the practice being forced underground. So far, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government has been slow to deliver the promised ban on conversion therapy. Part of the bind he finds himself in is due to competing (and so far irreconcilable) normativities.

#### A dangerous bargain? State-funded and -regulated faith schools

Normativity in education is an inescapable phenomenon as much as normativity in funding and legal requirements. The UK has 'faith schools' that receive funding from the state. These schools sit at the intersection of several forms of normativity.

While 'faith schools' are often lumped together, they represent many different communities. In 2014, in England, among the 6,210 state-funded faith primary schools, 70.77% were affiliated with the Church of England, 26.45% Roman Catholic, 0.58% Jewish, 0.14% Muslim, and 0.08% Sikh. Among the 628 state-funded faith secondary schools, 33.54% are Church of England, 50.78% Roman Catholic, 1.88% Jewish, 1.41% Muslim, and 0.47% Sikh. The imbalance may constitute a kind of normativity: Christian predominance. However, a withdrawal of support for faith schools would affect not only Christian schools, but disproportionately religious minority schools.

Education is a form of cultural normativity, determining what is taught, how it is taught, and to whom it is taught. All state-funded — including non-faith — schools legally must offer religious education of some kind, though students' participation is non-obligatory. State-funded faith schools have more control over curriculum, but funds can influence what can be taught and how. The level of legal normativity enforced on faith schools varies with their types, from significant control in 'voluntary controlled schools' (most control is ceded to the local council) to very little in 'academies' (they charge no fees but operate virtually independently).

The most controversy surrounds social capital's normativity, i.e. who can go to faith schools. Faith schools can choose students on the basis of their family's religious affiliation and participation, though not all do. Yet social normativity is also involved with questions of who gets to run the school, with regulations requiring faith schools to surrender some autonomy in governance to get funds. Faith schools demonstrate rival normativities. Yet, the diversity of school types and local situations affect which normativity takes precedence. Both religion and the state could be said to have made a dangerous bargain: religion for letting the government meddle in their education, or the government for letting religion do the same.

#### Learning from these case studies in UK normativity

The religious and political landscape of the UK is diverse. Complex religious and non-religious normativities present within UK society are compounded by the UK's several devolved legislatures.

All societies must implement normativities, but normativities at the intersection of religious and political life have the potential to be weaponised in either direction. Perhaps in the above cases, these rival normativities will not be reconcilable. However, they show that the first step forward is for communities holding rival normativities to seek to remove causes for fear of one another and increase causes for trust.

*Tyler Mikulis, Frazer MacDiarmid and R. Anthony Buck*

# Digitalisation

```
def watchInput(...).merge(nonts, pipeline.tsPro...
return watcher(src, {...src...
def watchInput():
    with pymc3:
        pipe(util.incrSample(size, chains=...
        pipe(guip.dest(out));
def get_sample_class_frv = {
    'scipy': SampleFiniteScipy,
    'pymc3': SampleFinitePymc,
    'compiled': SampleFiniteNumpy
}
def pipeline = createPipeline(...)
```



## Can AI replicate religious leaders and rituals?

— Author recommendation

### AI religious rituals around the world

In 2017, Japanese plastic moulding company Nissei Eco developed a robot called Pepper, programmed to conduct Buddhist rituals and funeral ceremonies. Pepper wears a human ceremonial dress and can perform a funeral ceremony for a much lower rate (\$462) than charged by human priests (\$2,232). Again in Japan, a new priest named Mindar is at the head of Kodaiji, a 400-year-old Buddhist temple in Kyoto. Japanese worshippers have stated not to be bothered by the robot Mindar and “about the risks of siliconizing spirituality.” This response could be explained by the fact that Japanese people are already so used to using robots in their country.

In Beijing’s Longquan Monastery in China, Xian’er — an android monk — recites Buddhist mantras and offers guidance on matters of faith. In India, to give another example, there is a robot that performs the Hindu aarti ritual which is characterised by moving a light back and forth in front of a deity.

