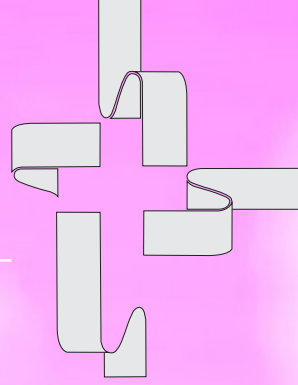


faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

Spring 2025



Five Current U.S. Protestant Political Outlooks

Page 8

White House faith advisor and Pentecostal preacher Paula White-Cain is a leading figure in MAGA Christianity (Photo: Delo.si)

ALSO INSIDE:

- ▶ From the President: White House Religion? page 3
- ▶ Post-Liberalism in Conversation: Why Is Liberalism Becoming Illiberal? page 7
- ▶ Should Calvin University Divorce Its Denomination? page 10
- ▶ Anglicans in Danger of Becoming a 'Boutique' Church? page 12
- ▶ Reconciling Methodists Tout 'DEI Which the Lord Has Made' page 13



An LGBT caucus group within The United Methodist Church is developing an ecclesial response to Trump Administration moves to end federal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs (see "Reconciling Methodists Tout 'DEI which the Lord Has Made'" on page 13).

FEATURES

- 7 Post-Liberalism in Conversation: Why Is Liberalism Becoming Illiberal?

by Davison Drumm

- 14 United Methodist Lobby Promoted Queer Theology Course

by Sarah Stewart

- 16 IRD Diary: Post-Christian France or Pre-Christian France?

by Jeffrey Walton



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PROGRAMS

From the President

- 3 White House Religion? Mark Tooley

- 4 International Briefs

- 6 Church News

Protestantism

- 8 Five Current U.S. Protestant Political Outlooks Mark Tooley

Reformed

- 10 Should Calvin University Divorce Its Denomination? Aaron Vriesman

Anglican

- 12 Anglicans in Danger of Becoming a 'Boutique' Church? Jeffrey Walton

United Methodist

- 13 Reconciling Methodists Tout 'DEI Which the Lord Has Made' ... Wyatt Flicker

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COVER: White House faith advisor and Pentecostal preacher Paula White-Cain is a leading figure in MAGA Christianity (Photo: Delo.si)



Christian evangelical leaders lay hands on U.S. President Donald Trump during a prayer gathering at the Oval Office of the White House, March 19, 2025 in Washington, DC (Photo Credit: Margo Martin/White House Photo)

White House Religion?

Of course, there's been some controversy about the latest group of evangelical leaders meeting with President **Donald Trump**, convened by White House faith advisor **Paula White-Cain**, a Pentecostal preacher. Seventeen persons, many of them clergy, are shown praying over him in a March 19 White House photo. Trump's most supportive demographic is white evangelicals, who voted for him by 83 percent in 2024.

White-Cain is senior advisor to the White House Faith Office. Some evangelicals have complained that she is a "heretic" because of her ardent Prosperity Gospel views and allegedly heterodox views on the Trinity. But what of it? There are no religious tests for public office, and she's one of the President's most prominent and perhaps effective religious supporters whom he personally admires. The person who fills such an office can be of any kind of religion. She seems to suit the role the President prefers.

Some have complained that the male evangelicals, laity, and clergy, were being led in prayer by a female preacher (female clergy are widely accepted among Pentecostals). Online complaints have focused on one participant, an outspoken online provocateur who leads a group opposing any female leadership roles in the Southern Baptist Convention. But, again, what of it? The gathering was in a government building and was a mostly political event. Politics convenes disparate personalities and views for mutually beneficial purposes. Theological and ecclesiastical standards in politics cannot be reasonably expected. Politics is chiefly about building electoral coalitions.

Such gatherings of supportive religionists in the White House are not unusual. In 1995 the National Council of Churches led a church delegation to pray with President **Bill Clinton** in the Oval Office so that he could be "strong for the task" as he battled the new Republican Congress. At the time, we at IRD strongly criticized the church council for its partisan exploitation of prayer. The church council, composed mostly of Mainline Protestant

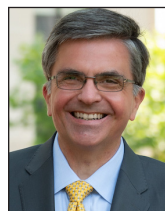
denominations, was already in long, sharp decline, but it was still able to make occasional news, purporting to represent millions of church members. Today the church council barely exists, justifiably ignored. Its political activism at the expense of more traditional church work accelerated its decline.

