

**RELIGION AND POLITICS:**

**IS SECULARIZATION  
A MYTH OR REALITY?**

Edited by  
**Zoran Matevski**

# **Religion and politics: is secularization a myth or reality?**

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## Introduction

The content of this book derives from the papers presented at the Second World Conference for Religious Dialogue and Cooperation, which was held in Strumica (North Macedonia) in June 2023. The theme of the conference was “Religion and Politics: Is Secularization a Myth or Reality?” The Conference featured eminent professors and researchers from North Macedonia, Italy, the USA, the Netherlands, Belgium, Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria, Serbia, South Africa, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Romania, Greece, Estonia, Canada, Ukraine, Iran, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Australia and Sweden (22 countries worldwide).

The Second World Conference saw the presentation of the latest research results in the field of secularization. Evaluating the claims of the secularization story, we face several unresolved questions:

1. Is the suppression of religion limited to Europe and is the narrative of secularization at the same time an attempt to present the European experience to the rest of the world?

2. Are religious beliefs being comprehensively suppressed and are people becoming less religious, or are we dealing with new forms of religiosity, where new models of religious beliefs and practices are emerging that are replacing the traditional ones?

3. Has the religiosity of people not decreased and what has been achieved with the process of secularization? Is this a change in the social role of religion? Secularism is not the suppression of religion but an aspect of the weakening of religious authority.

The entanglement of politics in religion can lead to problems in society that arise as a result of politicized religion; i.e. to confessional homogenism and ideologized religion and to fanaticism that can end in terrorism against religious dissenters. In modern multicultural and multi-confessional societies, such an alliance between religion, religious communities and politics may lead to an increase in inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions and open opportunities for open clashes and conflicts between members of different ethnic and religious groups. A hallmark of the new, global right-wing populisms has been the bid to capture religious constituencies. The strategy is one of harnessing the emotive solidarities and conservative values which often characterize religious communities to the steed of ethno-religious nationalism. This pattern is evident from engagement of evangelicals in the USA, to the vilification of religious “others” by populists from Poland and Hungary to Turkey and India. And while the leaders of populist movements arguably act out of opportunism as much as conviction, their conjuring of ethno-religious passions has

culminated in exclusionary legislation and pogroms against religious, ethnic, and gender minorities. But even as right-wing populism relies on demonizing dualisms, its global scope undermines the binary frames we all too often use to read world politics. After all, scholars and policymakers alike tend to presume that pluralist democracy is to be found in the Global North and West, while illiberal and authoritarian regimes are situated in the Global South and East.

Civilizations are also narratives because they are nations writ large. As in the case of nations, so in the case of civilizations, the way one tells “stories” about “religious us” and “religious them,” “heroes” and “villains” forms the basis on which the notion of civilizations colliding with each other is constructed. Even the term “dialogue of civilizations” denotes the need for inter-civilization conversation in order to avoid conflict. Conflict between civilizations is, therefore, a built-in assumption that undergirds the concept of “dialogue of civilizations.” The term civilization may be fuzzier than that of nation, which is also slippery and malleable, and is often dependent upon context for its definition, but that is the nature of all concepts based on subjective feelings rather than irrefutable objective criteria. However, for those who harbor these feelings, they are, nonetheless, real and often deep-seated. The more convincing the narrative, and the longer it has been in existence, the greater attachment individuals have to their “nation” or their “civilization.”

Civilizations normally go beyond the boundaries of states and nations, and often encompass more than one nation or state. Nonetheless, like the “nation”, they evoke a “we” feeling often at the expense of denigrating and often demonizing “religious them,” that is, those belonging to other civilizations. This is particularly the case with imperial civilizations, namely those that have ruled over peoples belonging to other civilizations. Intra-civilization conflicts among imperial powers do not detract from the commonality of their perceptions regarding their “subjects,” namely, the people they rule over or have ruled over in the past. In modern terminology this is known as “racism.” In the heady days following the collapse of the Soviet Union, George W. Bush and Barack Obama embraced the notion of an ever-expanding, liberal and democratic world order. Francis Fukuyama even preached the “end of history,” prophesizing “the good news” of democracy’s inevitable spread and insisting that tech growth favors “a universal evolution in the direction of capitalism.” Recent events, notably the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, suggest it is time to bury these notions. In *The Clash*, Huntington predicted the Ukrainian conflict, as well the resurgence, at the expense of the West, of many cultures, including the Indian, Chinese, and Arab and Turkish ones.

Our two concurrent wars demonstrate Huntington’s thesis. The assault on Ukraine, which he foresaw, reflects not neo-Soviet ideology, but a deeply Russian

Orthodox racial world view. After all, Vladimir Putin's fears about NATO expansion into the former U.S.S.R. notes parallel traditional nationalist concerns that claim Ukraine is an essential part of their state, with roots to the earliest civilization that was long based in Kyiv, reaching back to the ninth century. China's emergence similarly speaks of revanchist notions more reflective of Han nationalism and Imperial tradition than Communist ideology. The red mandarins may spout Marxist credos but their appeal to the masses lies largely in nationalist desires to achieve the stated aim of becoming the leading global superpower by 2050.

The takeover of the Palestinian movement by Hamas wipes away even the smallest fig leaf of liberal intent for a two-nation solution. Hamas's goal is simple: eradicate Israel and its Jewish inhabitants. Longer term, the goals of the Islamists also include imposing their faith on even those Christians full of sympathy for the beleaguered Palestinians. The imbecilic Obama-Biden pandering to Iran demonstrates the foolishness of ignoring the fundamental realities. You cannot form a partnership with someone who wants you dead. Given the clear threat to the West and its values, how can we resist these forces? The bad news is that Hamas has the support not only of the duopoly, but also of many other revanchist powers. The good news is that, unlike old Communists, who shared a theoretically universal world view, the various forces uncorked by the current wars often have competing visions. After all, Russia may want Chinese money and technology, but it may not be so keen on seeing Beijing's sphere of influence spill into Siberia and the "near abroad" of Central Asia.

What has arguably overtaken the envisaged ascendancy of "liberal democracy" and the placing of entire civilizations on a war footing has been the globalization of neoliberal ideology and its concomitant by-product of populist reaction. Neoliberalism, which nearly all capitalist societies have embraced since the 1980s, has verifiably resulted in the inequitable distribution of national wealth to the few who effectively exercise power and benefit most from the policies they promote. That the large majority of people acquiesces to a situation that ostensibly disadvantages them is due to the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology and the difficulty of effectively questioning the global system it sustains. Enter populism, a phenomenon that is changing political landscapes throughout the world, though in different ways. In the West, populism manifests itself as a groundswell of right-wing disaffection with liberal democratic governments and corrupt ruling establishments. Populism of this kind is driven by narratives that identify metropolitan elites and multinational outsiders as virtual enemies of the state.

In South Asia, populism has fed into top-down discourses that identify religious minorities as anti-national impediments to unity and development. In both Modi's India and Mahinda Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka, Muslims have been instrumen-

tally targeted to garner populist support for policies that blunt opposition to their regimes and weaken constitutional checks on their use of power. In Muslim Pakistan and Bangladesh, the omnipresence of India in their neighborhood has always fed into populist narratives about the Hindu other and the role their respective armies play as the symbolic bulwarks of Islam. While Huntington has been credited with incorporating a populist dimension into his “clash of civilization” thesis, he did not foresee that the trajectory populism might take would just as likely foment intra-state tensions as heightened inter-civilizational antagonisms.

The world’s conflicts demonstrate the failures of Huntington’s thesis. Huntington’s wrongheaded belief that the Muslim world would unite in response to what was then called the war on terrorism revealed his limited understanding of the divisions among, and motivations of, the hundreds of millions of people in Muslim-majority countries, who are as divided along nationalist, ethnic, and intra-religious lines as any other civilization. Similarly, by far the deadliest war of the twenty-first century so far has been the Second Congo War. Most of the three million people killed in the war were civilians. The ongoing Syrian Civil War has claimed the lives of more than 300,000 civilians. That number is similar to the number of people killed in Sudan in the war that began in 2003. These three wars top the list of the worst conflicts of the twenty-first century, and they have something in common: they were largely fought within civilizations. And then there is the Russo-Ukrainian War, the conflict with the most potential to escalate into a nuclear exchange.

In *The Clash*, Huntington argued specifically that the future relationship between Russia and Ukraine would serve as a test of his theory. He rebutted that the two countries were headed for conflict because of a long, undefended border, a history of mutual enmity, and Russian nationalism. A civilizational approach, on the other hand, emphasizes the close cultural, personal, and historical links between Russia and Ukraine, and the intermingling of Russians and Ukrainians in both countries, and focuses instead on the civilizational fault line that divided Orthodox eastern Ukraine from Uniate western Ukraine, a central historical fact of long standing. Huntington wrote: “While a statist approach highlights the possibility of a Russian-Ukrainian War, a civilizational approach minimizes that and instead highlights the possibility of Ukraine splitting in half, a separation which cultural factors would lead one to predict might be more violent than that of Czechoslovakia but far less bloody than that of Yugoslavia.” Here, as elsewhere, the civilizational approach proved demonstrably, even catastrophically wrong, highlighting the limits of a perspective that overemphasizes the role of culture in world affairs. Putin might eventually conquer some of eastern Ukraine, but that occurrence would not result from some civilizational kinship. By May 2022, only four percent in Ukraine’s east and one percent in the south still had a positive view of Russia. Amazingly, people

who had called themselves Russians living in Ukraine are now patriotic Ukrainians. Cultural and historical preferences have also changed dramatically. Sixty-eight percent of citizens from the south and 53 percent from the east now describe Ukrainian as their native language.

But even as research and events have discredited Huntington's argument, it has found important adopters among the far right worldwide. The US White House administration has adopted variations of the ideas, saying, "If you look back at the long history of the Judeo-Christian West struggle against Islam, we believe that our forefathers ... kept it out of the world, whether it was at Vienna, or Tours, or other places." No wonder that the White House extensively limited immigration, signed out Muslim refugees as primed for violence, overstated the threat posed by jihadist terrorists, and made defending an apparently embattled American civilization fundamental to its worldview. Beyond the United States, right-wing figures globally increasingly used the language of clashing civilizations. A far-right populist crusader against Islam represented himself as "the Samuel Huntington of Dutch politics." Russian leader Putin styles himself as the defender of Christendom, saying "Euro-Atlantic countries" were "rejecting their roots," which included the "Christian values" that were the "basis of Western civilization." Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian Prime Minister who has become the de facto leader of Christian conservatives, said that "Western civilization" was under attack by people who hated Christians and globalists who "want to give up on Western values and create a new world, a post-Western world."

ZORAN MATEVSKI



## Chapter 1

### THE IMAGE OF THE CHURCH IN SOCIETY THE HUNGARIAN EXAMPLE

**Balázs M. Mezei<sup>1</sup>**

***Abstract:** This article examines the development of the Christian churches in Hungary after the collapse of the Soviet system up to the present day in terms of their internal and external, social and ideological relations. The focus is on the Hungarian Catholic Church, but other denominations are also taken into consideration. It is argued that the political involvement of the churches was focused on institutional and material reconstruction, while in some cases ideological issues were also addressed by their representatives. In party politics, the liberal-conservative FIDESZ party, the leading political force in Hungary since 2010, has supported the Christian churches not only in terms of their reconstruction work, but also as expressions of a governmental ideology. There have been two waves of post-communist social activity in the churches. In the first wave, the churches pursued the reconstruction of their internal structures; in the second wave, conservative groups took over influential positions and strengthened political commitments. This change led to a conservative turn in the social and political position of church leaders. However, this turn generated an isolationist behavior that tends to alienate the churches from a society which increasingly favors current socio-political trends in the Western world. Whether there will be a flexible and pragmatic response to this new challenge on behalf of the churches in Hungary remains to be seen.*

***Keywords:** churches, politics, Communism, liberalism, conservative turn, Hungary*

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## Introduction

During the 1990s the number of people declaring themselves to be believers strongly increased in Hungary. This was a vivid reaction to the former militant atheism of the Soviet period. The personality and spirituality of Saint John Paul II had a wide impact on individuals and communities during this time, and his charisma brought about conversions, strengthened faithful commitment and awakened religious experience, and supported social action. In the renewed post-Soviet world, the Hungarian churches also changed, although they carried out reforms only cautiously. Religious life was revitalized. The first Catholic University of the country, Péter Pázmány Catholic University, was founded on the initiative and under the energetic guidance of its “founding dean”, Professor Miklós Maróth (Maróth, 1996). This initiative was followed by the creation of several other denominational universities in the country. The opening of the Piliscsaba Campus of Pázmány University in 1996 took place in the context of a large-scale ceremony attended by the Vatican nuncio, Catholic bishops, cardinals, lay dignitaries and ambassadors, including Otto von Habsburg. The recordings are still available on YouTube (Egyetemi Televízió, 1992-1996). The churches were popular again, they were respected, they were taken into account in the life of society, science, and politics.

Between 1998 and 2002, this popular support became even stronger. The first FIDESZ<sup>2</sup> government, which broke with the previous period on an ideological level, relied increasingly on the historical churches for cultural and organizational support. What else could this young political party have done? Economic and cultural life continued to be dominated by the oligarchies that had consolidated during the Soviet period, which, moreover, fought bloody wars of showdown against each other after the system change in 1990. In the political and economic chaos, it was reasonable to rely on the historical churches with an established organizational order and a solid moral and ideological basis. But in 2002 all this was almost reversed. The old Soviet representatives regained parliamentary power, and this had an immediate impact on the government’s church policy.<sup>3</sup> A widespread anti-religious climate was once again prevalent. There were a number of anti-church measures, material depri-

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<sup>2</sup> FIDESZ is the initial word coinage from *Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*, *Association of Young Democrats*, recalling the Latin word *fides*, i.e. faith, faithfulness. FIDESZ was originally one of the important political parties active in the demolition of the Soviet-type political system from the late 1980s in Hungary. The party was established by Viktor Orbán and his friends in 1988 as a university youth movement for political freedom.

<sup>3</sup> Many leading members of the Soviet-type Hungarian Socialist Working Party joined the newly-created Hungarian Socialist Party after 1990 and played, thereby, an important political role during the coming decades. Even today, some ex-members of the Soviet party, in their late 60s and 70s, are active in political matters in peculiar ways.

vations and even minor atrocities, e.g. deliberate disruptions of the power supply to the new Piliscsaba campus.

In the atmosphere of renewed religiosity, the restored hostile atmosphere was difficult to digest, but the committed persevered. Professors and lecturers defended the new achievements spiritually and intellectually in all possible forms of teaching, organizing, lecturing, and academic work. All this was a little like the underground religious movements of the 1980s, albeit in less unfavorable circumstances. In essence, between 2002 and 2010, church institutions struggled again to survive. In the new situation, the previously repressed church organizations offered the possibility, at least on the surface, of a struggle for cultural change. Pázmány University invited staff with the promise that they could be the builders of a new culture, continuing their work based on millennia of tradition in secure spiritual and material conditions, with faithful devotion and in a Christian spirit. So not only did people who had not found opportunities elsewhere appear in this space, but also those who saw it as a mission, a service, even a sacrifice. As a result of all this, Pázmány University became one of the outstanding institutions in the country by the mid-2000s (cf. Schanda 1999).

In 2010, FIDESZ and its allies won a landslide victory and gained a supermajority in parliament – a supermajority they have successfully maintained to this day. As a result, principal and practical support for the historical churches has become a priority. A debate emerged within the leadership of the churches as to the extent to which this political support should be accepted. The voice of the opponents proved relatively strong, but the debate did not end there. For understandable reasons, conservative groups in the churches gradually gained strength and took the initiative. The government supported these forces because it rightly believed that the spiritual and material corruption practiced under communism had done much harm to the churches and that we needed to cleanse ourselves of this. This was much the same in the Eastern European states of the former Soviet zone, where renewal was achieved with considerable government support. In Hungary, the difference was that massive government support – after some precedents – could only truly start after 2010. There was certainly no unreserved cooperation on the part of the churches, although there have always been leaders more willing to cooperate with the political leadership than others (cf. Szécsi, 2021). However, the political leadership gave priority to the churches, their institutions, education, and cultural role, as it saw the rectification of the oppression of the Soviet period as a common goal with the churches (Fabiny, 2016).

Moreover, the FIDESZ governments have initiated and maintained a number of programs to help churches beyond the borders of Hungary: governmental offi-

cials assisted in an almost heroic way Christians living in the neighboring countries, as well as deprived and persecuted Christians of distant lands. No similar government programs are known in the contemporary world (cf. Hungary Helps, 2024).

In what follows, I will consider the situation of the churches in Hungary from two aspects. First, in terms of the inner world of the churches (especially the Catholic Church). Secondly, I will look at the situation of the churches in the wider social context. Finally, I will review the possibilities that can help society and churches to work fruitfully together now and in the future. In this context, I would like to make it clear that the position of the churches and, more broadly, of Christianity in the world is currently undergoing a rapid and radical transformation, and one of the leading forces in this process is undoubtedly the Catholic Church (cf. Statement, 2021). This also means that the conclusions and challenges that I will outline below must be understood in this rapidly changing context. An integral part of this environment is the interaction of Christianity with other religious forms in today's world, which is also changing; however, I cannot go into this problem in detail here.

### **The inner world of the churches**

Not only did the task of the external renewal of the churches arise after 1990, but also that of internal, spiritual, and intellectual regeneration. In the latter dimension, the churches have made considerable progress. However, the efforts to revive self-identity has worked against the ecumenism that had previously been promoted, as the tasks of reconstruction distracted attention from the importance of interdenominational cooperation. The consequence was not always a happy one, with the emergence of closed communities, along which the old confessional divisions gradually became sharply perceptible again (Kránitz, 2023). The Catholic Church has always had a strong elitism (with the old term, clericalism), which has dogmatic-historical foundations. This mentality did not disappear, but rather became more self-conscious, even determined, insofar as the attention of the church leadership was not so much directed towards the perceived needs of the faithful as it was towards the internal reconstruction of their institutions. At Pázmány University, for example, although the teachers are largely lay persons, the perception of a recurrent distrust of non-clerical teachers has surfaced again and again, a phenomenon that is even more pronounced today than before. Reconstruction in this area would have meant, in the eyes of many interested actors, the restoration of structures of past centuries rather than the spreading of the spirit of cooperation with the faithful. While in the Western world this spirit became widespread after the Second Vatican Council, in Hungary the reconstructionist impulse reinforced the earlier clericalism, often giving the impression of an outdated archaism.

One can hardly wonder at this: the persecution of the churches began after 1945, so reconstruction would, in principle, aim to repair all that had been damaged in the intervening period – even if it is obvious that the previous situation cannot be restored. It also follows, however, that many of the great intellectual and spiritual achievements of the development of world Catholicism between 1945 and 1990 are lost for the mentality of restoration, achievements that are defining in the contemporary discussions about the relationship of the churches and contemporary society. One of these achievements is certainly the retreat of clericalism, i.e., the fruitful cooperation between church and society based on mutual respect.

However, the church leaders' cooperation with the political government is justified by the losses the churches suffered during decades of religious persecution, when their property was confiscated, their schools liquidated, their monastic orders restricted, and their leaders appointed only with the consent of politicians connected to the Soviet system. In the decades of "wilderness wandering", priests were kept under strict surveillance, many were imprisoned and even murdered (Kapalo – Vagramenko, 2020). After this, the task of reconstruction understandably became a top priority, which was repeatedly regulated by international conventions (such as between the Vatican and the Hungarian state, see Act LXX, 1999). All in all, reconstruction has been proceeding along a wide range of tracks, with a variety of results, some positive and some negative.

It is important to note the following: between 1945 and 1990, the churches were subject to personalized surveillance (Kapalo – Povedák, 2022). The aim of the monitoring and control was to either recruit the more gifted students in priest seminaries or to exclude them from priesthood. Those who were seen by the authorities as more talented were sought by all means to be turned into organized agents, secured by a personal signature. If this attempt failed, the professional (i.e., priestly) advancements were made difficult or even impossible, often with the help of their own superiors. As a result, a counter-selection developed in the churches. Their leaders were often organized or, alternatively, not above average in education or talent – with all due respect to the exceptions that happened to pass through this filter. The consequence of this was that after 1990, church leaderships were – as is solidly demonstrated by church historians – made up in no small part of organized individuals. But those who refused to do so on moral and spiritual grounds, and who remained in seclusion, in most cases did not have access to the means (books, visits abroad, conferences, contacts with intellectual circles) to strengthen their spiritual outlook, their knowledge of the world and languages. Therefore, the later, so-called conservative generation, which after 1990 gradually broke away from and sometimes even confronted the former leadership, was in some cases deficient, with all the consequences that entailed. This situation explains why the rise to prominence of

inner conservative circles in church leadership has typically, though not always, also meant an intellectual and cultural decline (Komáromi *et al.*, 2024).

This process paralleled developments in society as a whole. Prior to the regime change, the leaders of the Soviet era gradually relaxed socio-political repression, at the cost of ever more extensive organizational control. In the academic field, the chosen few had access to everything that was considered important in the West (books, journals, conferences), and were largely free to travel and maintain external contacts. The result was a relatively high-quality intellectual world with a decidedly international orientation. After the change of regime in 1990, there was inevitably a counter-effect, i.e., the attempt to strengthen local identity in several steps superseded universal outlook and orientation. This counter-effect, however, needed some time to mature and come to the fore. From the early 2000s, the conservative turn was gradually taking place and reached a breakthrough around 2010. This coincided with the rise of the long march of FIDESZ governments which supported the conservative turn in the churches and based social politics on the institutional and educational strengthening of the historical communities – first of all the Catholic Church, but almost as emphatically, the Reformed or Calvinist ministries.<sup>4</sup>

While the conservative reaction is historically and ideologically understandable, its evaluation is by no means unambiguous. The pitting of local identity against universality is explicitly at odds with the inherent requirements of ecclesiasticism, humanity, academic and institutional dignity. This process can be clearly seen in some ecclesiastical higher education institutions, where the former attitude of a supposedly universal outlook is replaced by local identity aspirations that display sectarian features, are accompanied by marginalization, stigmatization, incommunicado, and are reinforced at the expense of serious intellectual quality (cf. Tomka, 1995).

But let us be clear: this situation is never the end of the story, because the specificity of Christianity is always repentance, penance, reconciliation, and reparation. In this context, however, the militant-ideological bigotry of the identity movements is, nevertheless, worrying, not only among individual ecclesial communities but also in society as a whole, since in these developments we can recognize the serious disintegration and atomization of the age in which we live. That is to say, after the collapse of the Soviet ideology, universalism as an outlook also collapsed and in the place of integration and cooperation we witness today isolationist, self-interested, often seriously discriminative tendencies in the global culture, politics, and even in economy. In the field of interdenominational and interfaith perspective, similar

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<sup>4</sup> Other denominations in Hungary, such as the Lutheran and the Orthodox Christians, have also received similar support, not to mention the Jewish communities.

developments can be attested; in Hungary, these developments are also present in their special cultural and historical forms.

With this said, it can be pointed out that churches today exist in a state of multiple disunity in terms of their inner life as well. The generation of leaders that preceded the regime change in 1990 is slowly retiring, but this does not mean that the followers they selected are not present in church life. The reverse is true: the rise to prominence of the second generation after the change in 1990 shows that the earlier divisions persist. In addition, the general ideological trends in the Western world, including theological developments, will almost inevitably predominate, which may lead to an intensification of internal divisions and the growing influence of mainstream global circles as opposed to the diminishing influence of the conservative generation that had experienced the change of the system around 1990. The likelihood of the remaining effects of the previous internal division is relatively high, and the consequences will be far-reaching. The assessment of this process is a matter for another paper, but so much is clear that it is in line with the efforts of global political forces to gradually shift religious diversity towards a kind of formal unification, to create a kind of unified religious form while weakening the diversity of traditions. However, such aspirations may not be able to overcome the internal division of the churches as is shown by the multilevel and persisting conflicts within the global Anglican community (cf. e.g. Ndukuba – Mbanda – Kaziimba, 2022).

### **Churches in society**

The religious revival of the 1990s weakened and began to decline in the 2010s, leading to a visible reduction in the number of people who profess to be active Christians. Although about 90% of the Hungarian population is baptized, the number of people who claim to be religious is decreasing and church attendance is low (except in a few cities and districts, e.g. Esztergom, the ancient church center, where churches are still full on Sundays). Note that the training of priests and pastors in the internet world has become very difficult. Protestants are in a better position here, where pastorate does not mean social isolation. In contrast, the isolation of the Catholic clergy is strong and there is as yet no effective way forward to resolve the undoubtedly difficult situation that has arisen. However, the media campaigns accusing priests and pastors, which have become almost a regular feature in the Western world, have not found a breeding ground in Hungary, and the few minor cases have died out without any particular repercussions. But the problem of Catholic priestly formation is a pressing one, which can only be changed by a strong, personalized reform of seminarian education (cf. Máté-Tóth – Povedák, 2024).