The phenomenon of employing robots for the performance of religious rituals is present in Europe as well. In 2017 — in honour of the Protestant Reformation’s 500th anniversary — the Protestant Church in Germany developed the BlessU-2 robot, which gave more than 10,000 blessings to the faithful. Another example of a Christian robot is SanTO, which resembles Catholic saints. The robot responds to people’s worries with quotations from the New Testament. Robotist Gabriele Trovato — the designer of SanTO — has said he decided to develop the robot to offer a spiritual figure to elderly people who have mobility problems. He is also planning to develop robots for Muslims. A Confession Chatbot app has also been developed for Catholic believers. The faithful can log into the app and have an interactive conversation about their sins. While the app could solve the problem of embarrassment of confessing for the individual, it may raise many ethical problems connected with the nature and content of the confession.

“The robot responds to people’s worries with quotations from the New Testament.”

### The relation to AI depends on the religion

Different religions have different relations to AI, and react differently to the impact that AI has on them. On the one hand, non-monotheistic religions such as Buddhism believe that everything in the world — even technology — is permeated by a godly aspect and by ‘Buddha’s nature’. Non-monotheistic religions may seem more predisposed to the spiritual guidance that comes from technology. At the temple in Kyoto, Buddhist monk Tensho Goto said: “Buddhism isn’t a belief in a God; it’s pursuing Buddha’s path. It doesn’t matter whether it’s represented by a machine, a piece of scrap metal, or a tree.” He has also argued that the advantage of AI over human beings is that they are immortal and therefore can store infinite information throughout the centuries: “[Mindar] can meet a lot of people and store a lot of information [over time]. It will evolve infinitely.”

On the other hand, monotheistic religions may have more issues with AI technology. Abrahamic religions

such as Islam or Judaism are metaphysically dualistic and are characterised by a much stricter separation between the sacred and profane. These religions are against the depiction of the deity and consider many of these depictions idolatry. In this sense, they may have a strong issue with Mindar-style iconography. In addition, monotheistic religions — such as Judaism — give more space to intentionality in prayer. A prayer needs to be made out of a deep and intentional involvement and it is not enough to say the right words in order to be a good Jew. It is exactly this intentionality that machines lack.

Moreover, as Ilia Delio — Franciscan sister with a chair in theology at Villanova University — argued, AI priests will challenge the traditional understanding of Catholicism of human priests. She argues that Christianity looks at priests as divinely called and consecrated — a status that assures them their unique authority — and that AI challenges this belief: “We have these fixed philosophical ideas and AI challenges those ideas — it challenges Catholicism to move toward a post-human priesthood.”

### Will the emergence of AI religion enhance us?

Will the emergence of AI technology and AI priests improve our society? What are the effects of this new technology on religious life?

On the one hand, robots can help suscite the interest and curiosity of people that are far away from religion. AI robots can also increase the involvement of the faithful in religious rituals that become a real attraction in the presence of AI robots. Moreover, the involvement of AI in religious rituals will keep religion abreast of the times and help keep religion relevant to our modern world. Furthermore, this technology could make the performance of religious rituals cheaper, as we have seen in Japan, and could be very useful in places in which a human priest for some reason is inaccessible, such as in the Amazon region where there is a shortage of priests. Finally, with AI machines, faithful will have to worry less about immoral actions of priests and religious figures such as sexual abuse or money scandals.

On the other hand, robots pose high risks for religion. AI technology may make religion impersonal and too mechanised, and may make it hard for faithful to have a deep religious or mystical experience. Religious rituals are often about community and human relationships between the faithful and the religious leader. This relationship may be lost when the faithful have to relate to impersonal and non-human technology. Moreover, AI technology may bring about theological and ethical problems such as the theological problems of free will and afterlife. But also the questions of how an AI priest will handle ethical dilemmas brought to it by the faithful. We will discuss these problems more at length below.

### Free will and ethical dilemmas

The first theological problem is the problem of free will and the human soul. If AI technology develops so far as to create AI robots with free will, people will have to ask themselves whether these robots have a soul. Up to date, monotheistic religions have considered the soul to be a unique aspect of human beings and have argued that human beings possess a soul as they were made in God’s image. Since human beings are



endowed with a soul they are able to sin, but can also repent. This means that they are in a constant relationship with God. But if it is true that artificially intelligent machines will have free will and therefore also a soul, does this imply that they can also establish a relationship with God? Kevin Kelly, Christian co-founder of *Wired* magazine, argues we need to develop “a catechism for robots.” He states that “there will be a point in the future when these free-willed beings that we’ve made will say to us, ‘I believe in God. What do I do?’ At that point, we should have a response.”