The National Council of Churches meeting with Clinton was of course publicized with an Oval Office photo, although their shot did not show the actual prayer, just denominational officials standing alongside Clinton. This week's scene with evangelicals in the Oval Office showed them in prayer, laying hands on Trump. Typically, such a laying on of hands would have the recipient in the middle of the circle as the others surrounded him. But in this scene, everyone is standing behind the subject and his desk, for the benefit of the photo. Such is to be expected. Everything that happens in the Oval Office is by definition political. And all official photographs there are definitely political.

Politicians cannot be faulted for being political, which is intrinsic to their profession. But to what extent should church leaders, especially clergy, participate in the details of political optics? Is close alignment with political power good for religion?

Continued on page 9

Mark Tooley



Mark D. Tooley is the President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

Methodist Jerry Kulah Jailed

United Methodism's schism in Africa resulted in the brief incarceration of a Methodist leader who led 100 of the 500 Liberian churches out of the denomination. **Jerry Kulah** is well known as a leader of African delegates at several United Methodist General Conferences. Across the years he has reaffirmed traditional teachings.

Those churches in Liberia backing Kulah have aligned with the new Global Methodist Church. The United Methodist bishop in Liberia, **Samuel Quire**, although professing to support traditional teachings, cleaves to the U.S.-based liberalized denomination. In March, police arrested Kulah and others at a Methodist church that United Methodism claimed.

Liberia's Senate has now intervened to mediate the Methodist schism. In the U.S. close to 8,000 congregations quit United Methodism under a temporary provision allowing departure with church property. But United Methodism outside the U.S. never had this opportunity. The (what were) roughly five million United Methodists

in Africa are overwhelmingly traditional and are left in difficult circumstances. Their bishops, although officially traditional, wish to maintain financial ties to the U.S. church.

In November 2024, Liberian United Methodism suspended Kulah from the presidency of the United Methodist university in Liberia. Kulah, as a delegate, had strongly protested U.S.-led United Methodism's new heterodox policies on sexuality adopted at the May 2024 General Conference in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Last month, Liberia's United Methodist annual conference unanimously reaffirmed its opposition to heterodox sexual standards while also warning legal action against any departing churches. But Kulah and other departees from United Methodism convened their

own meeting at the same time, aligning with the new Global Methodist Church. Liberia's United Methodist Women's group also exited the denomination.

These departees pointed out that the old United Methodism is a global church operating under a governing *Book of*

Discipline that no longer precludes sex outside of male-female marriage. Kulah says Liberia's bishop had previously promised that Liberia would officially exit United Methodism. That bishop now claims Liberia can remain traditional under a proposed "regionalization" plan allowing some autonomy to overseas United Methodist areas.

In February some Liberian congregants found their church—Jorquelleh District First United Methodist Church—locked to them by their newly appointed pro-United Methodist pastor. They began removing United Methodist signage, prompting the United Methodist district superintendent to appear with police, who arrested two men. In early March Liberia's bishop got an arrest warrant for at least six church members and their pastor for refusing to relinquish their church property.

On March 3, at a different church, Kulah and several others were arrested amid tear gas and mayhem as congregants insisted the church property was theirs and no longer United Methodist. A local court had ruled the building belonged to United Methodism. Kulah and the others were released later that day, after which Kulah announced there would be no backing down: "We will fight this battle, and Jesus will win. Jesus has already won."

Responding to the arrests, a Liberian Senate committee urged both factions to worship peacefully in their respective



The Rev. Dr. Jerry Kulah is jailed on March 3, 2525 after his arrest alongside several congregants at a disputed Methodist church property in Liberia.

Continued on page 5

churches while the committee investigates. Kulah attended the Senate hearing while the United Methodist bishop did not. The committee also recommended against any police action against either faction, that pastoral appointments in disputed churches pause during negotiations, and that the government should remain neutral while tensions deescalate and mediation continues.

The United Methodist General Conference did not provide for a practical exit policy for overseas churches. A further complication is that many African countries do not have laws about the legal status of United Methodist church properties. ✚

Violence Breaks Out Among Methodists in Nigeria

Tensions among Methodists in Nigeria have intensified since last year's General Conference saw the United Methodist Church (UMC) change its historic teaching on marriage. Those tensions have now escalated into violence.