The unprecedented popularity of Pope Francis's visits to Budapest is a good indication of the great trust Hungarian society has in church leaders. The people, families, young and old, flocked to see the Pope with great enthusiasm, welcoming him with great joy wherever he went. Likewise, Nick Vujicic's visits to Budapest, his speeches and his prayers with Hungarian believers and politicians make it clear that the religious openness of the Hungarian population remains very high. Hungarians are, as before, moderate: this characterizes their religiosity, their political choices and their relations with each other. They reject extremism, turn away from the vociferous, but are understanding towards those whom they can trust on the basis of common sense.

The religious inclination of the Hungarians is, thus, peculiar, but certainly of a remarkable level and quality. It is not certain that the present situation will be maintained in the longer term, since the environment and the technical and technological revolutions in today's world are undoubtedly transforming this sensibility at essential points. Although we are still a long way from a massive societal turn against the churches, there are some signs that the opposition will grow (Schneider, 2024). The churches will have to find an appropriate response to this, and if there is one thing that is certainly not an option, it is increased isolationism. This problem is particularly strong in the area of training priests and ministers, but in general it can be said that the Hungarian churches, because of their position in education, will face social challenges with particular force. Responding to this will require a patient, understanding, cooperative methodology, of which there are already signs, although it has yet to be fully developed. At present, isolationist tendencies prevail, although the degree of isolation is highly dependent on denomination and church. In general, however, these tendencies must be moderated and limited in order to prevent social confrontation (cf. Szlachta, 2021).

In Table 1 below I summarize the development of the relationship between the churches and society in Hungary. This is certainly an approximate scheme, but it may help to understand the changes that have characterized the internal and external transformations of the past 30-plus years in Hungary.

<i>Period</i>	<i>Internal development of the churches</i>	<i>External relationship between the churches and the society</i>	<i>Comment</i>
<b>Before 1990</b>	Total submission to the Soviet regime; the main space of activity is behind the walls of the church buildings; underground spiritual movements were active.	The churches existed on the periphery in the context of a continuing anti-religious propaganda.	The Soviet regime established an oppressive yet balanced relationship under its totalitarian and personally structured control.
<b>Between 1990 and cca 2000</b>	The possibility of renewal was used only partially and gradually; here and there attempted spiritual renewal took place.	Uncertainty as to the right relationship between the churches and society; yet the latter turned to the churches with great expectation and trust.	The promoted persons and groups of the earlier period remained in power but had to face the growing protest of anti-communist individuals and groups.
<b>Between cca 2000 and 2010</b>	The anti-communist generation came to the fore both spiritually and institutionally.	Strong political engagements were taking shape and led to some emphatically political steps.	The anti-communist forces took over many influential positions in the churches, but they could not fully prevail.
<b>After 2010</b>	Liberal and conservative views have clashed day by day; the spiritual revival is weakening; emphasis is put on the institutional and material reconstruction.	Conservative groups are losing their influence; the society is becoming uncertain as to the role and significance of the churches, especially in their traditional forms.	The pre-1990 generation of church leaders morphs into liberally supported groups; they react to the conservatives, so the inner and outer division of the churches intensifies.
<b>Present</b>	Opposition to the closed spirituality and mentality of the churches is growing; there is hardly any new spiritual initiative to be seen.	Governmental politics is still decidedly supportive of church institutions, such as schools and hospitals, but the opinion of the majority of society becomes more skeptical.	The influence of the churches in society is firmly established but its content is changing in view of the global developments, such as the spread of the use of artificial intelligence, etc.

Table 1. The development of the internal and external transformations of the relationship between the churches and the society in Hungary between the 1980s and 2024

## Tasks

Understandably, the importance of church groups in the complex tasks of reconstruction is growing. Churches play a crucial role in the long process of eradicating the effects of Soviet communism. After 1990, there was a general consensus on the need to purge society and politics of these effects. Later it turned out that many politicians in the West and at home were not fully serious about this goal, and after 2010 it also appeared that many people in the Western elites saw the former loyalists of the Soviet system as the right partners for their business, political or otherwise. But this is a sharp departure from the original vision. This vision remains unchanged today: society must be transformed, and religion and the churches must play a decisive and educational role in this, and, therefore, support for the historical churches is imperative.

In addition to the many advantages that are present here, there are also disadvantages, which are manifested in the new isolation of the churches and their governing bodies. It is essential to change this, to open the church leadership to non-clerical society, to promote cooperation both spiritually and intellectually. There is no doubt that those groups which have been repeatedly disadvantaged in the past (lay people, women, etc.) have a significant role to play in this. Clergy and laity, pastors and the faithful, must relate to one another in a spirit of love, openness, collaboration, mutual respect and esteem, always keeping in mind salvation as the supreme human goal, in the effective mediation of which the clergy have a special role (Máté-Tóth, 2022).

The Hungarian churches are repeatedly attacked in the Western press for their perceived political role. But these accusations are misleading. These churches are doing the difficult work of reconstruction with governments whose leaders are often religious, and their Christian outreach is almost unparalleled in the contemporary world. The internal changes in the churches should be seen in this context: the rise of conservative groups was a backlash against the failure to marginalize previously cooperative church figures after 1990. Today's conservative groups sometimes overstep the mark, often making unjustifiable moves. There is an intellectual, even spiritual impoverishment in their circles, the causes of which I have pointed out above. This explains many of their actions, which are incomprehensible to outsiders – but all this must be viewed with some understanding, knowing that we as human beings cannot act without missteps, given the weight of various responsibilities we are saddled with. Western church bodies should help reconstruction efforts and, at the same time, give intellectual and spiritual support to the churches in their greater openness and more organized, spiritual and social cooperation with the secular

world, but it would be a mistake to question the integrity of church leaders for political reasons.

Today, world Catholicism is undergoing an important change. Here and there, extremist phenomena are appearing on the ecclesial scene, and internal divisions are deepening. The *complexio oppositorum*, which C. Schmitt used to describe the Catholic Church 100 years ago, is now less and less a *complexio* and more and more an *oppositio* (Schmitt, 1923). In this situation, the Hungarian church leaderships would do well to seek a careful balance: they must not become a kind of Mount Athos or an isolated sect in the desert. There is no need for scandalous fads, but rather for fairness, openness and cooperation. What is needed is a drifting spirituality, not an uninformed, levelled, disinterested closure (Halík, 2024).

In particular: the priority is to restore and strengthen universality, Catholicity and objectivity. The sociologically understandable rise of identity movements must be followed by a period of spiritual objectivity, theological orientation, philosophical insight and academic value. And, as far as humanly possible, malicious, unjust and undignified practices of marginalization should also be ended, since this will reinforce further disintegration, spiritual erosion (emptying of churches, weakening of the priestly vocation, etc.). Here let me draw attention to the danger that the story of the popular young parish priest Andrew shows: the initial impulse was socio-public openness in opposition to isolationism, the replacement of clerical immobility by publicity and community organization. But he overdid this, which led to a personal crisis, a passivation of his priesthood, and finally a political attempt to secure popularity for himself. This case is an example of the need for a transformation of identity conservative positions, but it cannot be done headlong. What is needed is restraint, consistency and balance (cf. Szilvay 2021).

In light of the above discussion, the place of the churches in society can be summed up in one great task: to watch for the signs of the times (cf. Paul VI, 1965). This attention must not mean either reckless adaptation or sectarian isolation. In fact, the preservation of traditions means the constant re-understanding and re-interpretation of traditions, and this activity – the unity of understanding and interpretation – postulates an integrating process, that is to say, a task which aims to combine as far as possible the forces of diversity. However, this process must not be violent or coercive, but based on mutual respect, understanding and cooperation. It cannot be ruled out that this integrating approach may be countered by revolutionary tendencies which seek to radically change the internal and external situation of the churches. Unfortunately, examples of this are already happening today and will probably continue to happen in the future (Ceci, 2025). However, arbitrary action can only be temporary. In all their tasks, the churches should follow the path of

organic transformation, that is, the path of respect for tradition in the context of an always progressing understanding and interpretation of our situation in the world today.

## Conclusion

The Hungarian society today is still more religious than most Western societies, but typically, as an after-effect of socialism, its formal church commitment is relatively low. Nevertheless, church leaders, priests and pastors are generally respected. The popularity of church institutions, especially schools and universities, is high. Church leaders cooperate with the political government mainly in areas related to the legitimately and legally prescribed reconstruction work. Leaders typically follow their denominational commitment rather than their political agenda when they engage in reconstruction work with the government (see, for example, the large-scale renovation of the Esztergom Basilica<sup>5</sup>). This work also involves identity reconstruction, but one must be careful to distinguish between sectarian isolationism and the openness, cooperation and respect required by tradition.

Special care must be taken to avoid ecclesiastical anti-Judaism. Anecdotally, when Frederick the Great was asked what the factual proof of the Christian faith would be, he was told, "The Jews, Your Majesty."<sup>6</sup> There are at least two ways to read this statement, but either way, the connection between Christ and Judaism as outlined in the Gospels is theologically significant. "The Jews" are, in fact, evidence, and it is a mistake to forget this in the context of Christology. Nevertheless, there is a kind of ancient anti-Judaism in the Church, which in many cases goes beyond the theological framework (cf. the writings of Ottokar Prohászka, cf. Fazekas, 2024). One can detect aspirations, silent but still expressed in action, which ignore the words of the Apostle Paul: "Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee." (Romans 11:18.) Identity reconstruction must not restore this old digression, not because we are unaware of the gravity of the issue, but because it is theologically wrong to ignore the apostolic admonition: "Blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved." (*Ibid.*, 25-26.)

*Ecclesia semper reformanda*: this applies here too, while we know that it does not mean human activism, but trust in Divine Providence. The latter is the inescapable context for transformation. Churches by definition cannot give up their supernatural

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://bazilika-esztergom.hu> (27.09.2024).

<sup>6</sup> The exact origin of this anecdote is unclear. Frederick the Great carried out a complex ideological and economic policy with respect to the Jewish population and was also aware of the theological significance of the presence of Jewish communities in the Kingdom of Prussia. Cf. de la Bédoyère, 2019.

origin, mission, and objective. They cannot give up their trust in Divine Providence and must act on that basis, both in their internal relations and in their external, social dealings. Further elaboration of this question, however, leads to relevant questions of the theology and philosophy of history, which it is not the task of the present review to address. I should note, however, that theology, despite all its contemporary transformations, cannot become a secular theory, but must retain its supernatural embeddedness, relevance, and meaning. This also suggests that the meaning of the world – despite all the spread of secularization – cannot be described in terms of purely secular categories. This is true of the internal and external relations of the churches, and of the understanding of the church itself as an institution, which holds fast to the words of its Founder: “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36.)

### Illustration<sup>7</sup>

This Grotto of Lourdes was built in 1946 under the old siege wall, next to the Esztergom Basilica, as a vow gift from the Esztergom seminarians who survived the war. The inscription, which is badly worn, reads: *In bello quos es tuta, exsolvimus hic vota – For you who defended us in the war, we fulfill our vows.*



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<sup>7</sup> This picture has been taken by the author of this article.

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## Chapter 2

### THEORIES OF SECULARIZATION. THE RELATION OF MODERN MAN TO THE RELIGIOUS

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***Abstract:** Secularization has been defined as the process by which, for several centuries, modern Western man has withdrawn from the influence of the Church, focusing on his thinking, his activity and his own life in order to assert his autonomy. These transformations occur not only at the individual level but also at the macrosocial level, through a desacralization of the world which assumes that "the spirit of this century lives its existence rather according to the fashion of the time, than in the spirit of the Gospel of Christ, therefore in the spirit of God's truth. " (Bryan Wilson, 2000). Through this process it may be said that religious institutions, thoughts and practices lose their importance or social significance, prejudicing the place of religion in society, and the trust in the institution of the Church.*

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## Introduction

In the process of secularization, a fracture appears between the culture in which religion is respected with its values, concepts and norms, and a modern culture that begins to form outside this framework, thus a fracture between faith, the Church and society. Economic, social and political structures begin to express themselves outside the ecclesial environment and even against it. More and more people no longer relate to the values or norms of religious, moral living in their private lives. Symbols, and tradition disappear from human life; the Arian belief that man is at the center of the universe appears in the form of camouflaged phantasms (Mălina Voicu, 2007). The utilitarian humanism we fetishize is found beyond science's reliance on its own capabilities - man deus, demiurge. The cult of work with the little free time granted makes the religious meaning of the holidays disappear. There is even an anxiety about the holidays, which leads to the secularized man, the man without adherence to meaning, symbol, humanism (Geană, 2005).

The evolution of recent events has emphasized the efforts of theorists specializing in the sociology of religions to explain the transformations that religion undergoes in modern societies. The French term secularization has its origin in the legal sphere, denoting the transfer of assets belonging to the Church to a civil owner at its expense, being associated with the separation of society, the values of the Church, and its authority (Dolbelaere, 1981).

In Christian terms, this represents the weakening of the "guardianship" of the Church over society, so, in other words, the loss of religious meaning in a society governed more by technical, scientific reason, and the maximization of material profit.

### 1. Secularization in Romania

It is believed that the communist period was one of intense, aggressive, institutional secularization, perceived as such by the clergy and the members of the Church. After December 1989 the Church erupted into the public space, perceiving the criticism which was aimed at it during this period as the work of "atheists" or "enemies of the Romanian nation". Even the term secularization was regarded with reluctance as not belonging to the Orthodox Church, being seen as a disease of the Church of the West. After almost 25 years that have passed and have been marked by crises of religious modernity, among which we mention the struggle to remove religious symbols from schools and public institutions, to teach religion in school, a very controversial subject, we are also witnessing the emergence of some associations and people who are openly challenging the BOR (but not other cults and denominations present in Romania today).

The post “Collective” moment marked a moment of crisis in which the majority Orthodox Church was openly contested, reaching the point of physical aggression against priests in some localities.

After Romania’s entry into the European Union, the wave of migration that followed, and the advance of technology, led to an increase in the degree of autonomy of the individual, a fact that aggravated some moments of the crisis, leading to the contestation of the church hierarchy, to the so-called “crisis of modernity” and to advancing the secularization process.

The causes of this phenomenon were multiple and varied.

For Romanians, Orthodoxy is inextricably linked to the nation, the village, popular rurality and a certain way of transmitting religious values orally, based on the mechanical repetition of magical-ritual gestures.

The existence of two contradictory trends in the Romanian space is specified as follows:

- the belief to treat religion and the village as a “national memorial treasure” that must be defended at all costs because it is also considered to be on the way to extinction; this would be a trend;

- the second trend would be the extreme folklorization of the religious for marketing, tourist and commercial purposes.

We are meeting, as the experts point out, with the notion of “religious exultation”, religion becoming marketing in which everyone chooses what suits them, a “DIY” - as the British sociologist Grace Davie pointed out: believing without belonging - to believe without belonging to a religious institution. In this sense, it can be observed that many of the young people who shouted in the University Square “we want hospitals not cathedrals”, love monastic products, attend the fairs around the monastics and visit the monasteries in Oltenia and Moldova.

## **2. Religiosity in Romanian society**

Many of the traditional representations about the meaning of life have a predominantly religious character, they are considered and transmitted over the centuries, entering into the common heritage called ancestral law. For this reason, the realm of beliefs concerning the purpose of man and the meaning of life is not a place for personal positions and initiatives. Nicolae Iorga (after Flonta, 2005) mentioned that these religious beliefs have a long history and are the result of a process of adaptation and assimilation between the beliefs of the Thracians and the Daco-Gets, on the one hand, and Christianity on the other, the common point being the immortal-

ity of the soul. In this sense, the self-control of death is emphasized, stemming from the unwavering belief that what happens to them does not represent the definitive end, but a threshold to pass into another life, an extension of the one on Earth. This ancestral law is the communion of the individual with their parents, grandparents and ancestors. For the Romanian peasant, the way of life of the ancestors is sacred. The content of this heritage, transmitted from one generation to another, consisting of symbols and religious practices, evades reflection and clinical examination. An Orthodox theologian noted, "With us, neither the patriarchs nor the synods were ever able to introduce new things, because with us, the defender of the faith is the entire body of the Church, that is, the people who want the religious dogma to remain forever unchanged and likewise with that of predecessors" (Flonta, 2005). We may mention that Romanians have a somewhat fatalistic mentality, in the sense that what happens depends on higher forces. Thus, happy events are perceived as the expression of Dumezeu's mercy, and unhappy ones are means of punishment as a result of individual or ancestral sins. Romanian peasants are convinced that their attributes, such as intelligence, energy, perseverance, are of little importance, the success of some acts being the result of the support of divinity, hence the expression "With the help of God" or "As the one from above wants it".

The archaic mentality, strongly rooted in the Romanian village, especially where communication with the urban world is weaker, causes religiosity to merge closely with a variety of magical rituals, impregnated with pre-Christian pagan residues. These aspects can be observed in some external practices of the faith, such as fulfilling obligations toward the deceased (memorial services), keeping fasts, and making the sign of the cross, which are ritual elements considered more important than proper conduct, imbued with the spirit of love and solidarity with fellow humans. These aspects were characterized by Kierkegaard (according to Flonta, 2005) as representing a path that makes Christianity comfortable, adding that we can all become better Christians, thus leading to Christianity being *ex ipso* abolished. (Gabriela Lăzăreanu, 2023).

Recent social issues have highlighted the presence, particularly in urban environments, of a new generation, a new social category, which some call 'the multinational youth,' who have protested in the streets against several institutions, including the church, demonstrating a different perception of religion as compared to the previous generation. This new generation, which protests in the streets, consists of people who work hard from dawn to dusk, often holding multiple jobs, in exchange for salaries that allow them to survive with dignity. They have only learned about the horrors of communism from the stories of the previous generation. They interact with young people and individuals from around the world—in other words, they are individuals with a different mentality and a different perception of faith.

They are the people who travel a lot, work hard, and are innovative creators for whom the long, complicated religious rituals seem outdated. They see religion classes as an attempt at indoctrination, against the spirit of freedom. They are attracted to the bio-eco dimension, as mentioned above, in the traditional Orthodox cuisine, but are not interested in those who maintain and fight for this way of life. They are critical and demanding of the political missteps of the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR), of the lack of involvement or low sensitivity of the clergy to social crises and problems, but they sympathize with well-known or publicized monastic or clerical figures (Banica, 2015).

They do not deny the idea of God or divinity, but they perceive Jesus as a different figure and openly protest in the streets against any issues that may arise in the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR). A radical modernization of the new generation can be observed, which may be said to erode the 'matrix of traditional Orthodox culture,' representing a version of the secularization trend typical of Western Europe. This has been characterized by the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) as the law of 'loss of the density of a nation's cultural and religious memory'.

It can be noted that in traditional societies religion was overwhelming: it established routine practices, the daily schedule, it started and stopped wars, it intervened in political matters, it imposed moral norms at the individual and social level, it controlled their observance and influenced people's decisions, marriage, work.

In the modern era, the factors favoring the emergence of secularization are: scientific rational thinking, cultural diversity and religious pluralism, urbanization and industrialization.

- Scientific rational thinking gives explanations on some phenomena, not religious thinking. Likewise, the modern state controls ever larger areas that come out of the influence of religion, new rules and norms are built in these spheres independent of religion;

- Cultural diversity and religious pluralism mentions "That when the oracle spoke with one voice, it was possible to believe that that voice was God's. When the oracle speaks with twenty different voices, we are tempted to look behind the screen." Cultural diversity brings us into contact with different religions and cultures, calling into question the very existence of divinity and its veracity.

- Urbanization, by decreasing social control over the individual's behavior, cultural diversity leads to the fragmentation of the traditional community, which gives the individual the chance to choose how much to believe, how to believe, ending up believing more in what they want, not in what the church tells them.

- Industrialization causes a “disenchantment of the world” in the sense that religious thinking loses ground due to the fact that everyday reality is different from the reality presented in the Bible.

Secularization acts, as some researchers have presented, on three levels:

- individual;
- organizational and
- societal.

At the societal level, the process of functional differentiation is highlighted; at the organizational level, the mode of activity of the church as an institution is observed; and at the individual level, the way in which religion influences daily life is presented.

In communist countries, as well as outside the communist camp, secularization manifested itself more acutely through “the process of diminishing the influence of religion on the other social spheres that are beginning to become autonomous and conduct themselves according to rules and norms different from those of religion”. The degree of secularization in ex-communist countries was influenced by:

- the level of political repression, as in the case of East Germany and the USSR;
- the degree of modernization, as it is in countries like East Germany and the Czech Republic;
- the dominant denomination, in the Catholic countries of the Eastern Bloc, the effects of secularization were weaker than in the Catholic and Protestant ones;
- due to the closeness between religion and national ideas, some countries such as Poland or Lithuania had the Vatican as their external support, while East Germany and Estonia had to face communism and secularization alone.

### **3. Research on religiosity and activities practiced in the religious worship of students**

The research aimed to understand the perception of students in middle school education, pre-university, regarding faith in order to observe the effect of religious classes in education. The selected group included grade seven students, predominantly aged between 13-14, from general schools in Iași County in 2023. The analysis used is quantitative, focusing on data collection through a structured interview. The number of subjects was 130, 70 boys and 60 girls. The sample indicates a predominance of boys over girls, but the subjects investigated are of similar ages, have the

same educational and religious background as a result of the same socio-historical context, hence the same cohorts.

**Table 1. Classification of the sample by gender, background, formal and informal components**

No.	Sex				Background				Believer in God				Churchgoer				Mourner			
	male		female		urban		rural		yes		no		Sunday		Holiday		yes		no	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
130	70	54	60	46	80	62	50	38	125	96	5	4	90	69	40	31	120	92	10	8



**Pie chart 1. Responses obtained for the question “Do you believe in God?”**



**Pie chart 2. Responses obtained for the question “Do you go to your ancestors’ grave?”**

**Table 2. The ritualistic dimension in private space**

No.	Fast						Confess						Own icons				Pray at icons			
	yes		no		rare		yes		no		rare		yes		no		yes		no	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
130	70	54	35	27	25	19	75	58	5	4	50	38	120	92	10	8	124	95	6	5

The ritualistic dimension in public and private space indicates a good representation of ritualistic components, as a relatively large number of subjects, almost all with a few exceptions, mentioned that they believe in God, 125 respondents or 96%, which is a large percentage. Only five respondents, or 4%, mentioned that they do not believe, either in the Orthodox faith, because they belong to another faith, or because they do not believe in God. The ritualistic component related to church attendance indicates that 69% of the respondents participate in religious services on Sundays and 31% on major holidays. Another facet of the informal ritualistic component is the respect paid to the memory of deceased loved ones, materialized through various practices performed at the cemetery, which also have a compensatory character from a psychological perspective. Of the respondents, 120 go to the cemetery at different times of the week or year (Easter, Whitsunday, memorial services, etc.). Those who do not go to the cemetery make up 8% and visit the graves of loved ones with candles and flowers, honoring their memory.

Regarding the observance of fasting, confession, and praying in front of icons, these rituals are practiced and observed during fasting periods, especially before major holidays, and are mandatory for a good Christian, being practiced from childhood. The results show that 54% fast, 27% do not fast, and 19% fast rarely, while 58% go to confession, 4% do not confess, and 38% confess rarely.

## Conclusion

It can be stated that religion presents two aspects: one, sociological and another, psychological. Societies will remain socially stable entities that present their own system of values which religion accumulates and preserves. From a psychological point of view, individuals are social actors who must be integrated into a system. And, religion helps this process by giving free rein to the expression of feelings, therefore, beliefs.

For the young generation in development, religious practice is carried out if religion has been a component in shaping personality within the family and at school.

Belief in God was confirmed by the majority of the individuals interviewed (96%), but other religious practices, such as going to church on Sundays, confession, and communion, have high percentages among children in the school environment, but tend to decrease as they grow older.

However, the large number of parishioners attending religious pilgrimages indicates a continued closeness to divinity, a form of identity, comfort, and faith in a better world for the Romanian people.