Another potential problem could arise the other way around. This considers how AI priests or other religious figures will handle ethical questions brought to them from the faithful and how they will make decisions on religious topics. Robots are not human beings and may be unable to understand the uniqueness of each situation. They also risk providing answers to the faithful which are based on algorithms that are not adequate to that specific and unique situation. In a sense, AI machines may lack intuitions about what to do and what to choose to say.

#### AI will change our experience of religion, but collaboration is possible

The use of AI for religious rituals is still a small phenomenon, yet more and more religious communities may in time incorporate robotics into their religious life. These robots are not always powered by AI. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the more AI technology will develop, the more AI technology will be used in religious rituals. This new reality will almost certainly change how people experience faith, religious experiences, and religious rituals. It may also change the way humans think about ethical problems and the way they will make ethical decisions. We have seen that the emergence of AI technology may bring both positive and negative tidings to our society. The real challenge will be to develop a world in which robots and humans are not competitors but rather collaborators. Each offers something the other lacks, and they will need to learn to use each other to improve society rather than demise it.

*Ghila Amati*

## AI and privacy in Europe

*This article was written in preparation for our round table on Artificial Intelligence.*

With the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), concerns about the risks that it may pose have also become more and more significant. Voice assistants, search engines, speech and face recognition, advanced robots, autonomous cars, and drones represent not only digital advances that government and private industry are managing, but also developments that we as individuals are experiencing in our everyday lives. A crucial aspect of our lives that AI affects is our privacy. But why is that? Unlike other or earlier innovations, AI has a far greater ability — both power and speed — to use personal data in ways that can shape what we think and do, and therefore, intrude into our private lives. This makes it ever more possible for governments and private organisations to collect and use unprecedented amounts of personal data on us from every facet of our lives: each time we use our mobile phones, watch TV, or check the search engine.

#### Harvesting private lives

AI’s intrusion has become an increasingly significant part of everyday lives in Europe. The digital transformation of political campaigning in Europe, particularly around social media, highlights this. Despite public scares, such as the 2018 Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal, political parties across the world, and indeed in Europe, are relying more and more on harvesting personal data to influence voters. Recent developments in political campaigning by European populist political parties of Spain, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom have specifically focused on using social media technology — more and more powered by AI — to better target and influence voters’ beliefs about religion and Europe itself. During the European Parliament election campaign in 2019, for example, Podemos, Vox, the 5 Star Movement, Lega, Rassemblement National, France Insoumise, the Brexit Party, and UKIP, all published and promoted Eurosceptic messages on their Twitter accounts. Researchers at the Universitat Jaume I, Castellón de la Plana, Spain found that these messages questioned the maintenance of “the foundational values of Europe, such as equality or solidarity between different people and countries.” One party, Rassemblement National, tweeted that by letting in refugees, the European Union was also exposing Europe to terrorism. The party, according to its Twitter campaigning, was the only political option that will protect its voters from immigration and its consequences.

#### Protecting personal data

The European Union (EU) has been working hard — or harder than others — to address these challenges. Its 2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) ushered in new standards worldwide on a person’s right to his or her own data. The Luxembourg-based Court of the Justice of the European Union (ECJ) 2018 ruling, soon after GDPR’s introduction, shows the protection these standards may offer to Europeans. The ruling asked Jehovah’s Witnesses to comply with GDPR’s data privacy requirements during door-to-door preaching: “A religious community, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, is a controller, jointly with its members who engage in preaching, for the processing of personal data carried out by the latter in the context of door-to-door preaching,” judges said. “The processing of personal data carried out in the context of such activity must respect the rules of EU law on the protection of personal data.” For a start, preachers from Jehovah’s Witnesses would



need to get people's consent before they take down their personal details, so that they may be digitally collected and stored. To be sure, the EU's GDPR seeks to protect religious as well as secular information as communities, institutions, and organisations in Europe increasingly go through digital transformation.