A February 17 incident occurred at Banyam Theological Seminary, where ownership of the school campus along with other church properties is in a court dispute between the Global Methodist Church (GMC) and the United Methodist Church.

According to Bishop **Scott Jones**, members of the Global Methodist Church in Nigeria were gathered for a worship service as part of the Central Nigerian Annual Conference when "a group of individuals supportive of the United Methodist Church disrupted the gathering. In an effort to maintain peace, the conference was relocated. Today, these same individuals, expecting to find our bishops and conference members gathered, returned to Banyam Seminary armed, engaging in destruction of property and physical attacks on members of the Global Methodist Church."

Jones was in Nigeria and witnessed the attack. Multiple people sustained injuries, and Nigerian Army forces interrupted the fighting.

In a separate post, Jones described the attack and the resultant injuries: "The regular session of the Central Nigeria Annual Conference [was] scheduled to be held at Banyam Theological Seminary yesterday and today, February 17 and 18. A group of UMC supporters disrupted

United Methodist Church in Nigeria and the breakaway Global Methodist Church has escalated with an incident at United Methodist Banyam Theological Seminary. In separate statements, United Methodist Bishop **Ande Emmanuel** and the Assembly of Bishops of the Global Methodist



Global Methodist pastors prepare to process at an ordination service in Nigeria.

the opening worship on Monday. Because we wished to preserve peace we moved the Conference to a different location. However, the UMC supporters returned to Banyam expecting Bishops Jones and Auta to be there with the Conference. Some carried guns and others carried machetes. They invaded the seminary grounds, broke windows and attacked GMC people. The GMC people offered no resistance. One man was hospitalized with a head wound. A presiding elder was cut on his chest and hospitalized. Five others were hospitalized. Mrs. **Titi Auta** and a friend were locked in a room for several hours."

The attack was briefly mentioned on the United Methodist News Service (UMNS) website, which reported that "The property dispute between The

Church shared conflicting accounts of the incident, which both sides say included violence and vandalism."

UMNS shared a statement from UMC Nigerian Bishop Emmanuel referring to the attack as an "altercation" and accusing GMC members of vandalism and changing of property signs. Emmanuel argued that GMC members should not have been at the seminary. He did acknowledge that members of the UMC were present when the violence occurred but initially made no direct condemnation of the attack. Instead, he wrote, "There are two different stories of what occurred and now it will be a matter for the police."

Several days later Emmanuel released a statement condemning violence on all

Continued on page 11

Presbyterian Church (USA) Shutters Foreign Missions

The Presbyterian Church (USA) this winter fired nearly all 60 of its missionaries around the world and ended its foreign mission agency. The 1.09-million-member mainline Protestant denomination counted more than 3 million members at the merger of its predecessor bodies in 1983 and has experienced a membership decline of nearly 65 percent since that time.

As recently as 2010, the denomination supported about 200 missionaries worldwide. The recent cuts reflect broader continued mainline Protestant decline also seen in recent reorganizations within The United Methodist and Episcopal churches, among others.

The total PC(USA) mission budget for 2025, passed at the 2024 biennial General Assembly, is \$95 million.

Earlier last year, Stated Clerk The Rev. **Jihyun Oh**, the denomination's top executive, signaled what was ahead while announcing changes to achieve a balanced 2025–26 budget, including \$5 million in cuts.

"We shared information with World Mission staff as well as partners around the world that we anticipate significant changes to how we engage our partners in the future, and we are in the process of examining how our organization will be structured in 2025," Oh disclosed in November 2024. "We anticipate that there will also be reductions in 2025, once that process is completed."

Those reductions have since been made. In February, 54 mission "co-workers" were notified that they would be laid off and offered severance packages. Some

will be eligible to be re-hired for other roles.

"The gravity of the church worldwide has shifted to the global South," Oh stated in November. "We are at most half the size compared to when the current structures were set up."

A January 30 letter addressed to PC(USA) leaders and signed by former

The recent cuts reflect broader continued mainline Protestant decline also seen in recent reorganizations within The United Methodist and Episcopal churches, among others.

mission co-workers and seminary officials questions the need for a decrease in the number of mission co-workers and "a lack of consultation with global partners before changes were announced."