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## Chapter 3

# THE WISDOM OF CROSS-CULTURAL REVELATIONS: BUILDING CONSENSUS FOR SOLVING GLOBAL RELIGIOUS ISSUES

Cherng Jason<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *This paper explores the wisdom found in cross-cultural revelations to build a consensus on addressing global religious issues. It begins by outlining the major challenges faced by global religions and proposes specific strategies through an examination of shared truths within both Western and Eastern religious and cultural traditions. The study focuses on Confucianism's 'Zhongyong' (The Doctrine of the Mean, 中庸) alongside the unique cultivation practices of Tai Ji Men, revealing core values that transcend religious boundaries. It analyzes the deep connections between "nature" (性, Xing), the "Tao" (道), and the "heart" (心, Xin), while also exploring the parallels between spiritual cultivation and the pursuit of transcendence.*

*This paper highlights the crucial role of "conscience" in modern life and religious transcendence, examining its profound link to self-awareness through a linguistic lens. By tracing the historical and cultural significance of conscience, it offers insights into humanity's path toward harmonious coexistence. Finally, it showcases the global influence of Tai Ji Men, an ancient menpai (門派, school) of Qigong, martial arts, and self-cultivation. Despite facing political persecution through judicial and tax measures, Tai Ji Men has remained committed to principles of justice and righteousness. Its demonstration of inner peace and remarkable external vitality serves as a valuable reference for groups experiencing secularization.*

*Additionally, this paper incorporates the wisdom and philosophy of Dr. Hong Tao-Ze, the contemporary leader of Tai Ji Men, in the hope of offering benefits to all of humanity.*

**Keywords:** *Zhongyong, Tai Ji Men, Conscience, Transcendence of Religion*

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## Introduction

Culture represents the sum of human life, encompassing values, beliefs, customs, and the arts. With the ongoing advance of globalization, cross-cultural inclusivity and understanding have become increasingly important, particularly in the realm of religion and faith. These aspects significantly shape human behavior and social structures. Religion, as a central part of culture, not only influences the values of its followers but also provides a moral framework and social cohesion, helping people to find common ground when addressing societal challenges.

In this context, cross-cultural wisdom serves as a vital resource for resolving global religious issues. Dr. Hong Tao-Tze, the leader of the Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy (Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy n.d.), actively promotes cross-cultural and interreligious understanding. His initiative, “An Era of Conscience,” launched in 2014 (An Era of Conscience n.d.-a), sparked a global movement of conscience awareness and contributed to the United Nations’ recognition of April 5 as the International Day of Conscience (United Nations 2019). Dr. Hong emphasizes the foundational role of culture in societal development, stating, “Good culture leads to good education, and good education leads to a good economy,” underscoring the crucial roles of culture and religion in social progress.

This paper explores the core values of religious transcendence from a cross-cultural perspective by delving into the shared wisdom of Western and Eastern religious thought and examining the role of conscience in modern life. Additionally, it highlights how Tai Ji Men serves as a global model for promoting peace and harmony. Through these discussions, the paper aims to offer concrete strategies for addressing global religious issues while advocating for a greater focus on conscience in creating a harmonious and just future within the context of globalization.

### **1. Cross-Cultural Wisdom in Addressing Global Religious Issues: Specific Strategies**

Religion has historically shaped societal structures and cultural identities. However, with evolving political environments and cultural shifts, today’s global religious issues—such as religious conflict, persecution, restrictions on religious freedom, secularization, and religious extremism—are particularly alarming. Many of these challenges arise from political interference, highlighting the complex relationship between religion and governance in shaping global concerns.

In response to these pressing issues, international institutions like the UNESCO Chair in Intercultural Studies and Research and the Center for Intercultural Studies and Research at the Faculty of Philosophy, Ss. Cyril and Methodius Uni-

versity in Skopje, North Macedonia, co-hosted the Second World Conference on Religious Dialogue and Cooperation in June 2024 (the 2nd World Conference on Religious Dialogue and Cooperation 2024). The conference, themed “Religion and Politics: Is Secularization a Myth or Reality?” focused on the intricate interactions between religion, society, and politics. Scholars and experts from around the globe gathered to discuss topics such as religious freedom, cultural diversity, and the role of religion in modern political frameworks.

The discussions at the conference reflect a global commitment to addressing religious issues. Drawing on these international perspectives, this paper seeks to rationally analyze and explore the shared spiritual truths across Western and Eastern cultures.

While distinct religious systems have unique doctrines, many intersect in moral values and the pursuit of peace. Scholars from the Traditionalist School, such as Frithjof Schuon and René Guénon, propose that all religions embody a universal spiritual truth, with each tradition offering a distinct expression of this truth. Schuon refers to this concept as the “Perennial Philosophy” (Religioperennis contributors n.d.), emphasizing common objectives within religious systems, such as inner peace and enlightenment. This philosophy highlights the connection between humanity and divine reality, encouraging religions to move beyond superficial doctrines to uncover deeper wisdom.

This idea resonates with Chinese cultural concepts, such as “all dharmas have the same origin” and “all religions share a common source.” By adjusting cognitive frameworks and transcending dualistic thinking, people can find common ground across different cultural and religious perspectives, fostering global peace and harmony.

The idea of “revelation” differs in form and cultural context between traditions, but both have profoundly shaped their respective civilizations. In the West, revelation often involves direct communication from God or supernatural forces, providing essential insights into the universe, morality, and existence. In contrast, Eastern cultures emphasize inner awakening and spiritual cultivation as forms of revelation. Despite their difference, both models share common goals: the pursuit of ultimate truth, moral standards, and solutions to human problems.

Confucianism’s ‘The Doctrine of the Mean’ (Zhongyong) (Wikipedia contributors n.d.) stands as a central classic of Chinese thought, offering profound insights into “interreligious thought” that transcend specific religious frameworks. It provides valuable perspectives for contemporary discussions on the secularization and de-secularization of religion. This paper draws on the teachings of Zhongyong and

Dr. Hong's Taoist wisdom, proposing that understanding and practicing the core values of religious origins and human spirituality are essential to resolving religious and human issues and achieving consensus. These reflections aim to offer constructive insights for our tumultuous world.

## **2. Finding Core Values of Religious Transcendence from the Opening of the Confucian Zhongyong**

### *2.1. Core Concepts of "Interreligious Thought"*

The Chinese term for "religion," or "宗教" (Zongjiao), refers to a belief system or organization that encompasses humanity's pursuit of spiritual growth, connection with the divine, exploration of life's meaning, and the establishment of core values for a harmonious society. While different religions have unique understandings and practices concerning spiritual elevation, the pursuit of inner peace and goodness is a universal aspiration for all humanity.

In Chinese, "宗" (Zong) can be interpreted as "purpose," emphasizing the core objectives of the belief system, while "教" (Jiao) refers to teaching or educating, guiding individuals through doctrines and practices to achieve these purposes. The origins of various religions typically stem from divine revelation or the wisdom of ancient sages, which then form systematic doctrines over time. This process not only attracts followers but also nurtures respect and continuity for these teachings and traditions.

One of the most significant texts of Confucian thought, the Zhongyong (The Doctrine of the Mean), written over 2,400 years ago, reveals the source of human spirituality from the very beginning. It illustrates the relationship between "nature" (性) and "Tao" (道), presenting the core objectives that every "person" (人) "must" (需) pursue according to Confucian (儒) principles. This highlights the Confucian belief that cultivating virtue is essential for everyone. The insights of the Zhongyong, originating from ancient Eastern revelations, have deeply influenced the Sinicized world of East Asia, comparable to the impact of the Bible or the Quran on Western civilization.

James Legge, a Western scholar, translated the Zhongyong in 1893 as 'The Doctrine of the Mean' (Legge 1893) and rendered its opening lines as follows: "What Heaven has conferred is called The Nature; an accordance with this nature is called The Path of duty; the regulation of this path is called Instruction. The path may not be left for an instant. If it could be left, it would not be the path."

The original Chinese Text: “天命之謂性，率性之謂道，修道之謂教。道也者，不可須臾離也，可離非道也。”

In contrast, Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, in their 2001 publication ‘Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong’ (Ames & Hall 2001), translated the same passage as: “What tian commands is called natural tendencies; drawing out these natural tendencies is called the proper way (Tao); improving upon this way is called education (jiao). As for this proper way, we cannot quit it even for an instant. Were it even possible to quit it, it would not be the proper way.”

Though these translations convey significant meanings, Western readers may still find it challenging to fully grasp the core values of Zhongyong. Even for Chinese individuals, deeply understanding its implications and putting them into practice can be difficult. The opening of the Zhongyong reveals the innate “nature” humans possess at “the original birth of humanity on earth,” conveying Confucianism’s “purpose”: how sages “teach” people to “cultivate (themselves in alignment with) the Tao,” thereby “manifesting their innate nature” (率性, Shuixing ) in harmony with the Tao, ultimately returning to the source of spirituality. To truly comprehend this profound purpose, readers must work backward from the above text’s conclusion to its beginning.

This philosophy of life elucidates core concepts and practical principles of “interreligious thought,” laying the foundation for Confucian thought and resonating with ideas from other spiritual traditions. It is noteworthy that this concept transcends specific religious frameworks, providing essential insights into contemporary discussions on the secularization and de-secularization of religions.

## *2.2. The True Essence of Nature, Tao, and Heart, and their Interrelationship*

Every entity possesses an inherent “nature,” which represents its essential qualities, often referred to as “true nature,” “innate nature” or “heavenly nature.” This nature embodies an internal capacity for harmonious functioning, enabling all things to grow and exist in alignment with the cosmos, deriving their essence from the “Tao”. Within our nature are various attributes and functions: the “perceptual nature” grants us the ability to perceive, think, and will; the “emptiness nature” helps us maintain ease when experiencing emotions, allowing us to transcend attachments and distinctions and reflect the ultimate truth of impermanence; and the “heavenly nature” embodies virtues of goodness, guiding us to make morally sound choices in alignment with our “conscience.” Practicing these attributes in our daily lives is precisely the process of embodying “following our innate nature.” This practice also serves as a path to achieving “manifesting our innate nature” or Shuixing,

allowing us to reflect the essence of the Tao and align ourselves with the harmonious operation of the universe.

Nature can be likened to the invisible roots of a tree, while the heart— encompassing both reason and emotion—is the blossom that emerges from this source. The original, pure human heart—in harmony with nature and the Tao—is referred to as the Tao heart, true heart, heavenly heart, or conscience. Although these terms emphasize different aspects, they are interconnected. However, the accumulated karma of all lifetimes, along with the influences of our social environment and education, can gradually pollute the heart. This results in internal afflictions like greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and doubt, which obscure our unchanging nature. In the cultivation process, the heart serves as both a window to perception and a bridge for self-reflection and cultivation, becoming a crucial tool for “manifesting the innate nature” and achieving harmony with the Tao.

The Tao, as the fundamental principle of the universe, is inherently omnipresent. It manifests in the myriad forms of heaven and earth, the source of life, and in human emotions and dispositions. All these are natural manifestations of the Tao. While different contexts may lead to various terms such as Heavenly Tao, Earthly Tao, and Human Tao, these names simply reflect the same essence of the Tao across diverse dimensions or environments. Importantly, the concept of “the Tao in humanity (Human Tao) equates to nature” emphasizes the intrinsic connection between humans and the Tao. When our hearts unify with our nature, we emulate the Tao of heaven and earth, achieving true oneness with the Tao.

It is essential to note that the (Human) Tao of manifesting one’s innate nature, as emphasized in Zhongyong, must remain intimately connected to daily life and should never be separated, even for a moment. Anything that can be temporarily set aside is not the true Tao. The Tao should be omnipresent and timeless, just as the universe—of which humanity is a microcosm—relies on the principles of the Heavenly Tao to function naturally. A moment’s separation from this order can lead to cosmic disorder. Similarly, if a person temporarily deviates from the principles of the Human Tao (i.e., their innate nature), their body and heart may fall under the influence of habitual tendencies, resulting in inner turmoil. This serves as a reminder and a guiding sign during the cultivation process, encouraging us to continually reflect upon and correct our actions.

This principle aligns with Dr. Hong’s insightful analysis of the wisdom embedded in the Chinese character “道” (Tao). Breaking down the character reveals its deeper meaning: it symbolizes the balance and harmony of yin and yang (丿 ㇇) and represents a path or way (一) that we must walk (走 or 行) ourselves (自), from head (首) to foot (足), signifying both the beginning (top) and the end (bottom). This

illustrates that we must never stray from this path, as we practice the way (methods) that align with the Tao. These insights remind us that cultivating the Tao necessitates continuous action in life, self-awareness, and the maintenance of inner harmony and stability.

When contemplating the meaning of human existence, French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (de Chardin n.d.) proposed a profound insight: “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” Similarly, British philosopher Alan Watts (Watts n.d.) stated, “You are an aperture through which the universe is looking at and exploring itself.”

These perspectives resonate with the idea that “God created humans to experience Himself,” particularly within the contexts of New Age thought, spiritual philosophy, and pantheism. These concepts emphasize that the divine or the universe explores and experiences its existence through human experiences, revealing the profound and inseparable connection between humanity and divinity. They highlight the interconnectedness of all life, forming the holistic operation of the universe.

This viewpoint encourages individuals to seek higher levels of existence and deeper truths through the pursuit of personal awakening. Based on this understanding of a shared life community, humanity should strive for greater unity, recognizing our interdependence and shared evolution. In light of such wisdom, what is there worth disputing, apart from living in harmony with one another?

From the philosophical perspective of the Zhongyong, we can draw a similar insight: “Nature is experienced and manifested through the heart.” This emphasizes the close relationship between the heart and nature, revealing how spiritual essence is manifested and explored through concrete life experiences. Such understanding enhances our awareness of spiritual existence and encourages individuals to seek deeper inner connections in their daily lives.

### *2.3. Principles of Cultivating the Tao in Zhongyong*

From a Buddhist perspective, all our conscious activities—whether rational thoughts or emotional fluctuations—create sensations in the chest area. If these sensations are not properly addressed, they can lead to emotional turbulence, delusions, and attachments, pulling us away from our innate nature. This situation is particularly evident when facing significant setbacks or difficulties. Therefore, the phrase “bearing the burden of the cross” is often used to describe the pressure people feel, similar to how Christians symbolically draw a “cross” on their chests to remind themselves to “cross” (or overcome) life’s challenges. They may not realize that this pressure often manifests as a sense of heaviness and pain in the chest, which

is precisely the “right place and right moment” to transcend feelings of suffering—a principle elaborated upon in Zhongyong through the concept of “Zhonghe” (中和). Dr. Hong’s teaching resonates with this idea, posing the question: can the pain of being “pierced by a thousand arrows” simply be “passed through” and released?

In the practice of Zhongyong, “Zhong” (中) embodies not only the balance and harmony of yin and yang but also the cultivation of “maintaining awareness”. This awareness nurtures a state of effortless ease and non-attachment in life. Maintaining the spirit in a state of “Zhong” echoes the wisdom found in the I Ching’s Qian Hexagram (易經乾卦) (I Ching’s Qian Hexagram n.d.), which emphasizes the principle of “self-strengthening without rest” (自強不息). This principle encourages us to continuously align our nature with the Heavenly Tao, remaining diligent in our efforts. Such a state allows us to maintain stability amidst emotional fluctuations, harmonizing with natural laws to achieve true balance. This cultivation strengthens the connection between our consciousness and innate nature, guiding us toward realizing and manifesting our true essence.

By cultivating “Zhong,” we allow emotions such as joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness to arise naturally. Instead of reacting with judgements or habitual responses, we simply let these emotions pass, returning to a state of calmness. This process not only enables appropriate emotional expression without excess, reflected in decorum, but also promotes inner harmony, ultimately benefiting both mental and physical development. In this state, “Zhong” naturally “regulates” (節) our inner energy or “qi” (氣), bringing us into a state of “He” (和), embodying the essence of our innate nature just as the Heavenly Tao harmoniously governs the Earth’s 24 solar terms (節氣). This concept aligns with the I Ching’s Kun Hexagram (易經坤卦) (I Ching’s Kun Hexagram n.d.), which highlights the importance of “holding virtue and supporting all things” (厚德載物), encouraging the cultivation of a heart that embodies the Earthly Tao’s forgiveness and tolerance.

“Zhong” represents the essential state of the Tao (or nature), keeping our hearts in a natural state of alertness and readiness, while “He” embodies the Tao’s natural function. “Zhong” leads us to “He,” harmonizing emotional fluctuations and helping us release attachments and delusions, thus maintaining a natural dynamic balance. This process mirrors the harmonious changes of the four seasons under the Heavenly Tao, which governs the balance of the universe. Even today, the idea of “Zhonghe” (中和) has evolved into the notion of “neutralization,” focusing on “achieving balance and harmony” among various forces. It is this internal balance that allows individuals to coexist more harmoniously within society. The Chinese character “中” (Zhong) originates from the symbol of “Tai Ji” (太極, ☯), symbolizing the balance and harmony of yin and yang within all things.

The character “Yong” (庸), which forms the latter part of “Zhongyong,” signifies that “every ordinary person can practice it, and it must be practiced in everyday moments.” It also conveys the deeper meaning of “continuous use.” Thus, the concept of “Zhongyong” can be understood as “keeping Zhong in practice.” Unlike tangible objects, our nature and heart cannot be directly “used,” which is why “Yong” symbolizes the cultivation of the Tao. Correspondingly, the function of “Shui” (率) in “Shuixing” (率性) parallels “Yong,” indicating individuals should naturally “lead” or “manifest” their innate nature, thereby achieving the fulfillment of their essential functions. Therefore, Zhongyong is not merely a philosophical theory but also a practical guide, reminding us how to lead our nature and align with the Heavenly Tao in our daily lives.

#### *2.4. Contemporary Wisdom in Spiritual Practice: Insights from Zhongyong to Tai Ji Men*

The concept of “maintaining awareness” in the Zhongyong can also be linked to Confucianism’s ‘The Great Learning’ (大學) (Legge 1893), which highlights “anchored awareness” (知止). Only by “achieving this anchored state of awareness can the heart find stability, stillness and peace, leading to wise contemplation and eventually, the realization of the Tao.” However, the human mind is often restless. So, how do we achieve this anchored awareness?

Stillness allows all things to reveal their inherent wisdom. By drawing inspiration from daily life and observing and grasping the subtle interplay between body and mind, we can cultivate awareness. For instance, the practice of burning incense in various cultures and religions serves not only to purify the environment but also to honor the divine or ancestors. The rising smoke interacts with the intangible wind, reflecting the relationship between body and mind. Just as the wind guides the smoke, our thoughts and emotions influence how our bodies respond. Therefore, focusing on body activities such as breathing, Qigong, martial arts, chanting, walking meditation, prostration, or yoga helps us cultivate anchored awareness, ultimately leading to inner peace.

What I have come to understand is that Tai Ji Men Qigong, as taught by Dr. Hong, is unique in its integration of “breath, movement, and intention.” This harmonious combination fosters a natural state of anchored awareness, much like a clock that “relies on a shared axis” for smooth operation, allowing the hour, minute, and second hands to work together in precise harmony. The practice enhances the dynamic interaction between body and mind, reducing monotony and making it easier to attain harmonious stillness both internally and externally. This makes Tai Ji Men’s teachings a simple yet profound path to inner peace, applicable in daily

life, allowing practitioners to remain calm and focused even in the face of stress or challenges. These teachings reflect the wisdom passed down by sages, encouraging practitioners to embody these insights.

By maintaining continuous awareness and inner ease, we establish a deep connection between the heart and our innate nature (the Tao), which leads to a higher level of cultivation. This begins with the interplay between smoke and wind, symbolizing the subtle relationship between the external circumstances and the internal states, and extends to the harmony between body and mind. Such integration fosters spiritual growth, enhancing the harmony between the metaphysical and physical realms. As emphasized in *The Great Learning*, this type of cultivation follows a harmonious progression: from self-cultivation to family regulation, governing the nation, and ultimately establishing peace in the world. This demonstrates the omnipresence of our innate nature and the Tao, as the interconnectedness of all these spheres reflects the fundamental unity between the individual and the larger cosmos.

Before cultivating the heart, our nature is often influenced by habits and external circumstances, leading to reactions, desires, and impulses. For example, anger is an expression of nature, but it can destabilize us when driven by habit. However, when the heart is refined and aligned with our innate nature, it no longer reacts from habit but flows harmoniously and naturally, demonstrating wisdom and compassion. At this stage, nature is expressed through self-awareness, self-discipline, and ease, enabling alignment with the Tao.

Although people may not fully perceive or grasp it, the Tao transcends both material and spiritual realms, existing everywhere. When individuals master the *Zhong* principle and align with their innate nature, they achieve harmony both within themselves and with the world around them. Through active practice, this understanding becomes a natural order in personal and social life, embodying the Tao's omnipresence. As the *Zhongyong* states, "manifesting our innate nature is in accordance with the Tao" (率性之謂道).

In this way, while acknowledging the Tao's transcendence beyond human comprehension, aligning one's nature with the Tao reveals a deeper relationship between humanity and divinity. Though "we belong to God, and God does not belong to us," when we act according to our nature and align with the Tao, we truly honor God and become part of Him.

Unlike the research insights I have presented above, Dr. Hong additionally proposes a simple yet highly effective method: maintaining constant gratitude and joy. While this approach may seem straightforward, practicing it is no easy task. As

the saying goes, “Many discuss principles, but few truly comprehend them; many know the Tao, but few act upon it.” Gratitude and joy are essential paths to wisdom in many religions and belief systems. By following this path, we quietly align with our innate nature, as this method integrates the key elements of cultivation: awareness, ease, and living in the present moment while safeguarding conscience.

It is essential to highlight that our innate nature comprises two dimensions: “nature” (性) and “life energy (命, Ming).” In this context, “nature” refers to the natural laws of the Tao, which are expressed through various mental activities and emotions, reflecting an individual’s essence and behavior. On the other hand, “life energy” symbolizes the vital force of the Tao, emphasizing an individual’s life force and overall health.

The cultivation practice of Tai Ji Men focus on the “dual cultivation of nature and life energy (性命雙修).” This involves enhancing moral character by cultivating the heart and aligning it with the Tao, while simultaneously harmonizing the body’s energy channels, strengthening life energy, and promoting physical well-being through the practice of Tai Ji Men Qigong.

Guided by the spirit of “nurturing the righteous Qi of heaven and earth and following the true principles of ancient and modern sages,” Tai Ji Men is dedicated to promoting its culture and fostering the physical, mental, and spiritual health and harmony of all people. This wisdom of cultivation embodies a holistic approach, nurturing both nature and life energy while integrating the righteous Qi of heaven and earth into practice, ultimately achieving harmony between the individual and the cosmos.

### *2.5. The Common Pursuit of Religion and Spirituality*

People from various religious backgrounds shape their beliefs based on unique spiritual experiences. For some, cultivation is a path to spiritual enlightenment; for others, doctrine lies at the heart of their faith. Today, the key to promoting harmonious coexistence is respecting each other’s beliefs and spiritual practices while seeking common values. Whether it is the Confucian idea that “everyone needs and can benefit” or the principles of Western religious traditions, exploring spiritual growth is a journey we can all pursue together.

Dr. Hong emphasizes that the truths of the inner world often transcend the limits of science. As we continue to advance technology, we must also prioritize spiritual growth. By balancing the spiritual and the scientific, we can better understand the wisdom of life and bring greater benefits to humanity. As Dr. Hong asserts, “facts are science, even beyond science.” Therefore, by safeguarding our conscience

and maintaining a conscious awareness, we can face the deeper truths of the spirit. Science can even learn from those who have gained profound insights into life, the human spirit, and the laws of the universe.

In this context, many religious traditions enhance inner cultivation through external precepts. “Upholding precepts” (持戒) is often seen as a fundamental practice for believers or followers. In the Zhongyong, the state of vigilance described as “caution and alertness” (戒慎恐懼) exemplifies the practice of “maintaining awareness.” If this understanding is viewed as an internal form of upholding precepts, it not only helps individuals adhere to external rules but also harmonizes with internal self-awareness. This alignment fosters positive interaction between one’s inner and outer selves, facilitating profound personal transformation.

The concept of “Zhong” advocated in the Zhongyong is similar to the idea of “mindfulness” found in Buddhist meditation (Mindfulness Meditation n.d.). It also resonates with the “Power of Now” emphasized by Western spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle (Eckhart Tolle’s Teachings n.d.). The shared values of “living in the present moment” and “living consciously” have emerged as central themes in modern spiritual practices.

Philosophical thoughts rooted in Confucianism and Taoism, which share the same origin, suggest that virtuous goodness is a direct expression of our heavenly nature. When we commit wrongful acts, our conscience often triggers feelings of unease. The conscience guides individuals in distinguishing between good and evil, helping them make moral decisions and fostering harmony between their internal and external worlds. Acting in accordance with one’s conscience naturally leads to the emergence of virtues, which align with the laws of the universe and help individuals realize the true meaning of life.