#### **Baptising AI**

Another recent push to better deal with the challenges of AI in Europe was by the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). The RCC issued the 'Rome Call for AI Ethics' in February 2020, demanding stricter ethical standards on the development of AI, to "protect people," including the "weak and underprivileged." It proposed adherence to six broad principles: transparency, inclusion, responsibility, impartiality, reliability, and security and privacy. According to the RCC, this ethical development and use of AI was possible through the creation of new forms of regulation on "advanced technologies that have a higher risk of impacting human rights." On privacy specifically, the RCC called for "AI to respect users' privacy," that is the responsible design of AI that respects people's right to their personal information. The Vatican's AI ethics initiative was met with initial success, with tech giants IBM and Microsoft agreeing to sign on its new initiative. While the RCC hopes to increase the number of companies that are 'baptised' into its AI ethics initiative, it is also hoping to collaborate with universities across the globe to promote ethical AI guidelines. The concern for AI was again repeated by Pope Francis in November 2020, when he asked believers around the world to pray that Artificial Intelligence always served mankind, adding that this would only be possible if AI was harnessed correctly: "Indeed, if technological progress increases inequalities, it is not true progress. Future advances should be orientated towards respecting the dignity of the person."

"Pope Francis asked believers around the world to pray that Artificial Intelligence always served mankind."

#### **Privacy vs power**

But is the RCC's approach — the creation of ethical standards — enough? For many academics and activists, the only way to deal with AI's encroachment into our private lives is to take back control of our personal data. While existing standards, such as the EU's GDPR, protect how our personal data is kept and used, it also lets governments and companies use this personal data to monitor and shape our knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours. Dr Carissa Véliz, Associate Professor at the University of Oxford's Institute for Ethics in AI, argues that digital technology's greater power to harness our personal data — often without our permission or even awareness — also allows it to steal our power to make free choices and hands it over to governments and companies. In 'Privacy is Power', she argues that "tech companies are harvesting your location, your likes, your habits, your relationships, your fears, your medical issues, and sharing it amongst themselves, as well as with governments and a multitude of data vultures. They're not just selling your data. They're selling the power to influence you and decide for you." So, while Europe's approach of protecting our personal data may be better than others, it, like every other region and country, is unable to protect us from how influential that

use may be. Crucially, this influence — increasing with the burgeoning trade in personal data — extends to things we considered invariably private, and therefore, inaccessible to digital technology. Dr Véliz argues that this unprecedented extent of influence compels us to recognise the power of data better: "... people should protect their privacy because privacy is a kind of power." If we continue to give too much of our personal data away, we may even risk sliding into authoritarianism. "For democracy to be strong, the bulk of power needs to be with the citizenry, and whoever has the data will have the power. Privacy is not a personal preference; it is a political concern," she insists.

#### **An uncertain future**

Are the admirable or well-intentioned efforts of the RCC, or even of the EU's GDPR, significant enough to thwart the use of our personal data by governments and private industry? It seems unlikely. These efforts appear to not be enough for people in Europe to take back control, given both policy and activism need to not only regulate or ethically steward AI but also transform the very institutions that we take part in every day. But is it really possible to take back control of our personal data, as Dr Véliz argues? Can people transform their political relationship with governments and companies? And if so, how should we do it?

*Muhammad Faisal Khalil*



## New tech, politics, and old religion: What is the future of technology in religion?

— *Author recommendation*

An internet-savvy millennial moves towards sainthood. Ridley Scott produces a new futuristic dystopian TV series 'Raised by Wolves' where religion, politics, and technology all fight to shape the future of humanity. UK religious leaders object to a second lockdown ban on in-person worship. These three contemporaneous events may seem unconnected, but together they may signal the future of technology's relationship with religion.

### Will Carlo Acutis be the patron saint of new tech?

The Roman Catholic Church has taken a step towards getting its first millennial saint. On 10 October 2020, Pope Francis beatified Carlo Acutis. Beatification is the third step of the four-step process towards canonisation, the technical term for becoming a saint. First, a person is declared a 'servant of God' if they lived a sufficiently holy life upon investigation. Second, the person is pronounced 'venerable' if they are shown to have displayed 'heroic virtue'. Third, a miracle attributed to them is verified and they are subsequently beatified and called 'blessed'. Fourth, after two miracles are verified, they are canonised as a 'saint'.