The letter doesn't lament missionary cuts because fewer people will hear the gospel message, but instead expresses concern that "When progressive Christians, communions and mission sending organizations leave a mission field, their absences are inevitably and invariably filled with voices, personnel, and mission partners who view Jesus and his ministry differently, in less inclusive and liberating ways."

The letter's authors write that at a "crucial moment" PC(USA) officials have withdrawn staff when they should be "continuing to confront injustice and nationalism" and that "the choice to cut

so many mission personnel is one way to continue the tragic and deadly tradition of top-down, colonial approaches."

The Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) underwent a series of reductions in total annual giving towards supporting missionaries, peaking at \$16 million in 2000 and declining to about \$6 million by 2023. It was recently eliminated and merged alongside the Office of the General Assembly into a new entity, the Interim Unified Agency.

The equivalent of the Presbyterian Mission Agency within the United Methodist Church is the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM) overseeing the denomination's global mission and ministry work in addition to relief and development. The United Methodist GBGM allocated \$11,146,922 towards missionary services in 2022, the most recent year that audited financial reports are available.

The much larger Southern Baptist Convention International Mission Board reported \$332 million in expenses in 2024.

The American Baptist Churches U.S.A. World Mission offering was projected to be \$1,745,943 in 2024.

The Episcopal Church's international mission structure is less centralized, but the closest equivalent to the Presbyterian Mission Agency in The Episcopal Church is Ecumenical and Interreligious Ministries. The Episcopal Church Center in New York recently moved to cut staff through layoffs, early retirements, and the elimination of vacant positions in a "staff realignment" announced February 22 that reduces the current headcount of 143 down to 110. ✚



At left: Brad Littlejohn (l) of American Compass and Kevin Vallier (r) of the University of Toledo Institute of American Constitutional Thought and Leadership.

Post-Liberalism in Conversation: Why Is Liberalism Becoming Illiberal?

by Davison Drumm

Increasingly, contemporary liberalism has faced charges from both sides of the political aisle of being “illiberal.” On March 25, the Illiberalism Studies Program and the Loeb Institute for Religious Freedom at George Washington University hosted **Kevin Vallier** and **Brad Littlejohn** to discuss the causes of the shift.

Vallier is a political author and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toledo Institute of American Constitutional Thought and Leadership. Littlejohn is a former fellow with the Ethics and Public Policy Center and Director of Programs and Education at American Compass.

Fed by rising polarization, technological shifts, and decreasing social trust, liberalism’s pillars are crumbling as it loses a consensus on Christian principles necessary to support it.

Vallier simplifies liberalism into four secondary, normative principles: equality, freedom, toleration, and harmony of interests. First, liberalism requires belief in principles establishing the equality of all people. Belief in human dignity and the rejection of “natural slaves” is essential.

Even though Americans, myself included, take for granted our freedom and recognition of dignity, Littlejohn reminds the audience that Christian impulses are not necessarily natural impulses. Love of enemies is not our default mindset. In a world without a Creator endowing rights, equality may not be the default either. Thus, declining Christian values among the citizens erodes the belief system that “invented the individual” and instituted equality.

Instead, liberalism has shifted its focus to the autonomous individual while abandoning grounds for finding individuality. Rather than engaging with each other in the world, Littlejohn argued we have shifted largely to screens for political engagement and identity. Hungering for group identities, we have turned from embodied relationships toward echo chambers where all members are indistinguishable. Thus, emphasizing autonomy, our liberalism has morphed into group movements with no grounds to create individuality.

Furthermore, Vallier argued that decreasing trust alongside increasing polarization has created the ground for

liberalism to collapse. Both sides of the aisle have abandoned tolerance and the harmony of interests.

On the left, the breakdown of tolerance surfaces most clearly through progressive sexual ethics. Vallier defined “toleration” as the decision *not* to engage in legal or social punishment for those with different first principles.

Yet, since the U.S. Supreme Court legalized nationwide homosexual marriage in 2015 with *Obergefell v Hodges*, those who object to progressive sexual ethics and its effects are “lower status” in the academy, “subject to losing their jobs,” and seeing increasing legal punishment in Europe.

Moreover, the belief that differing interests can exist in harmony is collapsing. From Vallier, the left no longer believes reconciliation is possible within a liberal system. Leftist rhetoric regarding the many “isms” plaguing society has portrayed them as systemic and potentially impossible to eliminate without radical change.