The essence of this spiritual cultivation is to return to our pure nature, or Tao, through the cultivation of the heart and the nurturing of virtues. This journey ultimately leads to self-transcendence. While this perspective is widely embraced in Eastern philosophy, it is also gaining recognition in modern society, becoming an important pathway for promoting spiritual and moral self-cultivation, as well as facilitating religious transcendence.

### 3. The Important Role of Conscience in Modern Life and Religious Transcendence

#### 3.1. *Exploring the Essence and Relationship of Conscience and Consciousness from a Linguistic Perspective*

The English word “conscience” originates from Latin, where the root is “sci,” meaning “to know.” This same root gives rise to both the noun “science” and the adjective “scious.” By adding the prefix “con,” we derive the terms “conscience” and “conscious.” While “science” became widely used during the scientific revolution of the 17th century to denote the systematic pursuit of knowledge, “conscience” has existed since medieval times. In the case of “conscience,” the word’s connection to “knowing” relates not to modern scientific methodology but to an inherent moral “awareness.”

The prefix “con-” means “together” and can also extend to mean “complete” or “whole,” revealing the deep connection between conscience (moral awareness) and consciousness (awareness). This understanding emphasizes humanity’s innate ability to not only maintain self-awareness but also foster deeper connections with others and the world.

In both French (conscience) and Spanish (conciencia), the same word is used to represent both “conscience” and “consciousness.” This is not merely a linguistic simplification but reflects the close unity between cognition and morality. From a linguistic perspective, this continues the historical tradition of the Latin root, underscoring the shared nature of knowledge and awareness. From a psychological perspective, it illustrates the inseparable relationship between moral conscience and self-awareness.

The key point here is that the awakening of consciousness inevitably accompanies the awakening of conscience. As we become aware of our existence, actions, and their consequences, our conscience is activated, guiding us to make more conscious moral choices. Thus, this unified expression in language reflects an ancient philosophical insight: human consciousness is not merely a reaction to the external world but also a form of moral self-awareness. This linguistic phenomenon highlights the unity between inner awareness and outer actions, embodying the profound concept of “the unity of knowing and doing” in both philosophy and psychology.

“Conscience,” often understood as an inner moral guide, could be seen as a gift bestowed upon humanity after eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge—a moral compass granted by Heaven following humanity’s expulsion from Eden. Dr. Hong refers to it as “the excellent heart.” “Conscious,” meanwhile, refers to the con-

tinuous ability to remain aware of both the external world and one's internal states, helping one avoid delusion and the five poisons of the heart. Building upon this, Dr. Hong explains the Chinese character for "wisdom" (智) as the ability to "know" (知) in every moment of every "day" (日), perfectly reflecting the concept of continuous awareness, or consciousness. This mindfulness ensures that the heart remains aligned with the Tao, with wisdom as the guiding light for spiritual growth.

The phonetic similarity between "conscious" and "conscience" in English, along with the Chinese term for "emptiness nature" (空性, kōng xìng), highlights a deep connection between these concepts. This resonates with the core teaching of Zhongyong, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining constant awareness of one's perceptual nature, protecting the conscience as an expression of heavenly nature, and embodying the effortless ease associated with emptiness nature.

In both Western and Eastern philosophies, the gap between "knowing" (知道, Zhitao) and "acting" is often seen as a significant issue. Typically, "knowing" refers to understanding based on past experiences or learned concepts, which can be limited by habitual thinking. For instance, I "know" that getting angry is harmful to my physical and mental health, but I just cannot help getting angry every time. People often overlook another layer of "knowing," the "awareness" that goes beyond habitual thought and brings conscious recognition in the present moment, particularly regarding the full observation of inner activities. For example, I "know" that I am currently feeling angry, and this awareness alone can diminish the intensity of that anger. That is the power of being present.

This distinction between two types of "knowing" highlights the difference between knowledge and wisdom. The former turns the mind into a "poor master", leading to rigid thinking and living unconsciously, while the latter makes the mind a "wise servant," allowing for thoughtful and natural actions. This ultimately brings more freedom and alignment with conscience. The core practices emphasized in the Zhongyong focus on "awareness" and "non-attachment." Maintaining awareness (知) means being conscious of inner activities, while non-attachment refers to being in harmony with nature (道), embodying the deep meanings of "zhi" (知) and "tao" (道). This is the essence of truly "知道" ("knowing" and knowing the "Tao").

Socratic philosophy often echoes a similar understanding with the phrase, "I know only one thing: that I know nothing" (Daily Philosophy n.d.). While this phrase does not appear in Plato's works, it reflects Socrates' deep appreciation for wisdom. If we interpret "knowing only one thing" as clear, present-moment awareness, and "knowing nothing" as embodying effortless action and non-attachment, it aligns perfectly with the concept of "Zhong" in the Zhongyong.

In the Tao Te Ching, Laozi asserts at the very beginning, “The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao” (Tao Te Ching Online Translation n.d.), highlighting the ineffable and limitless essence of the Tao. Similarly, Socrates’ statement, “I know that I know nothing,” embodies a “wisdom of unknowing” that empowers him to release attachment and align with his true nature. This perspective resonates with Laozi’s concept of “non-action and yet nothing is left undone.” Such clarity of awareness, along with alignment to the Tao, allows one to transcend dependence on external knowledge and internal attachments, fostering a spontaneous state in which the heart resonates with the Tao of Heaven and Earth, ultimately leading to profound wisdom and freedom.

Those who cultivate self-awareness are particularly attuned to the sensations triggered by their conscience. This heightened awareness enables them to follow their moral compass when facing challenges, helping them make sound decisions rather than being swayed by momentary desires or emotions. By fostering this self-awareness, individuals can more clearly perceive their conscience and align their actions accordingly. This alignment facilitates personal elevation and achievement, leading to a higher spiritual state.

A well-known Chinese proverb states, “The plan of a day lies in the morning, and the plan of a year lies in the spring,” emphasizing the importance of timing and the key priorities in planning for all endeavors. Dr. Hong’s teachings extend this wisdom, stating that “the plan of a lifetime lies in conscience” and “the plan of a lifetime lies in the present moment.” These insights emphasize that both conscience and conscious awareness are central to the cultivation of wisdom within Tai Ji Men.

If the peaceful state akin to heaven resides not in some distant, unknown place but rather within our closest connection to conscience, why seek it externally? If inner tranquility depends not on anticipating the future but on embracing every present moment, how could we possibly overlook such an opportunity?

### *3.2. The Important Role of Conscience in Human History and Culture*

Throughout human history and culture, conscience has played a significant role. For instance, ‘the Book of Genesis’ recounts how Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command and were subsequently expelled from the Garden of Eden. This marked humanity’s transition from the “Age of Innocence” into the “Age of Conscience,” as outlined in the concept of “The Seven Dispensations in Biblical Theology” (The Seven Dispensations in Biblical Theology n.d.). From this point on, humanity began to rely on conscience for moral judgment. However, as time progressed, human morality gradually deteriorated, and the neglect of conscience led to events

like Noah's Ark and the Tower of Babel, which were consequences of divine punishment. Importantly, these principles are not exclusive to Christian scriptures.

In the ancient Egyptian 'Book of the Dead', the Egyptians believed that after death, the soul would face judgment in the underworld. The state of the deceased's conscience would determine their fate and whether they could return to the heavenly realm. During the final judgment ceremony, the deceased stood before a golden scale, overseen by the goddess Ma'at, who embodied truth, justice, and balance. Accompanied by 42 judges (The Forty-Two Judges n.d.) who assessed various sins, the deceased's heart—symbolizing the state of conscience or heavenly heart—was placed on one side of the scale, while Ma'at's feather of truth was placed on the other. If the heart balanced with the feather, it indicated the deceased's righteous conduct, allowing entry into paradise. If the heart was heavier, it would be devoured by the monster Ammit, leading to the annihilation of the soul.

Notably, in Chinese character analysis, one side of the scale symbolizes the state of conscience (忄). The other side represents "the decorative feather" (羽) in the hair of the Goddess (母) of Truth, which combine to form "每" (every) signifying that everyone must face this judgement. This synthesis of both sides creates the character "悔" (regret), suggesting that the state of conscience possessed by the deceased during their life determine the outcomes of the "weighing of the heart" (稱心) in death, leading either to fulfillment (如意) or regret (後悔).

These two cautionary examples pertain to the beginning and end of life, highlighting the crucial role of conscience as a key element in both daily life and spiritual transcendence, resonating with Dr. Hong's insights. He articulates that—"Conscience serves as the ultimate judgment of divine law, the sole arbiter between heaven and earth, and the passport to heaven."

As human beings, our nature embodies the virtue of goodness, with conscience serving as our inner guide to ethical actions. It assists us in discerning right from wrong, guiding our moral choices, and promoting harmony both within ourselves and in our interactions with the world. By aligning with the universal laws, we can realize the true meaning of life. The essence of spiritual cultivation lies in nurturing both the heart and virtue. By safeguarding our conscience and manifesting our innate nature, we can return to our innate purity or the Tao, ultimately achieving self-transcendence and reverting to the "Age of Innocence."

### *3.3. The Important Role of Conscience in Modern Society*

Conscience plays a pivotal role in modern society, particularly against the backdrop of globalization and rapid technological advancements. It acts as a guiding light when we confront moral challenges, social injustices, and human dilemmas. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948) emphasizes “conscience” as the foundation of freedom, equality, and dignity, providing every individual with an innate moral compass. Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (Churchill 1940) famously remarked, “The only guide to a man is his conscience,” highlighting the centrality of conscience in shaping our actions and decisions. Similarly, American pastor John MacArthur (MacArthur 2006) described conscience as “a built-in warning system that signals us when something we have done is wrong,” reminding us to return to the path of justice and truth when we deviate from moral principles.

In contemporary society, conscience is instrumental in driving social movements, advocating for peace, promoting the balance between technology and ethics, and safeguarding both the environment and human rights. It guides individuals and societies, especially when grappling with complex moral issues such as social injustice, environmental degradation, technological ethics, and global poverty. The voice of conscience is particularly crucial in these areas, as it serves not only as a personal moral compass but also as the cornerstone of social justice and harmony. When individuals act in alignment with their conscience, their collective good deeds form a powerful force that propels society toward a brighter future.

Dr. Hong has devoted many years to promoting a global culture of conscience through the “Era of Conscience Movement,” which emphasizes the universal value of conscience. He firmly believes that “everyone is a leader of conscience,” holding the key to unlocking the energy of peace. Dr. Hong hopes that individuals from all walks of life will speak and act according to their conscience, exerting a positive influence on the world. Since 2014, he has led a series of international initiatives, including the Declaration of International Day of Conscience (An Era of Conscience n.d.-b), the Declaration of World Prayer Day (Federation of World Peace and Love n.d.-a), and the Declaration of World Day of the Power of Hope (Federation of World Peace and Love n.d.-b), calling for a global response to the practice of a culture of conscience.

The Declaration of World Day of the Power of Hope emphasizes that “the security and stability of our global community must be founded on the awakening of everyone’s conscience; from this awakening arises the compassion and power of hope to act with kindness. By following the guidance of our conscience and illuminating the light within our hearts, we can cultivate hope in every corner of the

world.” It calls upon individuals everywhere to take action with conscience and the power of hope, working together for the safety and sustainable development of themselves, others, and the world, allowing the positive energy of the universe to guide the Earth toward a sustainable future.

These efforts have garnered broad international support and have achieved concrete results on the United Nations stage. On July 25, 2019, the Kingdom of Bahrain submitted a draft resolution on “Promoting a Culture of Peace with Love and Conscience” during the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly, leading to the UN declaring April 5th as the “International Day of Conscience.” This initiative has further strengthened global awareness of conscience, encouraging people to reflect on it and practice it in addressing the various severe challenges faced in contemporary society.

The establishment of the International Day of Conscience is not merely symbolic; it represents a tangible step in humanity’s collective pursuit of peace, justice, and sustainable development. In modern society, the role of conscience extends beyond being a personal moral compass to evolving into a spiritual force that drives social progress and fosters global cooperation. By raising global awareness of conscience, interactions among individuals, societies, and nations can function under elevated moral standards, promoting harmony and prosperity within the global community. Thus, in modern society, conscience serves not only as a guide for individual behavior but also as a fundamental force for sustaining global moral order, advancing peace, and ensuring justice. When conscience becomes a universally accepted standard of conduct, humanity can achieve true inner and outer harmony, collectively welcoming a brighter future.

## **4. The Global Influence of Tai Ji Men as a Reference for Secularization**

### *4.1. The Essence, Mission, and Global Contributions of Tai Ji Men*

Tai Ji Men has been transmitting the core wisdom of Taoism through esoteric traditions for over 6,000 years. In 1966, Dr. Hong Tao-Tzu, its contemporary leader, established the non-profit Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy in accordance with national laws. The mission of the Academy is to preserve Tai Ji Men culture while promoting the physical and mental well-being of individuals. Through his unique yin-yang philosophy and spiritual heritage, Dr. Hong transforms the religious functions and values of “self-cultivation and helping others” and “stopping evil and promoting good” into a practical life philosophy and mission. This approach empowers his dis-

ciples to change their destinies and transform their lives through practice, inspiring them to make significant contributions to social progress and harmony.

The Tai Ji Men Qigong taught by Dr. Hong emphasizes cultivating vital energy for health while nurturing both mind and spirit. Through various practices, individuals enhance their awareness, which extends into their daily activities. With a comprehensive approach to preventive medicine, disciples maintain their youthfulness, rarely fall ill, and are eager to help others. Gratitude and joy become ingrained in their attitudes, rather than merely serving as passive emotional responses. When faced with life's challenges, the wisdom imparted by Dr. Hong fills their hearts with peace and joy, enabling them to navigate difficulties and create countless wonderful memories.

Disciples of Tai Ji Men view conscience as their moral compass, self-awareness as the lighthouse of their spirit, and kindness and optimism as the power source of their lives. This mindset allows them to find more joy in everyday activities, ignite their creativity, and enjoy a high quality of life with their families. They take charge of their destinies, becoming the masters of their own souls. Moreover, they are committed to guiding others in the pursuit of inner peace and social harmony, enhancing human well-being while striving for common goals that transcend religious boundaries. This spiritual growth enables disciples from diverse religious backgrounds to gain deeper insights and benefits.

Tai Ji Men has long advocated for cross-cultural and interfaith understanding through unique cultural performances, rituals and blessings, the ancient Ceremony of Ringing the Bell of World Peace and Love, and the World Leader Summit. These efforts have successfully inspired the hearts of people worldwide and have fostered a consensus among leaders from various fields, allowing them to collectively practice the ideals of love and peace. These activities not only enhance dialogue and understanding between different cultures and beliefs but also play a crucial role in resolving everyday frictions and regional conflicts.

Dr. Hong's leadership and wisdom have garnered Tai Ji Men widespread international respect and numerous accolades. Driven by a shared sense of mission, the Tai Ji Men master-disciple community has visited over a hundred countries, earning the title of "International Ambassadors of Peace and Goodwill." This achievement reflects their substantial global influence and indispensable contributions to peace and cultural exchange.

Although Tai Ji Men has not experienced the challenges of secularization or de-secularization, they demonstrate a successful model by harmoniously integrating spiritual principles with daily actions, providing valuable reference for groups

facing these issues. Through these practices, Tai Ji Men disciples tightly integrate their faith with daily life, achieving religious transcendence while balancing secularization and de-secularization. On one hand, they elevate their faith to a higher level, embodying a form of de-secularization. On the other hand, they infuse their faith into various aspects of secular life, bringing religious values into social, political, and cultural spheres. This approach promotes the integration and coexistence of religious functions within modern society, serving as an exemplary model of secularization.

#### *4.2. Legal and Tax Persecution: A Warning Against Political Interference in Freedom of Belief*

Despite the lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987, Tai Ji Men has faced ongoing political persecution from remnants of authoritarianism since 1996 (The Tai Ji Men Case n.d.). This period coincided with Taiwan's first democratic presidential election, during which some religious groups that supported certain candidates were targeted by government authorities under the pretext of "cracking down on religious crime." As a result, Tai Ji Men was innocently implicated. Prosecutor Hou Kuan-ren maliciously prosecuted the group, using false witnesses and fabricated evidence, leading to dual persecution on criminal and tax evasion charges. In 2002, Taiwan's Control Yuan investigated the prosecutor's actions and confirmed eight major violations committed by him. After a decade of trials, Tai Ji Men was finally acquitted in 2007, with the Supreme Court ruling affirming that Tai Ji Men was not guilty, had no tax liabilities, and did not violate tax collection laws. Moreover, in 2009, the defendants received state compensation for their wrongful imprisonment.

However, despite facts and legal rulings confirming that Tai Ji Men had no tax issues, tax persecution continued. The National Taxation Bureau ignored judicial decisions and imposed administrative penalties on Tai Ji Men for tax years 1991-1996. Even after the Supreme Administrative Court ruled in favor of Tai Ji Men in 2018, prompting the Bureau to correct five out of the six years' tax bills to zero in 2019, they still refused to amend the illegal 1992 tax bill. This refusal was based on a technical argument that a prior Administrative Court ruling—acknowledged as erroneous—had become final for that year, despite all years sharing the same facts and evidence. This situation culminated in the illegal forced auction and nationalization of Tai Ji Men's sacred cultivation land in 2020. Such actions not only represent unreasonable accusations against a legitimate Qigong and martial arts cultivation organization but also challenge the rule of law in society, severely impacting citizens' fundamental rights and tarnishing Taiwan's reputation as a beacon of democracy.

Some scholars argue that one of the main reasons the Tai Ji Men tax case remains unresolved is the lack of a legal basis for the tax incentive system. This remnant of authoritarianism inevitably encourages some officials to misuse taxation, thereby legitimizing their misconduct. Consequently, Tai Ji Men has pursued administrative remedies and petitions to an extent that could set a Guinness record, yet these efforts have remained futile.

Former U.S. Ambassador-at-large for Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, commented on the Tai Ji Men Case, stating, “We believe the government’s role is to protect that innate right of a person to select their own course or future for their soul” (Brownback 2021). This perspective highlights the severe dangers of contemporary political interference in freedom of belief. As a typical case of human rights violations due to illegal government taxation, the Tai Ji Men Case draws attention not only in Taiwan but also serves as a warning to other democratic nations, necessitating urgent attention and response. Therefore, it is particularly pressing and essential to promote dialogue and cooperation across cultures and disciplines to rectify this situation.

The Tai Ji Men Case illustrates that true fairness and effective governance can only be achieved when public servants adhere to their conscience and follow the law. As Dr. Hong wisely states, only those willing to put these teachings into practice can genuinely benefit from them. His teachings aim to guide individuals in the pursuit of truth, conveying meanings that transcend mere words. He often encourages his disciples to explore their inner selves to seek answers, demonstrating a keen insight into their spiritual growth. This embodies the essence of Tai Ji Men’s Zen-like wisdom culture.

#### *4.3. Tai Ji Men Practitioners: Cultivating Inner Peace and Unleashing Exceptional Life Potential*

There is growing evidence that Taiwan is facing a serious national “tax disaster,” and the Tai Ji Men Case is not just an “isolated incident” as claimed by the National Taxation; rather, it reveals a broader issue of “corrupt officials.” The efforts made by Tai Ji Men disciples aim not only to clear their names but also to give a voice to countless other victims of similar injustices. The case highlights deep structural problems within Taiwan’s tax system, and Tai Ji Men disciples hope to raise public awareness about government abuse of power. This battle goes beyond the scope of Tai Ji Men; it concerns every citizen who believes in justice and the rule of law.

In the face of prolonged political persecution, Tai Ji Men disciples have shown extraordinary persistence and resilience, refusing to bow to power or compromise with lies. They have chosen to follow legal avenues, engaging in seemingly endless

administrative litigation and petitions as a reflection of their respect for the rule of law. Despite facing countless challenges, they remain steadfast. While many observers sympathize with the absurd and Sisyphean ordeal that Tai Ji Men disciples have endured, these disciples continue to live with peace in their hearts, traveling across five continents to promote a culture of peace rooted in love and conscience.

Tai Ji Men disciples firmly believe that, though the storm of tax persecution may try to trample the flowers, it cannot stop the arrival of spring. Their unwavering commitment to justice not only underscores their self-worth and dignity but also has a positive impact on society, drawing the attention and support of numerous conscientious international scholars and human rights organizations. Under the leadership of renowned Italian sociologist Professor Massimo Introvigne, the magazine *Bitter Winter* has established an international platform since December 2020 to report on violations of religious or belief freedom, recognizing Tai Ji Men's tax case as a significant example (*Bitter Winter Magazine* n.d.). The magazine is committed to continuously amplifying the voices of Tai Ji Men, ensuring that the case remains in the global spotlight until justice is achieved and the issue is fully resolved. To this end, *Bitter Winter* regularly invites experts and scholars from various countries to hold online forums, publish articles, and release books. In addition, international supporters have sent letters to the Taiwanese government and have even traveled to Taiwan to express their solidarity with Tai Ji Men.

Through their personal suffering, Tai Ji Men disciples not only help others understand the truth but also encourage them to reexamine the flaws in the judicial and administrative systems. They inspire those who have experienced injustice to stand up courageously. This combination of inner strength and outward action exemplifies the resilience and dedication of Tai Ji Men disciples. Whether addressing their own injustices or participating in the global conscience movement, they consistently uphold the values of truth and justice. With the collective wisdom and conscience of the global community, the story of Tai Ji Men continues to inspire the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty, while promoting peace and progress on a global scale.

## **Conclusion**

Cross-cultural insights provide valuable wisdom for addressing global religious issues, especially in the context of globalization, where shared truths and values from both Western and Eastern cultures can transcend religious barriers. Conscience, as the cornerstone of individual and social harmony, has historically played a pivotal role in multicultural contexts and continues to guide human actions and choices in modern society.

In a world grappling with challenges posed by secularization, Tai Ji Men exemplifies the profound significance of conscience in daily life through its core beliefs, highlighting the importance of religious transcendence. As a model for fostering global harmony and cross-cultural dialogue, Tai Ji Men demonstrates that this approach can transcend mere matters of faith and spiritual cultivation, actively promoting justice and equity while fostering peace and understanding worldwide.

As a universal value, we aspire for conscience to become a shared belief among global citizens, serving as a balancing force between politics and religion to help resolve conflicts and differences.

In summary, this paper begins with the core concepts of the Confucian classic *Zhongyong* and connects them with the unique cultivation wisdom of Tai Ji Men, exploring the values of religious transcendence and spiritual practice. Maintaining self-awareness and effectively harnessing conscience are crucial for achieving inner transcendence and fulfilling human potential. As a messenger of love and peace, as well as a steadfast defender of freedom of belief, Tai Ji Men exemplifies the importance of upholding conscience and justice through tireless efforts, becoming a model for the pursuit of truth and justice in modern society. We hope these discussions will inspire more individuals to value conscience, appreciate spiritual values, and work toward a more harmonious and just future for humanity.

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## Chapter 4

### FROM MAINLINE TO MARGINAL: THE GRADUAL DECLINE OF THE ONCE-POWERFUL PROTESTANT CHURCHES IN AMERICA

Dyron B. Daughrity<sup>1</sup>

***Abstract:** Mainline Protestants used to be at the heart of American society. They were large, thriving, wealthy, and influential in American life. Their mammoth church buildings still stand as a testimony to their glory days. These churches have gone through a rather stark and steep decline over the last several decades, as churchgoers move towards Evangelicalism or Pentecostalism. The mainline Protestant churches demonstrate a loss, but do not necessarily demonstrate secularization in America. "Mainline" is a term that used to refer to the churches that were at the center of American religious life. The tables have turned, however, and they are now best described as "marginal," at least in terms of sheer number. They used to be home to some of the wealthiest American families. They were towns that have been described as "elite white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP)." They were the establishment class. Church historians would describe them as "high church", as opposed to the evangelical churches that were often geared to minister to the low or rising classes in America. Mainline, however, meant high class. It was at the center of American power. Mainline churches controlled the Ivy League seminaries, and their clergy often held master's degrees, even doctorates. Today, Evangelical churches claim around 22% of the American population, while mainline Protestants claim around 10%. Mainliners are twice as likely to join Evangelicalism than Evangelicals are to join a mainline Protestant church. Today, Evangelicalism has reached a point of "stasis." Mainline Protestants are not declining as fast as they once were, but all things considered, "... it seems apparent that there are more causes for concern among mainline Protestants than evangelicals."*

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## Introduction

Mainline Protestants used to be at the heart of American society. They were large, thriving, wealthy, and influential in American life. Their mammoth church buildings still stand as a testimony to their glory days. These churches have gone through a rather stark and steep decline over the last several decades, as churchgoers vote with their feet and move more in the direction of Evangelicalism or Pentecostalism. The mainline Protestant churches seem unable to stem the exodus out of their doors.