In 2006, Carlo Acutis died aged 15 from leukaemia. He was known for his strong faith, for his concern for the poor, and for using his programming skills and the internet to spread the Catholic faith. There are also two miracles claimed for him: 1) the officially verified 2013 healing of a 7-year-old boy in Brazil from a rare pancreatic disorder after touching one of Carlo's t-shirts; and 2) Acutis mother's unverified report he also healed a woman from cancer while he was still alive. However, becoming a saint is not merely a matter of having the proper amount of miracles attributed to them, but also especially of the kind of model the church wants to put forward for its people and, to a lesser extent, to the world. This becomes especially clear when we consider what was highlighted about Carlo Acutis. Pope Francis said, "His testimony shows today's young people that true happiness is found by putting God first and serving people, especially among the poorest in society." In 2019's *Christus Vivit*, the pope exhorts, "Carlo was well aware that the whole apparatus of communications, advertising and social networking can be used to lull us, to make us addicted to consumerism and buying the latest thing on the market, obsessed with our free time, caught up in negativity."

Pope Francis elevates Acutis as a model of lived faith in a world being shaped by digital technologies. Simultaneously, this challenges the default pattern of human life that these technologies can assume and impose. The pope suggests that as much as it can be used for good, this new tech can also use people and degrade their humanity. The selection of Acutis, then, is not merely a matter of piety or theology, but an intentional move to undermine commitment to the value system of new tech that is baked into the technology and generated as people use it.

### Who will be humanity's wolves? Religion? Politics? Technology?

Meanwhile in Hollywood, Ridley Scott discusses his new TV series 'Raised by Wolves'. In this series, written by Aaron Guzikowski, androids seek to raise human children in their own image on a new planet. The series

deals with religious images. Guzikowski explains, "you're seeing all of these iconic elements — the serpent, the garden, Adam and Eve — but they're not the versions we know. We subvert expectations a little bit." The series intentionally plays with how religious, political, and technological visions of the world intersect and struggle against each other. Scott reflects: "Religion, politics, and technology are the same thing and they [fight to] control one another. They ought to be separated." So, in the wider cultural landscape, a perception of the competing visions of humanity found in religion, politics, and technology is emerging in the form of a TV series. The struggle between politics and religion is well known, but the entrance of new tech as a competitive and distinctive vision of humanity is now growing as well. In this light, we can understand 'Raised by Wolves' as a pop-cultural parallel to the beatification of Acutis.

### Religious pushback on politics forcing technology on religion?

This three-way fight becomes clearer when we note that unlike at the beginning of the first lockdown, UK religious leaders strongly objected to banning in-person worship during the second. On 5 November 2020, a letter signed by Archbishop of the Church of England Justin Welby and by high-ranking Catholic, Pentecostal, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu religious leaders was sent to Boris Johnson protesting the ban. They considered it an illegitimate or at least unnecessary use of political power against religious communities. Some even suggest it is a violation of, and/or a threat to, religious freedom. Yet, the letter identifies technologically-mediated services as ultimately problematic, even if pragmatically necessary. Moreover, the letter repeatedly states people's need to meet and gather in person for worship and the value of embodied presence. These religions are unwilling to allow digital technology (and the vision of the world it brings with it) to shape or determine their communities' vision of humanity and their values, even if they think being able to use this technology is important. In this way, the UK religious leaders' objection is a further manifestation of the three-way rivalry between religion, politics, and technology that Scott identifies, when he says "[r]eligion, politics, and technology are the same thing and they [fight to] control one another."

### What is the future of technology in religion?

Old religions are integrating new tech, but not uncritically. Like the beatification of Acutis, they might feel the need to subvert a technological vision of the world by raising up new models of faith. Religions sometimes seek to cooperate with political powers for the public good. Simultaneously, religions must resist ceding too much to them. Correspondingly, religions may soon have to navigate technology as a new competitor. In other words, just as religions presently have to be politically aware, the future celebrated models of faith might also need to be techno-savvy.

*R. Anthony Buck*



## Swipe right for a wife: The curious phenomenon of Christian dating websites

— *Author recommendation*

### Dating in a time of COVID-19

It turns out that a pandemic is a sure way to destroy people's chances of meeting new people and finding love. With Europe in lockdown for much of 2020, and into 2021, many have turned to the internet to help them find a partner. Dating sites such as Tinder, Match.com, and Hinge have seen big increases in signups and usage because of COVID-19.

Christians are also increasingly turning to online dating to help them find a partner, with some Christian dating platforms reporting an increase of at least 20% each month since March 2020 compared to the year before. And there are numerous websites and apps that cater to the Christian user, who may feel uncomfortable with the mainstream alternatives.