“Mainline” is a term that used to refer to the churches that were at the center of American religious life. The tables have turned, however, and they are now best described as “marginal,” at least in terms of sheer number. Their churches were tall with impressive steeples. They had influence, were culturally prominent, and were associated with the ruling classes in the United States. Mainline churches controlled the Ivy League seminaries for the most part, and their clergy often held master’s degrees, even doctorates.<sup>2</sup>

In 1989, historian William Hutchinson tried to specify what denominations should be considered mainline Protestant, and here is the list he came up with:

- American Baptist Churches USA,
- Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),
- United Church of Christ,
- The Episcopal Church (USA),
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,
- The United Methodist Church, and
- Presbyterian Church (USA).

These churches are often referred to as “the seven sisters” since they share much in common.<sup>3</sup>

These mainline Protestant churches share a progressive approach to Christian doctrine and practice. They tend to view Jesus Christ as a helpful moral teacher and guide who taught people how to love their neighbor, as compared to Evangelicals who stress the importance of Jesus offering personal salvation to people through faith in His life, death, and resurrection.

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<sup>2</sup> James Hudnut-Beumler and Mark Silk, eds., *The Future of Mainline Protestantism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Hudnut-Beumler and Silk, p. 5.

Mainline Protestants take the Bible seriously, but not literally. They sanctify altruism, whereas Evangelicals take a more hardline Reformation perspective—that salvation is available only by faith, and not by works.<sup>4</sup>

Although members of mainline denominations come from very diverse backgrounds across the country, there are a few uniting demographic themes and generalizations:

- They are more educated than the general population,
- They are far wealthier than the general population,
- They are older on average than the general population, and
- They are usually much more racially white than the rest of America.<sup>5</sup>

Mainline Protestant denominations peaked in the middle of the twentieth century. In 1958, over half of the American population was affiliated with one of them. America's leaders were "overwhelmingly from this religious subculture." However, today, less than 13 percent of Americans are associated with mainline Protestantism. The decline has been staggeringly severe.<sup>6</sup>

Politically, these churches tend to embrace causes that are more associated with the Democratic Party in the United States. Mainline Protestant pastors tend to embrace "a liberal and activist social agenda ... [and] affirm social justice as the core of the gospel."<sup>7</sup>

These churches have been ordaining women as pastors for decades. They have stressed inclusive approaches to the LGBTQ community for decades as well, which has led to major fractures in recent years.<sup>8</sup>

Issues of sexuality tend to dominate mainline Protestant discussions today. They have fought hard to reach consensus on these issues, but it is clear now that the divisions are too deep. These issues have proven to be overly taxing on more traditional members, and the floodgates have opened in recent years for large numbers

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, 8th ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), pp. 247, 26–27.

<sup>5</sup> Hudnut-Beumler and Silk, pp. 32–40.

<sup>6</sup> Hudnut-Beumler and Silk, pp. 1, 50.

<sup>7</sup> Hudnut-Beumler and Silk, pp. 48–49, and Wald and Calhoun-Brown, p. 246.

<sup>8</sup> Hudnut-Beumler and Silk, p. 49. For the Methodist breakup, see Joshua Zeitz, "Why You Should Be Worried About the Split in the Methodist Church," in *Politico*, 9 December 2022, located at: <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/12/09/methodist-church-lgbtq-slavery-00073112>.

of mainline Protestants to either join with evangelical churches, or walk away from congregational life altogether.

Religious switching is not a one-way street, however. Some once-conservative, evangelical Christians have converted to mainline Protestant denominations in recent years. It is rather common for evangelical students to go off to college and encounter ideologies from more liberal professors, leading to a kind of crisis in religious identity, particularly in the realms of scripture and theology.

Why did mainline Protestants become so progressive? Historian David Hollinger has argued that global mission work is one of the main stimuli of the liberalization of mainline Protestants. As mainline Protestant missionaries went out into the world to spread their uniquely American brand of Christianity, it backfired, and they ended up returning to America with a new, global understanding, and a strong sense of Christian ecumenism derived from working with other denominations in the field. The end result was that while the mainline Protestant denominations tried to change the world, in actuality the world changed them and, later, their denominations. Hollinger opens his book with the following sentences: “The Protestant foreign missionary project expected to make the world look more like the United States. Instead, it made the United States look more like the world.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The Rise and Fall of the Mainline Protestant Influence**

Mainline Protestantism’s overall numbers started to decline in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> The 1950s were their heyday as they peaked in influence and number. In the 1940s and 1950s they were growing at a faster rate than the general population. The baby boom that took place after WWII led to an overall increase in church attendance as people wanted to provide religious instruction for their children. By the late 1950s, well over half of America’s population were attending church in a mainline Protestant congregation.<sup>11</sup>

As these mainline Protestant denominations rose to unrivaled prominence in the mid-twentieth century, they embraced immigration, making “a pluralistic bargain.” As America’s chief cultural gatekeepers, they “contributed to their own decline” in making this decision. As non-Western immigrants came into the nation, it changed American culture as well as the nation’s religious landscape. These immigrants were not prone to join mainline Protestant churches; rather, they tended to be members of other religions, Roman Catholic, or far more evangelical in faith—

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<sup>9</sup> David Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Wald and Calhoun-Brown, p. 243.

<sup>11</sup> Hudnut-Beumler and Silk, p. 18.

even Pentecostal. Mainline Protestant leaders tried to reach the new immigrants, but with limited success. Their churches remained mainly white, culturally elite, and wealthy.<sup>12</sup>

By 1965, mainline denominations noticed that their numbers were going down, and it was not a statistical fluke. Many clergy were shocked, as their churches had been growing in number and in confidence throughout the 1950s. The sudden reversal caused all kinds of questions. As the more liberal mainline denominations declined, America's more conservative Evangelical traditions grew.<sup>13</sup>

Churches decline for a host of reasons; it is rarely a simple story. One obvious reason has to do with fertility rates—which drop when people, usually richer people, choose to produce at rates below replacement levels. Those churches started to become quite old in their membership. And without children in the church, other families with children are less likely to attend. This is a common point of despair for aging congregations; they struggle to get the ball rolling again.

Mainline Protestant churches are aging out, according to Pew Research. Their median age for members is in their late 50s.<sup>14</sup>

Political scientist Ryan Burge writes: “Mainline Protestants ... used to outnumber evangelicals by a significant margin in the 1970s. By 1983 there were more evangelicals in the U.S. than mainliners.”<sup>15</sup>

Today, Evangelical churches can claim around 22% of the American population, while mainline Protestants can claim around 10%. Mainliners are twice as likely to join Evangelicalism than Evangelicals are to join a mainline Protestant church.<sup>16</sup>

The U.S. Supreme Court used to be dominated by mainline Protestants. Today, however, it is strongly Roman Catholic—with seven of its nine members being either active Catholics or at least affiliated with Catholicism (Neill Gorsuch).

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<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Pruitt, *Open Hearts, Closed Doors: Immigration Reform and the Waning of Mainline Protestantism* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Lipka, “Which U.S. religious groups are oldest and youngest,” *Pew Research*, 11 July 2016, located at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/11/which-u-s-religious-groups-are-oldest-and-youngest/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ryan Burge, “Mainline Protestants Are Still Declining, But That’s Not Good News for Evangelicals,” *Christianity Today*, 13 July 2021, located at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/july/mainline-protestant-evangelical-decline-survey-us-nones.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Burge, “Mainline Protestants Are Still Declining, But That’s Not Good News for Evangelicals.”

It is a very different story when one considers the U.S. Congress, which is about 88% Christian. The majority (57%) of the Congress is Protestant, and nearly a quarter of the Congress identifies with a mainline Protestant denomination. America is only 10% mainline Protestant. That means mainliners punch above their weight when it comes to national leadership.<sup>17</sup>

Recent Presidents do not favor one type of Christianity over another. Biden is Catholic; Trump was Presbyterian when first elected, but now identifies with non-denominational Christianity—which tends to connote with Evangelicalism. Obama was raised non-religious but converted to Christianity as an adult. He eventually found his way into the United Church of Christ—a mainline Protestant denomination. George W. Bush was raised Episcopalian but later joined his wife’s United Methodist Church. Clinton was from the Southern Baptist denomination. Bush, Sr. was a lifelong Episcopalian. Reagan was from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), but joined a Presbyterian church after leaving office. Carter was a lifelong Baptist.<sup>18</sup> Put differently, five of the last eight Presidents were associated with mainline Protestantism at some point in their lives.

### **Mainline Protestant (“Seven Sisters”) Decline from 1970<sup>19</sup>**

- Episcopal Church: declined from 3.2 million (1970) to 1.9 million (2015) to 1.5 million (2021).<sup>20</sup>
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) declined from 5.8 million (1970) to 4.3 million (2015) to 3.3 million (2020).<sup>21</sup>
- Presbyterian Church (USA) declined from 4.8 million (1970) to 1.7 million (2015) to 1.2 million (2021).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jeff Diamant, “Faith on the Hill: The Religious Composition of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress,” *Pew Research Center*, 3 January 2023, located at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/01/03/faith-on-the-hill-2023/>.

<sup>18</sup> See Aleksandra Sandstrom, “Biden is only the second Catholic president, but nearly all have been Christians,” *Pew Research Center*, 20 January 2021, located at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/20/biden-only-second-catholic-president-but-nearly-all-have-been-christians-2/>.

<sup>19</sup> For 1970 to 2015 statistics, see Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 849–856.

<sup>20</sup> See: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/32055>.

<sup>21</sup> See: <https://www.elca.org/news-and-events/elca-facts>.

<sup>22</sup> See: <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2022/4/25/pcusa-2021-statistics-continue-show-declining-memb/>.

- American Baptist Churches USA declined from 2.1 million (1970) to 1.5 million (2015) to 1.2 million (2020).<sup>23</sup>
- Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) declined from 1.6 million (1970) to 786,000 (2015) to 351,000 (2019).<sup>24</sup>
- United Church of Christ declined from 2.7 million (1970) to 880,000 (2015) to 774,000 (2021).<sup>25</sup>
- The United Methodist Church declined from 14.4 million (1970) to 7.1 million (2015) to 6.3 million (2020).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.abc-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Summary-of-Denominational-Statistics-2020.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> See: <https://juicyecumenism.com/2021/02/10/disciples-brethren-shrink/>.

<sup>25</sup> <https://sowhatfaith.com/2022/02/20/ucc-membership-decline-from-2193593-to-773539/>.

<sup>26</sup> See: <http://www.umdata.org/UMFactsHome.aspx>. It should be noted that the UMC is undergoing a major denominational split at the time of this writing (2023).



## Chapter 5

### GLOBALIZATION PROCESSES IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGION IN MODERN SOCIETY

**Gegoska Ivana<sup>1</sup>**  
**Hadjievska Ivanna<sup>2</sup>**

***Abstract:** In the modern context, all social phenomena and activities happen much faster and more intensively. Such a dynamic causes the replacement of traditional forms of appearance and action with some new ones, and those changes under the influence of globalization spread rapidly. The same thing happens with religion and religious systems as well. In that sense, as research questions what exactly are the ways and effects of global processes on religion, explanations regarding these issues open a platform for understanding the opportunities and dealing with the challenges that the new age brings. It can be said that in the context of globalization, religion uses many tools that are immanent to globalization, such as communication and transportation technologies. Based on the relevant literature, the aspects that are determined as changes faced by the religious are singled out. These are increasing religious diversity in societies, increasing differentiation in the organization of religion and increasing subjectivization of religion.*

***Keywords:** religion, religious systems, globalization, communication, migration*

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## Introduction

*In the beginning, globalization was a word everyone mentioned, with Davos and New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman celebrating its good points and its inevitability. Globalization is becoming a conventional expression. Ruckus Sociétés and French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu highlights its flaws and weaknesses. Globalization is becoming a phenomenon that provokes numerous disputes, hostile discussions, even protests, and is spear-breaking at the beginning of the 21st century (Bagvati 2008: 15)*

Globalization is a multi-layered phenomenon that has had a profound impact on many spheres of social life. Evidence suggests that globalization is not losing its dominance in the 21st century, but is also manifesting itself in other spheres (e.g. media, religion, modernization, tourism, knowledge, education, etc.), in addition to the basic ones, such as economics, politics, culture, and technology. The definitions of globalization are numerous, which may be related to its manifest presence in all spheres of the social system of relations and the fact that, despite all the opponents of globalization, it is a kind of integrative phenomenon on a global scale. Globalization has made it possible to perceive the world as a whole, and with a pronounced awareness that individuals belong to that world (Чукалевска 2020).

Ulrich Beck points out that globalization is a “process of world society”; McLuhan identifies it as a “global village”; Martin Elbrow points out that the people of the world are a part of a world society, and globalization involves all the processes in which the people of the world are involved (Ranten 2005: 5). Anthony Giddens explains that globalization is the intensification of social relations (Gidens 1998: 69).

In fact, globalization is a complex process which generates a great deal of influence through culture. In the modern context, all social phenomena and activities occur much faster and more intensively. It is precisely such dynamics that cause the replacement of previous/traditional forms of emergence and action with some new ones, and those changes, influenced by globalization, are spreading rapidly. The same is true of religion and religious systems. One aspect of these changes is elaborated in a conceptual framework. In that sense, as research questions what the ways and effects of global processes on religion are, explaining these issues opens up a platform to understand the opportunities and address the challenges that the new age brings.

## 1. Globalization as a factor of change

Among the many definitions of globalization, it is seen as a process in which the functioning of fundamental aspects of social life is not limited to certain territories or states, but is expected to have an impact on aspects of social life, including religion (Golebiewski 2014).

For a long time, researchers in sociology and psychology (Allport 1950) have recognized the importance of the religious value system, but there are still aspects that deserve to be explored in greater detail.

It can be said that in the context of globalization, religion uses many tools that are imminent to it, such as communication and transportation technologies. But it can also be said that religion belongs to the group of anti-globalists.

Religion is a system of symbols that act to create strong, long-lasting moods and motivations in people (Geertz 1973).

Globalization is dominant in the relationships that are established in the global world. In such a context, religion has the potential to contradict, as religions become more self-conscious by becoming world religions (El Azzouzi 2013: 151). Globalization brings pluralism, which means that opportunities are created for greater interaction among religions and their adherents.

How can globalization be a benefit to religion? The primary form through which religion is transmitted is communication. In this sense, globalization goes in favor of religion by taking advantage of information and communication technology.

Globalization is increasing the use of the Internet for global communication and advancing communication tools, new social media, and their ease of use and accessibility. This enables:

- Believers to gain easier access to information pertaining to religion;
- Religious groups to reach out to their followers literally 24/7, regardless of location or distance;
- Greater accessibility to anyone who feels they need support, and in case they feel lonely or lost; this is especially typical in postmodern societies;
- Easier accessibility to distant destinations through advances in means of transportation; it allows, if necessary, greater movement of followers and active involvement in military conflicts, all because of the spread of the religious idea in which they are fundamentally convinced;

- Easier funding for fundamental religious groups. Cryptocurrencies as new ways of transferring money facilitate financing without the need for state authorities to control the origin of money;
- Increasing opportunities to inspect state documents and recruit new members through the use of encrypted modes of communication that facilitate access to groups involved in drafting government documents (Roudometof 2018).

Mechanical mobility or migrations are also a means of transmission and strengthening of religious systems. Namely, the history of mankind indicates that migratory movements are related to religion. For example, Jesus Christ led his followers to move from Egypt to Israel through the mountains of the Sinai region. Fleeing persecution, the Prophet Muhammad and his followers moved from Mecca to Medina. In the 21st century, migration for religious beliefs or the practice of religion are common motives for migration and emigration.

In this sense, certain assumptions are made that:

- The increased spread of religions beyond the place of origin is due to the greater availability of means of transport and communication, which intensifies migratory movements and allows new religions to be accommodated in areas of immigration;
- It reduces the influence of existing religions and religious beliefs and practices as a result of the immigration of persons with other religious worldviews, and gives them the opportunity to choose;
- It affects a change in the attitude of the state towards religions. The fact that people of other religions come to the migrant-attractive areas due to the volume and direction of migratory movements leads to an increasing need to create societies in which multi-religiosity will be a factor for peace and stability (Roudometof 2018).

Based on the above, when analyzing religion in the context of global change and globalization, it is inevitable to think about how religious norms, rules, and behaviors may be influenced by the processes of modernity that cause global change. Contemporary processes in contemporary society and, indeed, the processes of globalization that follow them, are of particular importance for the progressive, accelerated growth of religious pluralism in the world (Xie 2006: 363).

When determining the relationship between globalization and religion, and the changes caused by the religious system, the relevant literature identifies three

spheres of change, identified as: the growth of religious diversity, organizational differentiation, and the strengthening of subjectivism in religious determination.

### *1.1. Religious diversity (diversification)*

This aspect refers to the growth of religions or religious groups within a community, and it occurs in almost all socio-cultural contexts around the world.

The reasons are seen within the framework of the fact that volumetric large transnational migration movements are taking place. As noted in the reference literature, many modern migrants maintain contact with their country, travel, are connected to a transnational communication network (email, satellite TV, Internet TV and radio), are constantly informed about their country of origin, and maintain contact with family and friends. In this way, multilocal identities are created. According to analyses made in the United States, they radicalize processes and increase religious diversity in that region (Eck 2002: 2-6). Recent research suggests that the processes of globalization of contemporary societies are a factor in increasing religious pluralism around the world, even in countries where the state restricts religious pluralism. Namely, social change, diversity in structure, processes of detraditionalization, as well as individuation, inherently induce diversity. That is, each in turn, and in combination, creates socio-cultural conditions that are conducive to innovations in religious systems and the creation of new communities, beliefs, rituals, and traditions (Kumar 2006: 363; Berger 2007; Dawson 2011).

Religious diversification is also referred to as new diversity or new pluralism, and the relevant literature points out that it establishes a relatively different relationship with the socio-cultural and religious context in which it operates (Ališauskienė & Schröder 2012; Blanes & Mapril 2012; Giordan & Pace 2014).

The determinants are: 1) The manner in which the state is governed, the manner in which religious diversification (increasing diversity of religious beliefs and practices) within the state is managed. 2) The legal framework: whether there is a modification of the legal framework (laws, policy practices) in relation to certain barriers that put religious minorities and migrants in an unequal or discriminatory position and prevent their inclusion in society (barriers to be removed if certain inequalities in the treatment of certain groups are observed, such as discrimination). 3) The socio-cultural characteristics of the particular environment – the experience one has with the different religious and minority groups of the dominant one (whether discrimination and prejudice is present; whether cultural assimilation and loss of identity exists; religious conflicts; how the language barrier is dealt with and whether language is an obstacle to inclusion in the process of education, employment, etc., as well as social exclusion; if and how it is overcome (Beaman & Beyer 2008; Bouma

*et al*, 2010; Bramadat & Koenig 2009; Beaman 2012; Berman *et al*, 2013, Eck 2002; Vilaça *et al*, 2014; Wuthnow 2005).

In fact, religious diversity coincides with social differentiation. Prerequisites for religious diversity include: a favorable socio-cultural and political environment in society, experience with transnational migrations that consider the global transmission of religious beliefs and practices, and the presence of global processes. Due to changes in society, new social strata are breaking and bringing new styles and outlooks on life, as well as finding new ways to articulate their own life experiences through religion. If there are multiple religions in the existing religious structure that are internally differentiated, it is much simpler to depart from traditional forms and interpretations of religion so as to interpret it in one individual way and to favor it in the way that suits it.

### *1.2. Organizational differentiation*

Organizational differentiation of religions occurs when a deviation from traditional practices and beliefs is registered within a religion. This situation is related to the contemporary dynamics of globalization. Namely, certain religious traditions and movements are internationalized (religious values and beliefs are spread from one region and culture to another), and, in contact with existing religions, the mixing of other worldviews can alter existing ones and result in a differentiation of religions (Gilroy 1993; Jenkins 2007; Mandaville 2007).

Historically, such trends are not unknown. What is new is the speed with which it is happening, which is a result of the widespread web of communication and the exponential flow of globalization. This refers to the rapid and interconnected movements of persons, goods and services, information, and capital between borders; simplified transportation, efficient communication technologies, the rise of multilinear corporations, and the rise of connectivity in the global market. A process in which the beliefs, symbols, and practices of migrants are transferred to a new socio-cultural context. The literature cites the example of Hindus moving towards South Africa and England. The differences that manifest themselves as a result of transnational migrations and the encounter of migrants with new experiences, as well as the processes of adaptation and integration, indicate changes. For example, a woman has more responsibility in performing rituals, thereby diminishing the role of the caste and the privileges it brings, and diminishing the importance of ethnicity and language (Dawson 2008: 42-44).

### *1.3. Subjectivization of religion*

This aspect refers to individuals' subjective attitude towards religion. It shows positive direction and reinforcement in the sense that it increases the individualization of individuals' religiosity. Namely, the benefits of the impact of globalization on religion are precisely the prevalence and differentiation of religion that gives opportunities for the individual to have greater choices.

To explain this section, consider the views of Ronald Robinson who argued that the dynamics of globalization lead to a narrowing of the world and an intensification of world awareness. The world is becoming smaller due to advances in transportation and communication technologies, and all of this allows people from different parts of the world to facilitate interaction, an exchange of ideas, and a positive impact. In this way, individuals get to know and understand others' cultures more easily, and, consequently, become aware of global society (Robertson 1994). In this way, local value systems are relativized, and individuals become more aware of other options, and other possibilities, which is an advantage of globalization processes.

Opportunities for communication are on the rise, migration movements are also leading to greater contact among cultures that were isolated from each other and are now in constant contact. In this way, the processes of globalization make societies a part of a broader system of relations in which the role of societies and individuals, including religion, is relativized (Beyer 1994: 2).

Tolerance increases as a result of the influence that exists, pluralism of religions is accepted, and all religions have relatively equal significance (Frisk 2009).

## **2. Research approach proposed**

A sociological approach to this relationship is applied to approach empirical analyses of the impact of globalization on religious change.

A general assumption that research on this topic might start from is that globalization affects changes in the religious system in a society, such as increasing the number of religions and religious groups operating in a society, changing old forms of religious structures, and increasing the subjective explanation and practice of religion. The relationship established is not direct, but acts through other influencing factors, namely the process of development of the informational and technological aspects, i.e. new means of communication (social media) and transnational migrations (mechanical mobility of individuals and groups, whether forced or voluntary outside the borders of the state). Increasing the number, volume, and intensity of these relationships accelerates or decelerates the impact.

Based on this, the dependent variable is changes in a society's religious system, the intermediate variables are social media and migration, and the independent variable is the manner and degree of presence of globalization processes. Given the fact that the dominant attitudes in society are expressed through politics, legislation, the media, and education, the attitude of these systems towards globalization will explain the changes.

A society defined by state boundaries is a unit of analysis.

Both data sources, such as primary and secondary, could be used. The information is quantitative and qualitative.

The primary source of data is based on content analysis, structural analysis, interviews, and surveys.

The target groups of the research approaches are: institutions working in the field of religion, as well as relevant secular institutions, such as academia, media workers working on the topic of religion, as well as non-governmental organizations.

Content analysis is proposed to be used as a tool to obtain information about the social context, and a clear discussion relevant to the religious system. Relevant documents, normative acts, texts that are defined as indicators to follow the public discourse towards religion and religion may be used as units of analysis.

Interviews are conducted with representatives of religious institutions and those that deal with that matter.

Survey as a method for data collection includes the variables pertaining to globalization and their relationship to religious aspects. Target groups may differ in terms of interest. Examples include a youth group in a neighborhood or a minority group, or a public opinion survey, etc.

Secondary data source refers to data derived from international statistical records, then project research reports, and other relevant documents. This data source is used to map the global picture in terms of globalization, transnational migration, and the religious map.

## **Conclusion**

Based on what has been said so far, the changes taking place in religions and religious systems are present and should be the subject of continuous and comprehensive research. Change is taking place under the influence of globalization processes. The inclusion of everyone and everything in the global world is the foundation of globalization. Does this approach lead to relativization? Globalization is

accelerating through advances in information communication models, social media, and the effects of globalization are spreading to other spheres, including religion. The above are some aspects of the changes that are taking place in religion and religious systems. Of course, there are arguments for adding other aspects. However, the arguments as to why that approach is preferred is that it encompasses the changes that occur at the level of society, at the level of the organization, and at the level of the individual. In sociological approaches, these are macro-, meso-, and microplane analyses. The basic assumption is that the processes of globalization through advances in communications, predominance of information, and transportation lead to transnational migrations and influence changes in religion and its structure, as well as interaction among parts.

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## Chapter 6

### WHEN THE LAST NUN LEAVES: THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

**Hwang Alexander<sup>1</sup>**

***Abstract:** The Roman Catholic university in America has contributed to advancing the Roman Catholic mission of education and grounding Catholic and non-Catholic students in the principles of love, justice, peace, morals, and ethics. Originally founded for Catholic students as an alternative to Protestant and secular universities, which were historically anti-Catholic, for several decades now, Catholic universities have attracted students from a variety of religious backgrounds. Every student at a Catholic university, Catholic and non-Catholic, benefited from taking the required theology courses, which was three in the 1990s, two in the 2000s, and down to one in the 2010s. The decline of the Roman Catholic university, both in numbers of schools and in the required number of theology courses students must take, is another example of the growing power and influence of American secularization to influence religion and religious institutions. The consequences for such a fundamental change to the theology requirement will have significant consequences for the future of the Catholic university in America.*

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## Introduction

American Roman Catholic universities have taught millions of Americans about the history and faith of the Church. Every student was, and is, required to study college-level theology: to think about nothing less than the meaning of life, ultimate reality, love, beauty, justice, peace, compassion, and faith—just as they were required to study and know a foreign language like German or French. Today, there are about 200 Roman Catholic universities in the United States. At its peak, there were 305, in 1965, but since then, there has been a steady decline, accelerating in recent years. It is not entirely bad news, however. While there are fewer Catholic universities, the ones that remain are popular among American students, even though the tuition is higher than at a community college or a public university—and even if they do not identify as Catholics. In fact, the total enrollment in Catholic universities has not decreased, but has increased, and significantly, from 410,000 in 1956 to about 700,000 in 2023 (CARA 2023). The crisis or question is not with the survival of Catholic higher education, but about the challenges to the identity and mission of the Catholic university (O’Loughlin 2018).

The popularity of Catholic universities is a far cry from the colonial period when Catholic schools were prohibited and not a few razed to the ground by the anti-Catholic Protestant majority. So, it would seem this is very good news for Catholic higher education in America, and for the Catholic Church as whole, considering the decline in total numbers of practicing Catholics in America and most everywhere else in the world (CARA 2023). More Americans and international students than ever are learning about theology. Yet, it is not all good news; just within my lifetime, for example, there has been a dramatic change in Catholic higher education’s level of commitment to undergraduate theological education. As recently as the 2000s every student at every American Catholic university was required to take three courses in theology, then it went down to two required courses in the 2010s, and then to one course in the 2020s—with some exceptions, which will be discussed below. For now, American Catholic universities will still require one theology course, but that requirement could and is often fulfilled with a world religions course or a non-Christian religion course to satisfy the theology requirement. Potentially, a student could graduate from a Catholic university without having to learn anything about Christianity!

This paper is about the consequences of the devaluation of theology in the university general curriculum. Theology is still taught but not anywhere near to the same depth and breadth as in the past. The reasons for the change were not religious or theological, but “secular.” The fundamental change in the American Catholic university’s commitment to theological education has gone almost entirely

unopposed by faculty—even though theology professors are the ones most directly affected! Nearly all Catholic school faculty simply acquiesced to the powers that be, except for a few learned, but ultimately impotent protestations (Daly 2015; Kaplan 2021, Hest 2021). So, the answer to the question of secularization is, in this instance, very clear. A very sacred institution is becoming more and more like private and public universities.

## 1. History of the American University System

What is happening to Catholic universities in America is not unique in American history. The first colleges were established by Protestants for explicitly religious reasons: to train young men in divinity (Christian theological studies) to become ministers and enlightened leaders in their “new” world (Marsden 1994). Founded by a church, and administered and taught by Christian theologians, Harvard University was founded in 1636, and in the middle of its original school seal was its crest with the Latin word “*Ve-ri-tas*,” which is surrounded on its three sides with the words “*Christos*,” “*et*,” and “*Ecclesiae*.” Today, the “*Veritas*” in the crest remains, but Christ and his Church have long disappeared from Harvard, at least in its official symbol. Yale was founded in 1701 and its seal has remained remarkably unaltered. The crest contains, in Hebrew script, the words “*urrim ve tumin*” on the two pages of an open book. On the banner beneath are the Latin words “*lux et veritas*.” I suspect very few students know Hebrew, and even fewer believe that light and truth are found in the Holy Scriptures. Princeton was established by the Presbyterian Church in 1746 and its crest has an open book with: *Vet[us] Nov[um] Testamentum* [New Testament]. Beneath the New Testament is the banner that reads “*Dei Sub Numine Viget*.”

The exception to this Protestant college system was the College of William and Mary, founded by a charter from William and Mary, but with a prominent place for theology: where a “perpetual College of Divinity, Philosophy, Languages, and other good Arts and Sciences” was to be established in the Virginia Colony. The second oldest university was the first “state” university. There is no longer a College of Divinity.

Christianity is still taught at these old and esteemed schools but it is no longer a required subject of study and is taught in the same dispassionate and objective manner as with any of the other world religions.

## 2. The History of the Catholic University

The Roman Catholic Church became involved in American higher education much later because it was literally illegal to establish a Catholic university during the colonial period (Mahoney 2003). It was shortly after American Independence

that the first Catholic university was founded, Georgetown University in Washington D.C., in 1792. For many generations no reputable American family (WASP: White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant) would even consider sending their sons to a parish school. So much has changed—Catholic universities such as Georgetown, Boston College, and Notre Dame are now among the elite American schools.

Although it appears American Catholic universities will require at least one theology course, even that one course is not guaranteed to last. Who would have imagined that foreign language requirement is now becoming optional at many Catholic universities—that means there will be more and more millions upon millions of American college students who will graduate from a four-year university without ever having to take a single foreign language class and learn a new language: *Sai le vie* as the Germans say.

How did this happen? The reduction of theology courses was not made with the mission and purpose of the school in mind, but with attracting more students and making students happy.

At the same time, which is ultimately related, the leadership and control in Catholic schools have been changing. In the classroom, administration, and in the composition of the board of trustees, the presence of nuns, priests, and monks are almost entirely absent—much of this has to do with the aging population of clerics along with the general decline in numbers entering ministry. With more and more lay control of the entire university, I suspect the elimination of theology course requirements came from lay administrators.

Most students were not enthusiastic about the required theology courses anyway but enrolled in them because they were required. The school thought it was important enough to make them mandatory for graduation, no matter what kind of degree, no matter what kind of student. The reduction of theology courses was not a student-led initiative, or even of much interest to undergraduates, but they were certainly not complaining and protesting about it. No students I am aware of were arrested or camped out at universities in protest for more theology courses. So, administrators and students are happy, theology faculty not so much.

### 3. Consequences

What is at stake? Is it simply the loss of theology courses and theology teaching positions? I argue that the “classical” Catholic university education and experience is being lost, which will have consequences for the future of America and the world. Generations of students, although different in so many ways, shared the same experience of learning about the Christian faith. With three courses from qual-

ified instructors, a student could become familiar with the basics (ideally—surveys of Old Testament, New Testament, and Theology). In addition to the readings and assignments, students would have spent 135 hours of classroom time with the professor and other students learning about, engaging in, discussing, debating, reflecting on theology—God talk.

If the average church service in America is one hour, a student would have to attend the equivalent of 135 church services—that would take 31 months, or over two years of attending Church every single week. Attending church every week reminds you, at the very least, to think about God. Now, imagine how much these students would be thinking about God and improving the quality of their thinking about God under the classic Catholic college curriculum?

Compare the classic three course requirement to the one course. One theology course has just 45 hours of total contact time to cover Christianity, and that is if students decide to take the intro to theology—but this can be fulfilled by taking different courses—World Religions or any world religion or a specific topic in theology. Potentially, a student in the new curriculum could be exposed to as little as five hours to learn about Christianity in a world religions class, or not at all in certain non-Western religion courses.

With such significant changes, one should expect significant consequences. 135 hours reduced to 45 hours—two thirds of theological education disappeared for just about every student. While the reduction of theology course requirements to a single course may seem like a pragmatic adjustment to changing educational priorities, it is important to recognize and address the unintended consequences associated with this decision.

Millions of Americans who attended Catholic universities were taught and encouraged to live according to the principles of love, justice, peace, morals, and ethics—How? It was not through courses in chemistry or calculus, but courses in theology.

If, as a Catholic university, it claims theology is essential to its identity, its *raison d'être*, then something important is lost, but no one with any vested interest—those who are financially dependent on the school—can afford to reflect on this for too long, much less object to it. It is not a question of trying to stop the secularization of the Catholic university, it is too late for that; rather, the uncertainty is about the role and place of Catholic identity and mission in the Catholic university. Will they follow the route of the Protestant universities where their original Christian mission and identity have been reduced to vestiges of arcane Latin mottos that no one at the school even knows about?

#### 4. Some Specific Concerns

Theology courses play a vital role in fostering ethical and moral development by exploring questions of meaning, values, and human existence—learning about what is right and wrong. What is good? What is evil? Where are students going to learn about the Christian tradition that embraces and has even defined Western concepts of love, justice, and truth? Most do not attend church on a regular basis, some have no religious background at all. A single theology course would have to cover this crucial branch of Christian theology in addition to the other doctrines. A few hours do not provide sufficient time for students to grapple with the complexities of ethical and moral issues necessary for their development.

The dilution of religious literacy and knowledge is usually never good, especially if that knowledge is about what is true, good, and beautiful. The function of any university is to prepare its students for a meaningful and productive life after graduation. Practically speaking, students should be prepared for a global society in which religion plays significant roles and influences. The study of Christianity provides critical insights into diverse cultural practices, ethical frameworks, and historical contexts that shape human behavior and societal norms. Learning about Christianity fosters empathy and cultural sensitivity, enabling graduates to navigate and contribute to a multicultural world more effectively. Moreover, religious literacy equips students with the tools to engage in meaningful dialogue on complex global issues such as peace, conflict resolution, human rights, and social justice.

In addition to practical benefits, the study of religion in general and, in this case, Christianity in particular, enriches personal development. It encourages critical thinking about existential questions, moral values, and the human condition. Exposure to the rich and long Catholic intellectual tradition can inspire students to reflect on their own beliefs and values, fostering a sense of purpose and ethical responsibility. This, in turn, contributes to the cultivation of well-rounded, thoughtful individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also compassionate and ethical.

Perhaps the greatest concern is with the identity of the Roman Catholic University. It is not just the reduction of theology courses; something more important and fundamental is at stake—the “Catholic” identity of the university. At first it appears the Catholic university will go the way of the old Protestant university. However, unlike Protestants (individual agreements with denominational churches and boards), Roman Catholic schools are bound by canon law and *Corde Ex Ecclesiae*—two documents preventing the complete secularization of the university.

## 5. Canon Law

Canon Law does not devote a lot of attention to Catholic universities. Surprisingly, there was never a requirement for students to take more than one theology course, or even any theology course. The three courses requirement was how Catholic universities interpreted this law and their mission. It is still the same Canon Law and the mission has not changed, but their interpretation has changed considerably.

*Can. 811 §1. The competent ecclesiastical authority **is to take care** that in Catholic universities a faculty or institute or **at least a chair of theology** is erected in which classes are also given for lay students. §2. In individual Catholic universities **there are to be classes** which especially treat those theological questions which are connected to the disciplines of their faculties.*

Theology courses are to be offered, but this does not mean that they must be necessarily taught by theology faculty—only that the courses address theological questions. Moreover, classes must be offered, but they do not have to be taken. Thus, according to Canon Law the minimum requirement for theology at a Catholic university is one part-time faculty member (does not have to be from theology), and at least two courses offered to students that address theological questions—for example, an English Literature course on religion in Victorian novels would meet this requirement. Also, there are plenty of small Catholic schools that do not have a full-time theology faculty.

Because of the brevity of treatment of Catholic universities in Canon Law, Pope John Paul II, in 1990, issued his *Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff on Catholic Universities—Ex Corde ecclesiae*—which dedicated 15 pages to the topic. Two sections are especially relevant, 13 and 19.

*13. Since the objective of a Catholic University is to assure in an institutional manner a Christian presence in the university world confronting the great problems of society and culture, every Catholic University, as Catholic, must have the following essential characteristics:*

*“1. a Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the university community as such;*

*2. a continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research;*

*3. fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church;*

*4. an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life”.*

*19. Theology plays a particularly important role in the search for a synthesis of knowledge, as well as in the dialogue between faith and reason. . . . Because of its specific importance among the academic disciplines, every Catholic University should have a faculty, or at least a chair, of theology.*

*Ex corde ecclesia* is more detailed and specific, but, again, nothing on the requirements of theology courses. It reaffirms the canonical requirement of at least one faculty who teaches theology and that these courses in Catholic doctrine are to be made available to all students. “Every Catholic University should have a faculty, or at least a chair, of theology” is not a requirement or command, but a strong suggestion. Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to America in 2008 included an address to leaders of American Catholic higher education to remind American Catholic university leaders about the sacred role of the Catholic university and the Catholic identity and mission of these schools. If there was ever a more qualified and learned papal advocate for theological education, it was Benedict, but ultimately, he could not prevent the further reduction of the theology requirements at Catholic universities in the years after his visit.

## **6. A Remnant**

Like Protestant evangelical colleges, there are Catholic universities that have retained their historic traditional Catholic identity. These Protestant schools are almost entirely conservative “evangelical,” require theology courses, and their community ethos is explicitly Christian; Wheaton College and Westmont College are two examples. For Catholic students or students interested in the classical Catholic university experience, although on the more conservative side, there are Catholic schools that remain committed to Catholic theological education, albeit a conservative Catholicism, such as the University of Steubenville and the Catholic University of America.

## **Conclusion**

For generations millions of Americans were exposed to and had to learn about Catholic values and principles. I imagine, without empirical proof, that this had a positive effect on those students and on American society. Politically speaking, if universities do not provide religious education, where will students get that information?

There is a good reason a critical mass of Americans does not fall victim to extremist and dangerous religious and political ideologies. Among these Americans are those who have taken theology courses. They certainly might not remember much about what they learned, but they were given the tools to think critically about religion and faith. The fuel for religious and political extremism is ignorance.

The history of Catholic higher education had quite a different origin, much more humble and even traumatic as compared to its Protestant counterpart, but survived and thrived. The Roman Catholic universities in America were founded on, believed in, and operated on the conviction that theological education deserved a prominent and special place in the life of the student and the university. With the requirements reduced to one course and, in the future, possibly to zero, what will become of the mission, purpose, and principles of the Catholic University? As I was finishing this paper, I received word that the last nun in a leadership position at my university, founded by her religious order, was reassigned to a hospital affiliated with her religious community.

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## Chapter 7

### THE GLOBALIZATION OF NEW ASIAN AND AFRICAN SPIRITUAL MOVEMENTS: CASE STUDIES

#### Introvigne Massimo<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light: A Middle Eastern New Religion Comes to Europe

In March 2024 I was invited, together with other scholars from different countries, from Australia to Lithuania, to a conference and field trip in the United Kingdom, where the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL) has its world headquarters, to listen to presentations by devotees and hold discussions with them. We then had a meeting with the leader of the religion.

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light finds its roots in Twelver Shia Islam (which includes more than 80% of present-day Shiites) and its belief that the legitimate successors of Prophet Muhammad are the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and his descendants who, with him, are honored as the Twelve Imams.

They also believe that the Twelfth Imam, Mohammed ibn al-Hassan al-Askari, who "disappeared" as a child in the year 874, was not killed by the Sunnis as some secular historians claim, but went into a state of "occultation" from which he will emerge when the end comes.

Many Muslims also expect that at the appropriate the world will be ruled on behalf of God by an eschatological figure known as the Mahdi, or the Qaim, the "Riser from the Family of Muhammad." Some believe he will be preceded by yet another eschatological figure, the Yamani, just as Jesus was preceded by John the Baptist.

During the history of the Shia, several individuals claimed that they had met the Twelfth Imam and had been appointed by him as his vicegerents or envoys. Several claimants to the role of the Mahdi, both Shia and Sunni, also appeared.

In 1999 in Iraq, Ahmed al-Hassan, a civil engineer born in 1968 in Basra, claimed to have physically met the Twelfth Imam, who had entrusted him with the

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special mission to proclaim publicly that he, al-Hassan, was the prophesied Yamani, as well as to call people to pledge allegiance to the Mahdi. Some of his followers, however, believed that he, himself, was the Mahdi.

The Shia establishment instigated the Iraqi security forces to raid the homes of the followers of al-Hassan, to arrest them, detain them, and sometimes even kill them. They accused them of being involved in riots, including (under the name “Soldiers of Heaven”) in the so-called “Battle of Najaf” in 2007, in which al-Hassan himself denied any connection.

Al-Hassan was last seen and photographed in Iraq in 2007, after which he went into hiding. Reportedly, he visited several countries and lived for a time in Sudan, while his followers in Iraq, as well as those abroad, separated into different conflicting factions.

Since 2002, al-Hassan has publicly denounced the Shia establishment in both Iran and Iraq, led by scholars and Great Ayatollahs such as Ali Khamenei and Ali al-Sistani as morally and politically corrupt. As a result, he and his followers have been persecuted.

After al-Hassan went into hiding in 2007, an Iraqi faction known as “the White Banners” or “the Office of Najaf,” started transmitting, including via a Facebook page, messages that allegedly came from him, which were suspiciously different from his previous teachings. A split occurred in the movement between those who maintained that the White Banners were still “authentic”, and that al-Hassan was communicating with them, and those who denounced the post-2007 messages as forged, and the White Banners as being manipulated by the Iraqi government.

The group currently headquartered in the UK is known as the “Black Banners,” or the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL). There are also other minor schisms. The White Banners / Office of Najaf “excommunicated” the AROPL in 2015 and again through a “Declaration of Disassociation” on April 18, 2023, which also targeted other groups. The AROPL has the largest international following, while the White Banners are mostly Iraqis.

The AROPL’s *raison-d’être* is to proclaim to the world the teaching and mission of one of al-Hassan’s followers, Abdullah Hashem, “Aba al-Sadiq,” a college-educated U.S. citizen with an Egyptian father and an American mother. In 2015, at the age of 32, Abdullah Hashem revealed that Ahmed al-Hassan had instructed him to “raise the Black Banners of the East” and inform the world about the appearance of Imam al-Mahdi. He claimed that he, Hashem, was the promised Qaim or Riser of the Family of Muhammad, i.e., the Mahdi.

The date, 2015, was important. Hashem and his followers referred to an old prophecy by Prophet Muhammad about the death of a king that would be followed by the appearance of the Qaim/Riser, which they applied to the death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in that year.

There are also prophecies indicating that the Qaim will come from Egypt, the land of Hashem's father, and one, the AROPL maintains, that had an advanced monotheistic religion before it became corrupted. When we visited the headquarters of AROPL, we noted the presence of symbols of the ancient Egyptian religion.

The will of Prophet Muhammad Hashem fulfills the criteria for being recognized as the Qaim. The first is being mentioned in the last will of the previous divinely appointed messenger, i.e., Prophet Muhammad. Both Sunni and Shia sources confirm the intent of the Prophet Muhammad to write a will on a night referred to as "the calamity of Thursday", which would offer security from misguidance before he died the subsequent Monday. While other Muslims dispute its authenticity, for the AROPL Muhammad's will as preserved in Shiite sources is both genuine and all-important, as it includes both the names of al-Hassan as the Yamani and Abdullah Hashem as the Qaim.

Hashem's claims and revelations are collected in the book *The Goal of the Wise*, translated into English in 2022. An outside observer would discern diverse sources here: Twelver Shiism, various esoteric "hyper-Shiite" traditions of Islam including Alawism, Christian Gnosticism, Western esotericism, and what scholars of the latter refer to as "conspiratoriality," the meeting of esoteric ideas and what are commonly called conspiracy theories.

Hashem's theology follows a scheme that some scholars would call "dispensationalist." God entered into six covenants with humanity, centered respectively on Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. Al-Hassan as the Yamani inaugurated the seventh covenant leading to the rise of the Riser/Qaim. The rules of each covenant were God-given and valid at that time, but were superseded by the following covenant. Each covenant was breached by humans, thus causing a punishment by God, and ultimately requiring a new covenant.

The AROPL is part of the esoteric tradition of Islam believing in reincarnation (including that of humans into animals and even rocks and stones) and karma, as well as in the possible transmigration of souls either before or after death from one body to another. This means that a soul can enter the body of an adult who is alive, not only of an infant at birth. Some souls can also be present in two bodies at the same time.

Islamic traditions indicate that in human history the number of prophets is 124,000 and the number of “messengers” (a higher function) is 313. Ahmed al-Hasan revealed that many of the 124,000 prophets are unknown prophets who carried divine messages to their nations, and others are well-known names such as Zeus, Socrates, Aristotle, King Cyrus II of Persia, Krishna, Buddha, Confucius, Lao-Tze, and Alexander the Great.

In the present new dispensation, many AROPL believers are the reincarnations of prophets, messengers, and even angels, whose souls entered them after their conversion. This is the phenomenon of the Raj’a, the Great Return, and the headquarters in the UK display the portraits of many current believers represented as the reincarnations of previous prophets and messengers.

Between one incarnation and the next, the souls dwell in a Purgatory-like space called Samarat. When the number of their incarnations is completed, they are judged and go to Heaven, which is in an inaccessible location on Earth, or Hell, which is in the Sun, although there is also a worse possible destination for the most evil of souls, known as the Great Terror.

The AROPL teaches that over time all religions became corrupted. As a result, 99% of what Islam currently teaches is wrong: “Ninety-nine percent of religion is wrong, not ninety-nine percent of all religions, ninety-nine percent of each religion, even Islam.” “The Islam that the Riser/Qaim brings shall be almost entirely different from the Islam that Mohammed... came with and the Islam that is currently practiced today. Essentially, it is a new religion.”

Today’s mosques and mausoleums, as the AROPL teaches, are lavishly constructed but are empty of guidance and will, therefore, one day be destroyed, including Mecca’s Great Mosque—which, at any rate, hosts a false Kaaba: the genuine Kaaba is in Petra, Jordan.

The use of the lunar calendar, Friday prayers, the prohibition of alcohol, and the mandatory hijab for women, which was never a divine commandment in any of God’s covenants, are believed to be teachings that have been distorted, all of which will be corrected in the seventh covenant. Ramadan will be observed in December. Homosexuality is not encouraged but, unlike in the current Islamic societies, the AROPL welcomes LGBTQ people and asks that they be treated with respect.

The AROPL announces the future institution of the Divine Just State, which will not be a Western-style democracy, but will be ruled by 12 Mahdis (whose succession will not necessarily follow a family lineage), of which the Qaim/Riser is the second (and al-Hassan the first), based on their appointment by God rather than on

popular election. It will be more similar to Plato's ideal political order ruled by a philosopher-king.

AROPL devotees do not hide their criticism of democracy, which goes back to Plato. They only insist that they respect the existing governments, and do not call for their overthrow. However, like Plato, they believe that democracy leads to the emergence of demagogues and "poets," whom they regard as incarnated today in the "non-working scholars" who rule Shia Islam and persecute the AROPL. While non-democratic, the Divine Just State will guarantee freedom of religion, as people of different faiths will be allowed to live there, practice their faiths, and follow their religions' rules.

The Mahdis will progressively expand and consolidate the Divine Just State, which will at first not encompass the whole planet Earth. It will be a millennial kingdom where there will be no death due to illness or old age, although life will still end in some cases due to accidents or murders.

Today, believers in the UK have gathered around the Qaim/Riser (in the UK) and have formed a community that is a germ and an announcement of the Divine Just State. Like the first Christians and the first Muslims did, the believers share all their properties in common under the stewardship of the Qaim/Riser, keeping only what is needed for subsistence as private property, and follow his directions. This utopian community plans to give testimony to the truth through its high morals and good manners. "Religion is good treatment of others, and whoever doesn't treat others well has no religion." We saw no evidence that this precept is not sincerely believed and practiced.

## **2. IMboni uZwi-Lezwe Radebe and the Origins of The Revelation Spiritual Home**

On April 20, 2024, "The Spirit King," a new musical theatrical play, premiered in Durban, South Africa, and was favorably reviewed by local and national media. It told the story of a unique figure in the contemporary South African religious landscape, IMboni uZwi-Lezwe Radebe.