Dating apps such as Tinder have a reputation for helping people have casual sex, without the expectation of any long-term commitment. This is commonly thought of as counter to the Christian sacrament of marriage. Indeed, even the very idea of using the internet to find a partner is abhorrent to some Christians. The creator of one prominent UK-based Christian dating site has said that she has noticed hostility from some evangelical Christians. They see her service as distasteful meddling in God's plan, and that '[i]f God wants you to find somebody, then it will happen'.

This article surveys three prominent Christian dating sites in the UK to try to understand the phenomenon and its appeal, as well as scrutinise any weaknesses.

### Christian Connection

This is one of the oldest dating sites, being launched over 20 years ago. It has also featured in the BBC's *Songs of Praise*, and won various awards. They give quite detailed criteria about those who are able to use their platform. In order to qualify as a Christian, according to Christian Connection, you must be Trinitarian (therefore excluding many denominations including Jehovah's Witnesses, Unitarians, Christian Scientists, and Mormons), and assent to a sort of home-made creed. This somewhat arbitrary definition of 'Christian' may be seen as a weak point. What if I call myself a Christian, and desperately want to find a spouse, but cannot literally accept the ascension of Jesus Christ, as the platform demands?

Christian Connection does allow LGBTQ people to sign up to their platform, and stresses the importance of accepting the beliefs of others. The site's creator, Jackie Elton, says that one of her main motivations was the invisibility of single people in churches. A recent survey found that more than a third of single people feel ignored, inadequate, and think they are treated differently from those in relationships. Church leaders are so focused on families and married couples that they often forget single people exist and have needs too, and often do not know how to meet these needs pastorally and theologically, she believes. She has also noticed embarrassment in churches about the issue, and fear of seeming like a match-making service.

### ChristianMingle.com

Also popular in the UK, ChristianMingle.com emphasises the 'customisability' of its platform. You can search using any number of categories, and define your Christian identity precisely. It allows indecision and ambiguity: denomination choices include 'non-denominational', 'interdenominational', and 'not sure yet'. Unlike Christian Connection, they are clearly accepting of a broader range of what it means to be a Christian. However, their acceptance does not seem to extend to LGBTQ people: a search for the words 'gay' and 'homosexual' on the site returned 0 results.

According to ChristianMingle.com, their platform works by matching people with common 'values, goals, and ... relationship with God'. While this might seem fine, it is worth pausing to ask: are successful relationships always between people who believe the same things? Of course, this is a question to be asked of Christian dating sites in general. Furthermore, is it possible that two people's 'relationship with God' can ever be the same? On the basis of these criticisms, this website might need to give more thought to how they coordinate matches. At least their online security protocols are rigorous: ChristianMingle.com does not allow you to create a password that includes the word 'believe'.

### Catholic Match

The last site we look at is specifically for Catholics, and differentiates itself from other dating sites by their focus on 'sacramental marriage'. Their goal is to 'promote more holy and healthy Catholic marriages', which seems to accord with Catholic teaching. Users are asked all kinds of questions about their Catholic practice, such as what liturgical style you like, whether you attend Mass regularly, and whether you believe in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Such rigour is presumably to allow users to be matched specifically according to their Christian beliefs, which, as suggested, may be unhelpful. Some users of Catholic Match also complain that it is impossible to sum yourself up according to the website's relentless questions, and that because the website is poorly explained, many are painfully shy and unresponsive.

### The future of Christian dating apps

The outlook remains good for Christian dating sites, as normal life still seems a long way away for many in Europe. There are several areas in which these sites could improve, such as clarifying arbitrary criteria, and not restricting matches to people holding identical Christian beliefs. From user feedback, it appears that the quality of Christian dating platforms is also lacking compared to secular ones, due to problems with the interface and loading times. Christian dating sites will have to improve in order to compete with the likes of Tinder, Bumble, and match.com. But for many Christians, some initial awkwardness (perhaps) notwithstanding, using a platform that recognises the centrality of faith for one's life and lifelong relationship is important. They feel that they will find people with whom they share meaningful beliefs and values, not only a hobby or a favourite TV show.

Frazer MacDiarmid



## Gokuism: The anime religion

Gokuism seems to be a newly emerging religion that is based on the moral example of the protagonist in the Dragon Ball series: Son Goku. It is not an officially recognised religion, but rather a shared creation of fans on the internet.