Some of "The Spirit King" performances were presented in Torino, Italy on May 11, 2024, when IMboni received the Global Spirituality Award at Torino's International Book Fair.

Samuel Radebe is known to his followers as IMboni uZwi-Lezwe Radebe, and commonly referred to as "IMboni," a word used in several different African languages to indicate a high-level spiritual guide. He explains that there is a difference between prophet and IMboni. A prophet is an inspired preacher and speaks for God,

but an IMboni is a spiritual guide who possesses immaculate spiritual foresight, indigenous spiritual wisdom, and speaks to a whole nation.

Radebe was born in 1977 as Samuel Mbiza, and grew up in Gugulethu, near Cape Town. He came from the Radebe clan, which had given to its AmaHlubi ethnic group several spiritual guides. According to TRSH sources, traces of Radebe's spiritual calling began from a very young age, and at age 4 he had a defining spiritual experience, "solved" by an elderly woman known for her spiritual gifts.

Having lost his parents as a teenager, Radebe moved to Johannesburg, where he joined a Brazilian Pentecostal denomination called the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG). Soon, the young Radebe conducted his own healing services, which attracted new members to Johannesburg's UCKG.

According to Radebe, his move to Johannesburg was predetermined by his spiritual guides to begin his mission of reviving the spirituality of the African people. However, for him to do so, he had to first understand the reason behind the demise of African indigenous spirituality. He came to fall out of place at the UCKG and noted that African pastors were discriminated.

One crucial spiritual experience was a trip to the Vaal River, where Radebe was spiritually initiated by his spiritual guides. He saw a golden lampstand emerging from beneath the waters, with seven lit candles in different colors. On another occasion, he saw beings with abnormally big heads and some with a third eye. It was at that moment when he was told by his spiritual guides that the time had come for him to establish an African indigenous institution.

After the vision at the Vaal River, IMboni started gathering followers in a Plein Street garage. The year was 2009, and the success was immediate. Soon, the garage was clearly too small to welcome those who wanted to hear IMboni.

IMboni and his followers rented what had been the Great Synagogue of Johannesburg in Wolmarans Street. TRSH should be commended for having restored the building with love, respecting its original Jewish flavor. They did the same, with respect to another Jewish place of worship, when they purchased a beautiful synagogue that was in a state of disrepair and now hosts the Empandeni branch of TRSH.

Even that synagogue eventually became too small, and TRSH is now completing the construction of a large building in the Marshalltown district of Johannesburg, which is already in use and where it can sit some 5,000 devotees. It also plans to build a mega-indigenous spiritual institution in the Johannesburg neighbourhood of Yeoville, where it has purchased a plot of land and has won a long legal battle to evict the squatters that previously occupied it.

No single building can contain those who want to attend the TRSH services. During two different visits in 2023, we visited several branches, all crowded and in need of using overflow spaces, which in the large Soweto branch included a huge white tent. Overall, there are more than 70 branches in South Africa, Eswatini, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, with an overseas branch in Newbridge, County Kildare, Ireland, and devotees in the United States who plan to open a place of worship in Atlanta.

TRSH was once called The Revelation Church of God and had “churches” and “bishops.” It is now called The Revelation Spiritual Home, and it has “homes” and local “leaders.” The change of terminology attests to an emphasis on the difference between African spirituality and Christianity. Although IMboni maintains friendly relations with several Christian leaders, he believes that Africans should return to African indigenous spirituality. Christianity, even in its “Africanized” forms, is regarded as a religion imposed on Africans by the white man and the colonial powers.

In fact, IMboni distances himself not only from Christianity but from religion. He believes that African spirituality cannot be reduced to the European notion of religion, and that serious problems were created when religion tried to replace spirituality in Africa. In traditional Africa, kings ruled by following the advice of spiritual guides. IMboni explains that, to subdue the kings, the colonizers had to get rid of the spiritual guides, and they replaced them with religious advisors.

Another misunderstanding, IMboni articulates, is to confuse African spirituality with African traditions. Often, traditions have spiritual roots, but just as often these roots are forgotten. IMboni sees spirituality as something that is alive and can change and adapt, while tradition is just kept. Religion may have the same problems tradition does, and for this reason religious leaders should ideally be led themselves by spiritual leaders. The same is true for traditional healers, and in fact many of them seek the guidance of IMboni and occupy a special corner, with their very distinct spiritual garments, during the TRSH services.

IMboni’s is a spirituality that understands and recognizes the role of the Izithunywa (spiritual guides) and ancestors in the Africans’ interacting with the Creator God UMfihlakalo. African indigenous Spirituality stresses that at the top of the spiritual pyramid is the Creator, followed by Izithunywa, and thereafter by IMboni, who guides the nation based on the spiritual revelations he receives from the Creator through the Izithunywa.

Not all ancestors are good, nor are they all bad. Being under the guidance of ancestors is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. We saw a woman shaking and speaking with the voice of her deceased grandmother, but were told the ancestral

spirit had no hostile intentions. A discernment is needed and is performed by those with special spiritual gifts, such as IMboni.

Most of our problems come from ancestors, although others can derive from malevolent human beings who use witchcraft. IMboni believes that the word “witch” has been abused by the colonizers to slander legitimate and benevolent practitioners of African spirituality. However, malevolent witchcraft also exists, and we were shown, for example, a video of how an attack against the Marshalltown TRSH home by its opponents through witchcraft was detected and stopped.

The Sunday service at TRSH is mostly devoted to teaching and reporting on the progress of the movement. Even more impressive are the Tuesday healing services, where a variety of Iintsebenzo (rituals) are performed. Many of them use sanctified water, which symbolizes life and protection in African spirituality, and izibane, the spiritual lamps of different colors that appeared to IMboni at the Vaal River, in the golden lampstand vision that led to the establishment of TRSH.

During the Tuesday services, IMboni walks with garments spiritually revealed to him and of spiritual significance, including some featuring leopard skin, which also appears on his ceremonial throne as a symbol of power and lineage. The devotees are organized in lines, waiting for a brief contact with him and a blessing with water or the izibane. Some hold in their hands symbolic small wooden swords; others carry pictures or copies of ID documents of relatives in need. When IMboni comes, some devotees fall to the ground or start shaking or speaking with voices not their own. These are manifestations from the spirit world, which need discernment.

The Revelation Spiritual Home is a way of life. IMboni also empowers his followers through a variety of business, educational, and cultural activities. Such a large spiritual revival, as it often happens, has also generated some “anti-cult” opposition.

### **3. Peace, Love, and Tax Reform: Tai Ji Men’s Global Outreach**

This presentation starts with a homage to, and a quote from Italian scholar PierLuigi Zoccatelli, who left us on May 25, 2024. “There are chairs, reviews, and even an international association of scholars that include in their names ‘Western Esotericism.’ However, in recent years, ‘Western esotericism’ is becoming a contested label. Some maintain it has the advantage of identifying a tradition scholars have now studied and circumscribed for decades. Others regard the label as ethnocentric and claim there are no reasons to regard esotericism as a specifically Western phenomenon, since there are esoteric currents in the traditions of Asia and other continents, as well. We will certainly not solve this debate today. However, I would like

to suggest that Tai Ji Men's unique approach to the theme of peace is also a part of what I call 'esoteric paradigm.' Perhaps this may help in exploring the extensions of the paradigm beyond the West" ("Living Together in Peace: The Esoteric Paradigm of Tai Ji Men," *Bitter Winter*, May 23, 2022).

There is, indeed, a bitter international debate among scholars of esotericism on the subject. Some, such as Egil Asprem, argue that the category of "Western esotericism" is inherently Eurocentric and colonialist (as if only Westerners would be capable of creating an esotericism). Others, including Wouter Hanegraaff, insist that "Western esotericism" should be maintained as it identifies a well-defined object of study and avoids vagueness.

A different debate concerns how we should call and categorize movements that are formally structured like the new religious movements, but whose content is esoteric rather than religious. Most of them emphatically claim they are not religious. In a lecture given at the 2002 CESNUR conference in Utah (available at [https://www.academia.edu/10389066/Notes\\_on\\_the\\_Esoteric\\_Paradigm](https://www.academia.edu/10389066/Notes_on_the_Esoteric_Paradigm)), Zoccatelli noted that my 1990 proposal of calling them "new magical movements" had met with resistance (perhaps because "magical" was ambiguous in itself) and proposed to regard them as part of an "esoteric paradigm," which would also include non-Western organizations.

As mentioned earlier, Zoccatelli regarded the Taiwanese movement Tai Ji Men as part of the "esoteric paradigm," which led him to reflect on whether the "esoteric paradigm" can be used as a tool to study quintessentially Chinese phenomena. Scholarly literature on Tai Ji Men in languages other than Chinese has experienced a significant growth in recent years. However, most Western scholars have studied the Tai Ji Men tax case in Taiwan and/or the movement's outreach through peace activities. The question of esotericism has remained comparatively unexplored.

Zoccatelli believed that Tai Ji Men was a part of the "esoteric paradigm" "because" rather than "despite" its activities for peace. To assess this statement, we should briefly examine what Tai Ji Men is.

Tai Ji Men claims to be an ancient menpai (similar to a school) of martial arts, qigong, and self-cultivation rooted in esoteric Taoism, whose 6,000-year-old wisdom has been transmitted from one Shifu (Grand Master) to another throughout the centuries. The present Shifu, Dr. Hong Tao-Tze (b. 1944), reports that in 1950, when he was six years old, a mysterious master called Shang-Zhi, accepted him as a dizi (disciple), and prepared him to be the next Master. As far as I know, there are no documents about Master Shang-Zhi or his predecessors. Rather than a criticism of Tai Ji Men, this is, in itself, a strong indication of a relationship with the "esoteric

paradigm," which according to Zoccatelli includes movements whose origins are a part of a "regime of secrets" and cannot be documented empirically.

Although Dr. Hong started teaching dizi and established the Tai Ji Men Qi-gong Academy in its present legal form in 1966, in 1999 he explained in a speech in the United States that Tai Ji Men had been historically an esoteric tradition, but that it was now time for the dizi to bring to the suffering humanity what they had learned. This was, thus, a case of "disoccultation" of an esoteric tradition (or part of it), justified by the fact that humanity was plagued by wars and rumors of war, epidemics, and economic crises, and was desperately in need of receiving the essential wisdom of Tai Ji Men. Today, there are 17 academies in Taiwan and four in the United States, and dizi in several countries of the world.

The ceremonies where Dr. Hong invites world leaders (political, cultural, and religious) to ring the Bell of World Peace and Love started in 2000. Tai Ji Men global activities have reached 103 countries with cultural exchanges and performances by Tai Ji Men dizi.

On the one hand, we can interpret these activities as a typical form of outreach practiced by East Asian religious and spiritual activities, which include international peace education activities where they often try to involve political and other authorities and the United Nations. On the other hand, as Zoccatelli wrote about ringing the Bell, "While it can be appreciated just as a beautiful message of love, for the Tai Ji Men dizi (disciples) it has a deeper meaning, which is in fact esoteric. At the core of Tai Ji Men worldview is the idea that a harmony between yin and yang, heaven and earth, heart and qi (energy), was part of the original purity of human beings. It was since lost, but it can be restored, together with peace. Ringing the Bell is part of a movement of restoring the world and humanity to its original purity."

Zoccatelli added that in an esotericism that includes its "Western" incarnation but goes beyond it, "sacred objects may function as catalysts of unseen energies and determine effects going well beyond what non-initiated may see or predict. Sacred sounds, in turn, may generate powerful waves of energy. The Bell of Peace is much more than a secular symbol of good will. It is a sacred artifact, each component of which has a precise esoteric meaning."

On the top of the Bell there is a crystal ball known in the movement as "the Dragon Fireball." The crystal ball is sustained by two dragon heads, symbolizing justice, strength, and wisdom. There are also the eight trigrams of the Chinese classic "I Ching," the Book of Changes, which are born from the interaction of yin and yang and correspond to the eight elements of the universe (earth, sky, wind, thunder, mountain, lake, water, and fire).

The body of the Bell features four kinds of animals: the mythical one-horned qilin, messengers of stability and prosperity; lions playing with a ribbon ball, symbols of safety and happiness; phoenixes, a celestial symbol of peace; and dragons chasing a pearl, signifying harmony, and the search for a world free of pain and fear. On the four sides of the bell, a decoration includes 16 knobs, for a total of 64 knobs, representing the 64 laws of nature.

Let me conclude about the Bell and its double function by quoting PierLuigi Zoccatelli again: "The Bell of World Peace and Love is a microcosm, and according to Tai Ji Men it has a mysterious but real correspondence with the macrocosm of the universe. That they know it or not, dizi believe that those who ring the Bell enter into a powerful energetic current whose roots are in a millenarian Chinese tradition, for which the Bell, as an esoteric artifact and a sacred object, serves as a catalyst. On the one hand, Tai Ji Men's approach to a world of peace and love is part of an 'esoteric paradigm.' On the other hand, ringing the Bell is part of... an effective 'citizen diplomacy,' which achieves demonstrable results in a secular sphere."

One spectacular part of Tai Ji Men performances are the dragon dances, for which only hand-made dragons are used. The process starts with collecting bamboo in Tai Ji Men's sacred land in Miaoli, and all stages of the dragon-building are organized according to ritual and spiritual principles.

For Tai Ji Men dizi "the spirit of the dragon" is a spirit of justice. Harmony in the macrocosm and the balance of the universe itself requires that justice reigns on Earth, which gives its deeper dimension to Tai Ji Men's campaign for human rights and for legal and tax reform.

Tai Ji Men dizi's sense of justice comes from their own experience. In 1996, the first democratic presidential elections were held in Taiwan. The then-President Lee Teng-Hui, of the Kuomintang Party, sought to be democratically re-elected. He did not expect serious opposition, but it came, and he won with the comparatively narrow margin of 54%. Since one of his opponents was a member of Fo Guang Shan, the largest Buddhist movement in Taiwan, after the elections he ordered a purge of the religious and spiritual groups that had not supported him, including Tai Ji Men. Dr. Hong, his wife, and two dizi were detained and accused of fraud and tax evasion.

As it happened with most other religious leaders targeted by the 1996 purge, Dr. Hong and his co-defendants were found innocent of all charges, including tax evasion, with the verdict confirmed in 2007 by the Supreme Court, which even gave them national compensation for the previous unjust decision. However, as a by-product of the criminal case, tax harassment by the National Taxation Bureau continued.

Tax bills for different years issued for the alleged tax evasion were litigated separately. Eventually, after protracted litigation, the NTB agreed to correct to zero all the Tai Ji Men tax bills, except the one for the year 1992. The NTB maintains to this day that for the year 1992 (and for that year only) a court decision against Tai Ji Men has become final and unappealable and there are no further steps available to challenge it.

Tai Ji Men countered that under Taiwanese law an obviously erroneous “final” decision can always be revised. The NTB disagreed and based on the 1992 tax bill, in 2020 it seized, unsuccessfully auctioned off, and confiscated land in Miaoli that Tai Ji Men regarded as sacred and intended for a self-cultivation and educational center. This generated widespread protests by thousands of dizi in Taiwan and in the United States, which continue to this day.

It is important to note that the fight is not about money. Tai Ji Men has spent in legal expenses more than it would have paid through a settlement it always refused. Again, the reason it has adopted this position is not strictly legal or economic. It is moral, spiritual, and ultimately esoteric as well. Injustice has broken the harmony in the universe. Not injustice against Tai Ji Men only, as dizi started studying Taiwan’s tax system and found systemic problems. They argue that a settlement (besides encouraging further governmental wrongdoings) would not repair the injustice done. Healing the wound and restoring harmony requires a public acknowledgment of what went wrong and a full restoration of justice.

It is not a mere problem of taxes; it is about what Tai Ji Men is all about. Zoccatelli would have said it is all a part of the “esoteric paradigm.”

## Chapter 8

### OPPOSITION TO NEW ASIAN AND AFRICAN SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS: CASE STUDIES

Šorytė Rosita<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. Parallels (and Differences) Between the Cases of the Unification Church in Taiwan and Tai Ji Men in Taiwan

Increasingly, freedom of religion or belief is not violated only by totalitarian regimes but also in democratic countries, including some we normally praise for their global defense of human rights. France, for example, a country deeply associated with the very history of human rights, has adopted increasingly restrictive laws against religious minorities it stigmatizes as “cults,” a vague label whose content is unclear.

After the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022, even a country traditionally friendly to religious liberty such as Japan started introducing restrictions, targeting in particular the Family Federation, once known as the Unification Church, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. In fact, the Jehovah’s Witnesses are under attack in several democratic countries, including peaceful Norway.

In other democratic countries, religious and spiritual minorities are harassed by a selective application of financial laws, and what should be regarded as non-taxable gifts to them are taxed under various pretexts. While, in general, Taiwan today enjoys religious liberty, we have heard about the Tai Ji Men case, a residue of tax practices and discrimination of the authoritarian and post-authoritarian era that for several reasons has lasted for almost 28 years.

I always considered Taiwan and Japan an integral part of the democratic world, where respect for human rights and the rule of law prevail. I had a chance to visit these beautiful countries several times, and I have noticed how deeply spiritual they are. To me, Taiwan appears as a guardian of authentic Chinese culture and history, which safeguarded it from the dangers of the Cultural Revolution in

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mainland China. Even today, Taiwan remains a proud custodian and an ambassador to the world of genuine Chinese culture and traditions. Japan is also the guardian of a millennia-old, beautiful culture and deep spirituality, as a visit to Kyoto would immediately show even to a casual tourist.

Religious freedom is part and parcel of human rights, and many traditional Chinese religions and traditions can survive Chinese persecution only because Taiwan is generously giving them this space. To keep Taiwan democratic and open, to keep Taiwan the custodian of Chinese cultural heritage, including its spiritual part, is crucially important to the entire Chinese civilization and to the entire world. Japan is, in turn, the home of some of the largest religious (as well as “spiritual-but-not-religious”) movements in the world, which have expanded from their Japanese homeland to become truly globalized phenomena, including Zen Buddhism, Reiki, and Soka Gakkai.

I was surprised to learn that many years ago, when Taiwan was still struggling to choose the path of freedom and democracy, there were some dark forces who tried, it seems at times because of the personal interests of certain influential people, to destroy and compromise the Tai Ji Men movement by accusing its leader and the group of various crimes. Justice prevailed and all cases were finally dropped, except one - of alleged tax evasion in 1992, which is a complete replica of other cases where the group and its leader were found to not be guilty. The reason for that is, as I understand, the simple legal argument that the time for further appeals had expired.

I also admire Japan’s principled attitude to various international issues, including the war of aggression waged by Russia against Ukraine. I shared the grief of the Japanese people when, in 2022, they mourned their assassinated former Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. Of course, not all Japanese agreed with Abe’s policies, but his long political career made him a key protagonist in Japan’s recent history.

The man who assassinated former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe claimed he wanted to punish him for his support of the Unification Church, now called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. The killer claimed this church is an evil “cult” and was responsible for the problems of his mother, who went bankrupt in 2002 due to her excessive donations to the church. The anti-cultists managed to create a national media campaign blaming Abe and his party for supporting the Unification Church, and the latter for soliciting important donations from its followers. Laws were passed targeting the Unification Church and other “cults,” including Jehovah’s Witnesses, who had nothing to do with the assassination of Abe but are always taken as scapegoats in campaigns against minority religions. As for the assassin, the media were quite sympathetic to him.

This was, again, very surprising and not attuned to my own ideas of Japan as a democratic and progressive country. How was this possible?

Before I came across the cases of Tai Ji Men and the Unification Church, I had taken an interest in religious persecution in China, and the humanitarian issue of religion-based asylum seekers who escape China and come to the West as refugees. In particular, I met refugees from a Chinese religious movement known as The Church of Almighty God, which, together with Falun Gong, is currently the most persecuted religion in China, and whose refugees have filed more than 5,000 requests for asylum in several democratic countries.

The Church of Almighty God has been both persecuted and defamed through fake news and slander. That it was responsible for a homicide in a McDonald's diner in 2014 in Zhaoyuan, in the Chinese province of Shandong, is still occasionally repeated by Chinese propaganda, but now even Chinese media have acknowledged that the crime was perpetrated by a different religious movement, not connected with The Church of Almighty God.

Trying to help refugees of The Church of Almighty God led me to some research on why they were persecuted in China. Some may argue that the reason is that they regard the Chinese Communist Party as a manifestation of evil, in fact the "Evil Red Dragon" mentioned in the Bible in the Book of Revelation. However, this is a vicious circle. The Church of Almighty God started insisting on the theme of the Red Dragon because and after it was persecuted, rather than before.

By researching the issue and reading the works of scholars, I realized that the problems were older and deeper than The Church of Almighty God's anti-Communist discourse. In fact, the Chinese culture and tradition do not have the concept of a religion independent of politics. Religion is conceived as a tool to create social harmony through teachings and rituals that would make the citizens law-abiding and induce them to support the powers that be. This idea prevailed for centuries through what historians called the "Sinosphere," i.e., the area where Chinese culture was enormously influential, although local cultures were also relevant, including Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

This idea of "religion" (a word that did not even exist before these countries came into contact with the West) explains why it is so difficult for scholars to agree on a characterization of "Confucianism" in China and "Shintoism" in Japan. Are they religions? Or are they simply systems where the support the citizens are supposed to give to the State and the governments is sacralized and ritualized? This is mostly a dilemma for Western scholars. For Chinese and Japanese, they are both, and both at the same time.

This conception may have served well the Chinese and Japanese empires throughout their long history, but it was hardly compatible with Western ideas of religious liberty (ideas that, of course, even in the West emerged only in the last few centuries and through much pain). The Chinese Constitution guarantees religious liberty, but only to “normal” religions, and which religions are “normal” is determined by the Communist Party. In Japan, religious liberty was imposed by the consultants who came with American General Douglas McArthur after the Allied victory in World War II to tell the Japanese how to draft a Constitution and laws making the country a democracy according to the United States model. In Taiwan, religious liberty was theoretically proclaimed after the end of the Martial Law period in 1987, but religious minorities continued to be harassed for at least a decade afterwards.

The idea that legitimate religions are those that support the state and are controlled by it leaves outside of the field of legitimacy independent groups that do not necessarily oppose the state (although some do), but are not part of the state system and elude control. In China, originally Buddhists were viewed as one such group, although it was later integrated into the state system. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, the dominant Taoists created a special name to designate the “heterodox movements” that threatened the state and needed to be eradicated, “xie jiao” (today, this expression is translated as “evil cults,” but this is clearly anachronistic). In Japan, similar expressions were adopted and used to persecute, inter alia, Christianity.

Throughout the Sinosphere, what I would call, to use a general term, “bad spiritual groups” have been identified since the Middle Ages as having two features. First, they opposed or at least did not explicitly support the government, and escaped its surveillance. Second, they used black magic to entice their followers or “victims.” Note that even Catholics were sometimes accused of practicing black magic in Japan and executed for this as late as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Again since the Middle Ages, this was confirmed by ex-members of the movements who, to avoid the death penalty associated with being active in a “bad group” both in China and Japan, cooperated with the authorities and denounced their former co-religionists. Thus, a third feature of a “bad spiritual group” emerged: it had ex-members who denounced it and confirmed the suspicion of the authorities.

This system never went away. As Chinese scholars have indicated, when the Western anti-cultists told them that “cults” use “brainwashing,” Chinese authorities accepted the idea very easily, because it looked just like a variation of witchcraft and black magic traditionally associated with the “bad groups.” However, they insisted that old-fashioned black magic was also still used by some movements.

This scheme is still at work today, and we can see it both in the Tai Ji Men case in Taiwan and in the Unification Church case in Japan.

First, both Tai Ji Men in Taiwan and the Family Federation in Japan are perceived as outside the state-sanctioned system of religious and spiritual groups the state is familiar with and looks at for support. This may seem contradictory with the fact that in Japan the Family Federation is accused of being too active in politics, having cooperated with the late Shinzo Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party and organized significant anti-Communist activities. However, there is no contradiction. Religious outsiders may be politically active, but their activity is still perceived as not being part of the established system where the state systematically cooperates with mainline religion. In fact, their political activities made them ever more suspicious. The Tai Ji Men case started as a part of a crackdown against several religious and spiritual groups accused of not having supported the party then in power in the 1996 Presidential elections. In general, Tai Ji Men were perceived as thinking and acting independently of any political control.