### What is Dragon Ball about?

Dragon Ball (and later Dragon Ball Z, Kai, and Super) is one of the most popular Japanese anime TV series ever made, and has been broadcast in 81 countries around the world. The story centres around the figure of Son Goku; a member of the so-called 'Saiyan' race of extraterrestrial warriors, who was sent to Earth as a child to conquer or destroy the planet. However, due to a head injury, he forgot about his origins, and instead became a heroic defender of Earth against evil villains. Goku has become a very influential cultural figure since he was adopted as one of the mascots for the 2020 Olympics in Japan, creating much public attention. The committee argued that Goku is a good representation of the Olympic spirit of constant self-improvement.

"Goku has become a very influential cultural figure since he was adopted as one of the mascots for the 2020 Olympics in Japan."

### Goku's roots in Chinese mythology and Buddhist history

According to the story, Goku was born with a monkey's tail, which reflects a mythological connection that is not accidental. 'Son Goku' is the Japanese name for the Monkey King (Sun Wukong) from the classic 16th-century Chinese novel called 'Journey to the West', which Dragon Ball was loosely based on. The novel itself is in turn based on the pilgrimage of the 7th-century Buddhist monk Xuanzang to India, in search of sacred manuscripts. The Monkey King in the story is a trickster god and playful superhero who protects Xuanzang on his journey back to China. Many regard the novel as the most popular literary work in all of East Asia.

Other characters in the series, such as King Enma, are also clearly based on East Asian religious and mythological figures. Even Goku's quest to find the Dragon Balls can be seen as a kind of pilgrimage to find holy relics that bestow magical powers, which he ends up using for selfless purposes. His quest eventually ends when he attains a combination of Buddhist enlightenment and Daoist immortality, revealing the deep religious ideals that underlie the story.

### Goku as a mythological hero

The origin story of Son Goku also has striking similarities to other stories about saviours and heroes, such as the myth of Superman. Both heroes were born on an alien planet, and their parents sent them to Earth as babies before their native planets were destroyed. They were both adopted by humans, but eventually discovered their true origins. To speak in mythological terms, both heroes came from 'heaven' (outer space), were endowed with 'divine' powers (superpowers), and sacrificed themselves for the good of humanity, while battling the forces of evil.

### Goku as a saviour figure

Therefore, as others have noticed, Goku is also similar to the figure of Jesus Christ. Both Goku and Jesus willingly die for the salvation of humanity, ascend to heaven, and are resurrected. Both are an 'only son' who was sent from 'heaven' in order to save mankind and defeat evil. Goku's enemies, like those of Jesus, are often called 'demons', or even 'the Devil'. Both Goku and Jesus perform miracles and heal people. Moreover, both Goku and Jesus are tempted with great worldly power, but refuse it in order to serve others. As scholars of mythology like Joseph Campbell and Jordan Peterson have argued, hero mythology around the world has a common structure, and often culminates in a religious saviour figure, who is seen as the ultimate hero, and therefore as the ultimate moral example.

### Goku as a moral example

The fans of Gokuism seem to rely on Goku as a moral example or role model for their daily lives, such as by asking the question: what would Goku do? They derive a lot of inspiration from Goku's perseverance in the face of adversity, and his relentless self-improvement. For example, his rigorous training in martial arts has inspired many to go to the gym and start exercising. He has also inspired them to follow their dreams, no matter how hard the journey might be. Besides, Goku represents certain character traits or virtues that people would like to develop, such as humility, mercy (even for his enemies), and altruism.

### Is Gokuism a 'fake' religion?

Some readers might take issue with the idea that Gokuism would be a legitimate religious movement, because it is based on a 'fake' or invented story. But, of course, some atheists would say the same thing about many official religions around the world. We might say that Gokuism shows us how human beings can create meaningful stories that inspire them to be better, and that these stories do not have to be factually true to have their intended effects.

*Timo Pieters*

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EARS is a European network of departments and faculties of Theology and/or Religious Studies. The structure of EARS is based on different types of partnerships (participants, partners and founding partners).



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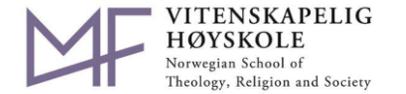
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