Second, both Tai Ji Men and the Unification Church were accused of manipulating their followers both through traditional black magic and the modern version of black magic, i.e., brainwashing and mind control. While the “cult” rhetoric, of which accusations of brainwashing are the center, was consistently used, the Unification Church was also accused of performing strange rituals involving the spirits of the dead that evoked the ghost of black magic. Dr. Hong, the leader of Tai Ji Men, was ridiculously accused of “raising goblins,” a practice that was never a part of his spiritual views and practices.

Third, ex-members who told false stories were mobilized. In Taiwan, the prosecutor who started the Tai Ji Men case created an “association of victims” of the movement. The association was, in one word, a fraud. Courts of law ascertained that the prosecutor invented it, started recruiting members, and created their tales as he deemed fit. Some of them were so false that in fact the “victims” had never belonged to Tai Ji Men. In Japan, media and politicians up to the Prime Minister referred to evidence against the Unification Church supplied by one particular ex-member, who went under the pseudonym of Sayuri Ogawa. Masumi Fukuda, an award-winning journalist (who is also a sociologist), spent months checking Ogawa’s story and discovered, and proved with documents, that all its main details were false. By then, however, the damage had already been done.

Of course, there are also significant differences between the Tai Ji Men case in Taiwan and the Unification Church case in Japan. Prosecutor Hou Kuan-Jen, who created the Tai Ji Men case in 1996, on April 25, 1997, overstepping his authority, wrote to the Ministry of Interior demanding the dissolution of Tai Ji Men. On May 21, 1997, he wrote to the governments of the counties and cities in Taiwan where the 12 Tai Ji Men Qigong Academies were located, demanding the dissolution of Tai Ji

Men entities. Although Taiwan was in a post-authoritarian period, the judiciary and some administrative instances were already independent enough, and Prosecutor Hou's requests were rejected. While still struggling with the tax consequences of the case, Tai Ji Men in Taiwan has not been liquidated and is free to exist and grow.

I am not sure that this will be the outcome in Japan, where the government filed in 2023 a legal action for the dissolution of the Unification Church/Family Federation, which is currently pending. International scholars have noted the extremely low percentage of court cases in Japan where requests by the government are denied, and the influence of the media on the judiciary. The risk of dissolution is extremely serious for the members of the Unification movement in Japan.

Despite the major differences, the similarities between the Tai Ji Men and the Unification Church cases is explained by a tradition of hostility, prevailing in the Sinosphere since the Middle Ages, against spiritual movements which give the impression of thinking and operating independently, and not being part of a system where religions are supposed to actively support the state. This hostility accuses the "bad" movements of opposing the government and using black magic (or its modernized version, brainwashing), and "proves" the accusation through the testimonies of disgruntled ex-members.

Recently, arguments taken from Western anti-cultists have been added, since anti-cultism has also been globalized. However, the widespread hostility against independent religious and spiritual movements also derives from a specific East Asian tradition.

## **2. The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light: Cases of Persecution and Discrimination in Different Countries**

The date was May 24, 2023. At the usually quiet border of Kapikule between Türkiye and Bulgaria screams were heard, as the Turkish police was threatening and beating 104 women, men, and children, members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL), standing in line to cross the Bulgarian border. They were not Turkish citizens. Except three who had been mistreated because of their faith in Thailand, they had reached Türkiye fleeing different Muslim majority countries (Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Jordan, and Palestine), where they had been persecuted for their religious beliefs. They hoped to find salvation in the European Union, of which Bulgaria is a member state.

Gunshots were fired. People protested police brutality, some showing their bloody faces after the beatings. Through a leaked audio recording, Puria, a 26-year-old Iranian devotee, offered evidence that he had been badly beaten and

even threatened with rape by Turkish border guards. “They told us to falsely say that we are fine and if we don’t say that we are fine, we will hit you and kill you,” Puria reported. In fact, he added, the asylum seekers were treated “like prisoners. Where I was, they beat a 75-year-old man and bruised his leg, and they didn’t even spare an old man. They even took sister Zahra (51 years old) and beat her. She fell unconscious on the ground and her condition was bad, but no one was even looking at her.”

Some reporters, alerted by the refugees’ co-religionists in the West, were able to get there. They were not well received by the Turkish police. English journalist Alexandra Foreman and her Scottish colleague Sermad Al-Khafaji were arrested when they arrived at the Kapikule border. Sermad reported: “They pulled my arms both backward and they pushed my head forward, which caused me spinal damage, they did this deliberately for me to release the camera. They also smacked my head from the back, they beat my head with fists.”

The two journalists were falsely accused of being spies working for the British intelligence, and were detained for two weeks before being released and allowed to return to the UK. They brought enough footage to create an international case. Meanwhile, the refugees were still stuck at the Turkish border and put under threat of being deported to their countries of origin. The fact that Türkiye itself considers the AROPL members heretic, particularly because of their theory that even prophets committed mistakes, certainly played a role in the incident.

It was an international mobilization that saved them. Thanks in particular to Willy Fautré of Human Rights Without Frontiers, who was also helped by the United Nations ECOSOC-accredited NGO CAP-Liberté de conscience and its President, Thierry Valle, the case was picked up by some Western media.

On July 4, 2023, three United Nations Special Rapporteurs, together with other United Nations officials, published a joint statement where they stated that the AROPL refugees faced serious risks if deported, and that the obligation not to send back asylum seekers to countries where they may be persecuted or killed is “absolute and non-derogable.” The threat of deportation was averted, and most refugees were allowed to proceed to the European Union, although some are still in Türkiye.

That the AROPL devotees are persecuted in Muslim countries is tragic but, unfortunately, predictable. As we have heard in this session, they teach that all great religions, including Islam, although originally admirable, have been corrupted and are today “99% wrong.” They insist that the real Kaaba is not in Mecca, fixed times for prayer are not necessary, Ramadan is in December, headscarves

are not mandatory for women, alcohol can be drunk freely if done in moderation, LGBTQ people should not be judged or persecuted, and that all prophets made mistakes. Their movement was born in a Shiite context, yet they teach that the present Shia leadership in both Iraq and Iran is made up of “non-working scholars” who lead believers astray with false doctrines.

For much less, people have been executed in several Islamic countries, and the situation only got worse when the AROPL’s sacred text, *The Goal of the Wise*, was released in 2022, with all the claims mainline Islam regards as heretic presented boldly and explicitly. In Iran, the AROPL is regarded as a “deviant religion” and is accused of “denigrating Islam” and “trying to subvert the Islamic state,” an offense punishable by death. The Iranian government has even produced a slanderous documentary about it, and dozens of devotees have been arrested. Some were taken to the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran, and two were forcibly sent to mental institutions.

After I and others wrote about the AROPL, an Iranian scholar who sometimes writes in Western journals protested by claiming that the movement is not persecuted in Iran because of its religious beliefs but because it tries to subvert the state. The fact of the matter is, however, that Iran is a theocracy based on the identification between religion and government, so that heresy is by definition subversive.

The same scholar also wrote to us that in Iran “although AROPL is just [one] of the Yamani movement’s branches, neither in Iraq, nor in Iran does anybody differentiate and distinguish between the branches. This means that the general public and the governments of the two countries, as well as religious scholars, treat all the branches as a whole, as the Yamani current... all the branches are counted together as a single entity.” However, there are substantial differences among the groups honoring the mission and teachings of Ahmed al-Hassan (what the Iranian scholar calls “the Yamani movement”). The “Black Banners” of the AROPL are very different from the “White Banners” in Najaf, and on key points their teachings are in direct opposition. Accordingly, refusing to “differentiate and distinguish between the branches” means that either scholars in Iran do not do their homework, or they are simply repeating the government’s propaganda that conveniently blame the sins of one group of followers of al-Hassan (different from the AROPL) on all the others. The situation is similar in Iraq, where religious scholars have released videos where they explicitly state that the AROPL members who are still in the country should be killed.

In Azerbaijan 85% of the population is Shiite, but the Constitution proclaims the post-Soviet republic secular and promises freedom of religion. This is

not the case, however, because religions should be granted registration to be free to operate and the distribution of religious material requires permission. In May 2023, AROPL members organized a peaceful march asking for religious liberty. The march was stopped by the police, and some were detained. Others have been arrested on trumped up charges. Twenty-five AROPL devotees from Azerbaijan were among those who reached Türkiye and tried to cross the border to Bulgaria. Another 70 members of the religion remain in Azerbaijan where they can be arrested at any time.

Iran, Iraq, and Azerbaijan have a Shiite majority, but the situation is not better in countries where the majority is Sunni. In Jordan, a campaign was launched accusing the AROPL members of insulting Islam and its Prophets, which are criminal offenses in the country. In 2020, the Jordanian authorities shut down the AROPL satellite channel. Devotees were targeted by mob violence and discriminated against in the workplaces. Last month *The European Times* published the story of Major Basil Al Squour, a Jordanian army officer who converted to the AROPL in 2015. In 2017, he was summoned by his commander and informed that he would be tried by a military court for apostasy and treason unless he left either his religion or the army. He resigned and eventually managed to escape to Greece, where he, his two brothers, and a sister-in-law, all AROPL members, are now seeking asylum.

In Malaysia, the main problem was the AROPL's support of the movement for LGBTQ rights. In fact, the AROPL was the only religious group brave enough to organize a public protest in solidarity with the repressed LGBTQ community in Malaysia. It happened in Kuala Lumpur in July 2023. Eight AROPL devotees were arrested and badly mistreated by the police, as two of them who had escaped to Europe told us during our visit to their community in the UK.

In Algeria, the local AROPL community, where 22 people lived communally, was raided. Three members were imprisoned and 15 put under house arrest. The women were falsely accused of prostitution. On June 6, 2022, the First Instance Tribunal in Béjaïa charged 18 devotees with "participation in an unauthorized group" and "denigrating Islam," both crimes in Algeria. The judge ordered the immediate detention of three members and released the others pending further investigation. In 2022, three received one-year prison sentences, while the remaining defendants were sentenced to six months in prison.

The case in Algeria, however, also proves that international protests on behalf of religious liberty are not always in vain. After international human rights watchdogs publicly complained, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of association and peaceful assembly met with AROPL members during his

official visit to Algeria, on September 24, 2023. Eventually, charges were dropped, although AROPL believers in Algeria remain under a fatwa declaring them heretic and they are not allowed to gather or worship together.

Another significant incident happened in Thailand, where Muslims represent 12% of the population but command considerable political influence. AROPL believer Hadee Laepankaeo, his wife, and their daughter were among the 104 blocked when they tried to cross the border from Türkiye into Bulgaria. They are now in Poland. Since the AROPL believes in a Divine Just State and proclaims that the allegiance should be ultimately directed to God and his vicegerent only, in Thailand its members are accused of lèse-majesté and of denying the authority of the King. The fact that before joining the AROPL Laepankaeo was politically active in a movement criticizing the prerogatives and power of the King of Thailand probably played against him as well.

On December 30, 2022, after he had given a speech promoting the newly-released *The Goal of the Wise*, Laepankaeo was removed from his home by security agents and beaten, resulting in injuries. He was subsequently detained for two days, and on January 23, 2023, escaped to Türkiye. Thirteen other members who remained in Thailand were arrested while participating in a peaceful march of protest in Had Yai, Songkhla Province, South Thailand, on May 14, 2023. While the strict application of lèse-majesté laws offers the legal grounds to persecute the AROPL in Thailand, in fact conservative Muslim clerics are those who incite the government to crack down on the group.

Less understandable is why the AROPL was harassed in Sweden, where some 70 members, including the leader of the religion, had settled in a farm near Hällefors, after they had spent some time in Germany. In 2019, the community started experiencing harassment by both the police and other agencies dealing with immigration and taxes. On September 10, 2020, more than 20 police officers, some of them in combat gear, raided the peaceful community. No reason was given for the raid and no charges were filed. On November 18, 2020, four police officers again entered the farm, accompanied by Fire Safety inspectors. No breach of the fire safety regulation was found.

Some AROPL devotees were British citizens, but after Brexit they were denied a residence permit. The police raids instilled fear in the peaceful community, and the businesses they legally operated were disrupted. Additionally, individual AROPL members were harassed by the police in different ways. For example, as reported by Willy Fautré, “On April 11, 2022, under false pretenses, UK citizen Kalsoom Shah and her daughter Dua Zahra were summoned to the Örebro police station. The mother and daughter were separated and interrogated while their law-

yer was prevented from being present. They were asked intrusive questions about their beliefs and 17-year-old Dua was even offered an option to leave her family, which she declined. On June 14, 2022, Guillaume Ballet, Ali Haider, and Lela Lotfi – Swiss, British, and Egyptian citizens, respectively – were stopped in traffic by two undercover cars, two police vans, and one motorcycle. The disproportionately large number of police vehicles was suggestive of a planned yet unwarranted ambush of the group. They were forced to abandon their vehicle, leaving it unlocked and unattended. Guillaume Ballet and Ali Haider were detained and subjected to degrading and humiliating body searches, prolonged interrogations and psychological pressure. Nothing illegal was discovered.”

The police authorities explicitly said that the aim of their action was to get rid of the AROPL, a result they eventually achieved, as by 2023 all members had left Sweden.

Why this happened in a country generally respectful of human rights remains somewhat mysterious. As all religions, the AROPL does have disgruntled ex-members and the word “cult” was used by the police and the media. It is possible that the usual anti-cult organizations were at work, but there is no evidence that this was the case. Iraqi immigrants to Sweden who adhere to a conservative brand of Islam and other Islamic radicals certainly bad-mouthed the AROPL, but the local police are not supposed to crack down on heretics.

Unless they received false information from foreign countries, perhaps the police were just concerned about possible trouble between the AROPL and Muslim fundamentalists in Sweden, within a context of increasing suspicion towards asylum seekers. They believed the easiest solution was to compel the AROPL believers to leave the country. However, this would hardly be compatible with Sweden’s human rights tradition. In democratic countries, those persecuted by radicals who accuse them of heresy should be protected, not harassed by the police.

The recent story of the AROPL is, thus, one of persecution—but also of resilience. All those I interviewed are not giving up. The AROPL mostly spreads its religion through the Internet with state-of-the-art equipment. Its media channels also document the persecution, reaching a global audience. Human rights organizations and, as we have seen, the United Nations themselves, were also able to help. Despite attempts to suppress it, and severe persecution in some countries, AROPL has proved capable of resisting and even growing, particularly through its skilled use of new technologies and by mobilizing the faith and loyalty of its members.

### **3. Who Is Afraid of African Prophets? Religious Liberty Issues, the Aftermath of Kenya's Deaths by Fasting, and Problems in South Africa**

In April 2023, media throughout the world carried the news that a Kenyan religious movement they called a “cult”, led by a local pastor called Paul Mackenzie, was responsible for the death of hundreds of followers, who had starved themselves and their children to death following the instructions of their leader about a radical form of fasting.

More than one year has passed, and what exactly happened is still not entirely clear. Obviously, however, if Pastor Mackenzie persuaded his followers to commit what, from a legal perspective, can only be described as suicide, coupled with homicide, if they compelled their children to join them in the fasting, he should be prosecuted and convicted, whatever his motivations. Instigation to suicide, and homicide, are not protected by freedom of religion or belief.

On the other hand, a Kenyan Ad Hoc Senate Commission took the opportunity of the incident to produce a report on “cults” with some disturbing proposals, released on October 10, 2023. The report presented the anti-cult laws in France and the existence there of a government mission to combat “cultic deviances” called MI-VILUDES, and the regulations introduced against “cults” in Japan after the assassination of Shinzo Abe in 2022 as “best practices” to be imitated in Kenya and, indeed, throughout Africa. The report also suggested creating a crime of “psychological abuse” and probing the finances of the churches and religions operating in Kenya and their leaders with the aim of reducing the tax exemption granted to religious organizations. After the tragedy in Kenya, similar proposals are now also heard in other African countries, including most recently Uganda.

This is an egregious case of throwing the baby of religious liberty out with the bathwater of its abuse by those who may have used religion to commit common crimes. Some Kenyan senators commented that the “Western” notion of freedom of religion is not applicable in Africa. That human rights, including freedom of religion, are not universal but “Western” is a favorite slogan used by both Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin to justify their systematic violations of them. In fact, human rights derive from our common dignity as human beings and should apply to everybody.

This introduction allows me to enter into my subject of today, the outreach activities of The Revelation Spiritual Home (TRSH) and the opposition it has encountered in South Africa, based on my two visits there in 2023. In fact, a campaign to extend the state control of religion in South Africa and investigate groups referred as “cults” started in South Africa before the case in Kenya. The general arguments

invoked were, however, similar, and there is a risk that the continuing media hype about the events in Kenya may revamp the South African campaigns as well.

The spiritual rituals of TRSH seem to transport us into a millennia-old indigenous world. Yet, a few blocks from its main place of worship, TRSH shows what at first sight appears as an entirely different face. These are the offices of Trillion Cart Holdings, a conglomerate founded by IMboni that now oversees some 70 different businesses. Unlike at the spiritual services whose pictures you have seen in a previous lecture in this session, here visitors mostly come in a jacket and tie, and are greeted by professional-looking secretaries. The walls are decorated with media articles depicting IMboni as a visionary businessperson and entrepreneur, although most of them mention he is at the same time a spiritual leader. Significantly, at Trillion Cart both the president, Thembi Tulwana, who also spoke in this session, and the CEO, Namhla Dabula, are women.

Yet, the first impression may be deceptive. Trillion Cart is, in fact, not really separated from the indigenous spirituality of TRSH. I was told that TRSH walks on two legs, the spiritual teachings and the business activities, whose aim is to empower the devotees to take care of their own lives. Some work in the Trillion Cart companies; others learn how to start their own small business, no small achievement for women and men often coming from the poorest neighborhoods of South Africa.

At the beginning of the Sunday services, videos chronicle the progress of TRSH and the founding of new churches, but also the results of the different business enterprises. Clearly, devotees do not see the two realms, spirituality and business, as separate.

The companies under the umbrella of Trillion Cart go from clothing and cosmetics (Ubuntu) to gyms (Black Rhino), restaurants, health supplements, advice on investments, and even racing pigeon farming, a personal passion of IMboni. Anecdotally, after I first heard of IMboni I did some research about him and found him to be criticized as a “cult leader” by the Chinese who knew precious little about his spirituality but were upset that he had beaten them at auctions for some of the world’s best racing pigeons, which normally end up in China.

Not all of the TRSH ancillary activities are for profit. A Dr. S.B. Radebe Foundation is a charity distributing food, food vouchers, and blankets to the needy, granting scholarships to worthy but poor students, and establishing libraries to encourage children in under-developed settlements to read. There is a Trillion Cart Football Club that has trained soccer players who went on to become professionals. Non-competitive Health Walks are organized in different South African cities. African Hidden Voices is a research center on the history of African spirituality.

There are magazines and publishing houses, and a small book presenting the story of IMboni to children once topped South Africa's bestseller list. Another important institution created by IMboni is an interreligious dialogue forum that gathers organizations representing more than ten million devotees. In December 2023, IMboni also became the African coordinator of the African Forum for Religious and Spirituality Liberty, an organization advocating for freedom of religion that works in cooperation with the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (FOREF).

During his interreligious activities, IMboni met the Unification Church/Family Federation founded by the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon and now led by his widow Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon. He became an active participant and regional leader of the Universal Peace Federation, the peace-building NGO also founded by Reverend and Mrs. Moon. To his credit, when in 2022 the Family Federation became the victim of a campaign in Japan after former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was killed by the son of a female member, who accused the church of having financially ruined his mother, IMboni publicly comforted and encouraged the Japanese Family Federation members. In doing so, he spoke from personal experience. He, himself, had experienced the discrimination and slander that often target minority spiritual organizations.

Successful spiritual movements normally have enemies. While during our visits to The Revelation Spiritual Home (TRSH) we regarded most of what we saw as admirable and noted how devotees voted with their feet, continuing to attend the services in massive numbers, what we discovered in South African media about the movement was often critical, and reminiscent of anti-cult stereotypes we were all familiar with, used to slander movements labeled as "cults" in Europe, Eastern Asia, and North America.

While in other parts of the world, now including Kenya, campaigns against all minority religions taking advantage of single dramatic incidents are carried out according to the ideology of the so-called anti-cult movement, South Africa has a special history. The infamous apartheid policy also included a spiritual apartheid. Christian and other mainline churches were regarded as "legitimate." Those established by Africans were called "independent" (a label that is today regarded as derogatory) and "problematic." African indigenous spirituality was slandered as "witchcraft" and even as "demonic."

The African elite that replaced the white government in South Africa had been mostly educated according to a Western paradigm (or in Marxist universities in the Soviet Union), and shared a prejudice against non-mainstream religion, if not against religion in general. We often heard from TRSH and other non-mainstream religionists the comment that "in matters of religion, the Black government

is anti-Black.” Conversely, members of the professional and political elite may be disturbed by beliefs and rituals they see as backward and an obstacle to South Africa’s path to becoming a modern regional political and economic power, armed with cutting-edge technology.

Politically, we cannot ignore the friendly relations the current South African government has with Russia and China, which, as we know, try to export their campaigns against minority religions labeled as “cults” internationally.

In 2002, the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL) was established as an independent institution under Chapter Nine of the South African Constitution. In 2015 it decided, somewhat arbitrarily, that its mandate extended to checking whether religious institutions were beneficial or harmful to South African communities. It started holding hearings on “the commercialization of religion and abuse of people’s belief systems,” on which in 2017 it produced a report.

The terminology, itself, showed the influence of European and American anti-cult ideology. The commission and its chairperson candidly admitted in the report that they had originally taken their information from “controversial news reports and articles in the media.” Not only in South Africa is media bias against minority spiritual groups well-known.

The CRL expressed its concern about “false churches” (without clarifying how a “false” church can be distinguished from a “true” one) and claims by spiritual leaders to an authority they did not in fact possess. Again, it was unclear which standards the CRL required to “prove” spiritual authority. The CRL also wanted religious and spiritual organizations to disclose to the Commission their budgets and bank accounts.

As the leader of one of the fastest-growing spiritual movements in South Africa, IMboni was summoned to appear and bring TRSH’s accounts. He refused, claiming that the investigation and the requests were against the South African Constitution, and went to present his complaints against the CRL to the Parliament. As a result, CRL’s chairperson depicted IMboni as rebellious and created a media campaign against him. She also accused a member of TRSH of having insulted and tried to intimidate her. She managed to have the man sentenced, but her attempts to have IMboni himself incriminated failed.

The aim of the CRL was to create a system of state control of religion, which would be unprecedented in democratic countries. The final report suggested legislation under which all religious and spiritual organizations should have leaders (with a temporary exception for founders) and treasurers democratically elected by

the members (obviously, this does not happen in mainline organizations such as the Catholic Church, where the bishop is not elected by the church members).

All religious and spiritual organizations, the CRL proposed, should affiliate themselves with umbrella organizations, which would, in turn, be under the supervision of “peer-review committees” established for each religious tradition (Christians, African Religion, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Rastafari), which would report to the CRL Commission itself. Individual religious practitioners and places of worship should also be registered with one of the CRL-supervised umbrella organizations. As the report clearly stated, “the CRL Rights Commission will remain the final arbiter in all matters” concerning religion and spirituality.

Curiously, the system proposals appear to be inspired by China’s organization and control of religions. In China, there is a centralized administration of religious affairs, and five umbrella organizations (for Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, and Taoists), to which all religious groups should belong. Those that refuse to become part of one of the umbrella organizations are declared illegal and are persecuted.

It would be a scandal if a democratic country such as South Africa were to adopt the Chinese model of religious repression. So far, the government has agreed that the CRL’s recommendation should, in fact, not be adopted. However, the fight is not over.

Are there black sheep in the world of African religion and spirituality? Yes, as everywhere else. But when they commit crimes, these may be punished by using the existing laws, without the need to put all religious and spiritual organizations under totalitarian state control.

As for TRSH, I agree with South African scholar Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon when he wrote in 2013 about the attempt to reduce the success of IMboni to his business activities and to see in them a “commercialization” of spirituality would be just “too simple.”

If TRSH is successful, the scholar wrote, it is because “It speaks to a hope that the failed aspirations of the city can be restored, that its pollutants can be cleansed, and that the people and things lost in its streets will return safely home, wherever that may be.”

I agree. IMboni and TRSH give hope, and economically empower many who live in very difficult situations. They give them a sense of belonging and the idea that their lives can change for the better. They give them pride as the heirs of an African indigenous spirituality that has nothing to envy of the other great religious tradi-

tions of humanity. They guide them to think independently of what the media and politics would dictate. And they encounter opposition, because everywhere there are powers that do not like those who think and operate independently.

The support they continue to enjoy shows, however, that they are on the right path, and give their followers something valuable that would be cruel and unjust to take away from them.