Yet, on the right, toleration and the harmony of interests have also weakened in reaction to the left. Conservative rhetoric portrays the left as citizens who do not love or even hate America. Framed by Vallier, “Why would you tolerate people who can’t be trusted... or why tolerate people who will destroy everything?” Moreover, President **Donald Trump**, Vice President **J.D. Vance**, and other prominent Republican leaders have publicly abandoned hope in reconciling with the other side.

Both sides view the other as too radical, dangerous, and perhaps as strengthening problems that require means beyond the constitutional change of power. If Vallier’s and Littlejohn’s assessments are correct, liberalism and the American experiment demand our immediate attention.

Moving forward, Vallier proposes two solutions: increasing federalism and stigmatizing political bigotry. Increasing choice at the state level would leave states

Continued on page 9

Five Current U.S. Protestant Political Outlooks

by Mark Tooley

There are currently five major streams of Protestant political outlook and activism.

The first, in terms of age, is **the old Religious Left**, composed chiefly of clergy from what remains of Mainline Protestantism. It has little political influence but sometimes gets attention because it can stage rallies with robed clergy in clerical collars. And it still has historic institutional affiliations. It rejects or minimizes historical Christian ethical teachings about human sexuality and the human body and endorses identity politics. It largely equates God's Kingdom with an ever-expanding federal entitlement and welfare state.

For the old Religious Left, virtually every human need and desire should be met by the government. Most of its denominational members do not support its political activism. So, its political influence has always been limited. But the membership collapse of its denominations makes it now very marginal. The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society is one still surviving representative. The Rev. **William Barber** of "Moral Mondays" is maybe its best-known current personality.

There is **the old Religious Right**, founded in the 1970s and 1980s by parachurch groups like the Moral Majority, Christian Coalition, and Focus on the Family. It advocated moral renewal through political action to defend "traditional values." It is pro-life, pro-traditional family, and pro-religious expression in public life. It has been mostly Reaganite, backing tax cuts, limited government, a strong U.S. national security posture, and free market economics. It venerates America's founding and is patriotic. It still has millions of adherents. But there are fewer groups articulating its core values, as the U.S. political right conforms to "Make America Great Again"

(MAGA). The Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission still articulates the original premises of the Religious Right. MAGA Christianity typically disdains the old Religious Right as weak and obsolete.

The neo-Anabaptist left resembles the old Religious Left but is more adamant about pacifism, peacemaking, and rejection of an American "empire." It has professed to be more theologically orthodox. Originally pro-life, it affirmed traditional Christian sexual teaching but later mostly liberalized on these issues. It has always loved to mock the hypocrisy and greed of bourgeois America. Evangelicals for Social Action founder **Ron Sider** was a chief representative. So too was Sojourners under **Jim Wallis**. Thousands of clergy and many seminary and college professors probably still identify with it, although they are almost entirely over age 50. The late **Richard Hays** of Duke Divinity School was among its more impressive thinkers, and he reflected the trend by changing his stance on Christian sexual ethics in his final book.

MAGA Christianity crystalized around the rise of **Donald Trump** in the past decade. Unlike the old Religious Right, it does not necessarily favor limited government but exalts in increased executive power vested in a strong man who can fight The Left. Nostalgic for America's past, it is not necessarily so for America's founding constitutional principles, which can impair its ambitions. It mostly harkens to traditional Christian views about abortion and marriage but is willing to subordinate those stances to wider political ambitions. With the rest of MAGA, it is skeptical if not hostile to American international commitments and to free trade. It's also impatient with the humanitarian values of the old Religious Right, which it sometimes disdains as signs of weakness if not wokeness. Pentecostal



White House faith advisor and Pentecostal preacher Paula White-Cain is a leading figure in MAGA Christianity (Photo: Delo.si)

preacher **Paula White-Cain**, the White House faith advisor sometimes associated with the New Apostolic Reformation, is a leading figure. But many others who were conventional Religious Right have aligned with MAGA Christianity. **Charlie Kirk** of Turning Point USA is a leading cheerleader.

Finally, there is **the TheoBro right**, which wants a Christian confessional state that legally privileges Christianity as the only remedy for defeating the Left. Some of its leaders openly denounce voting rights for women as a liberal, modern corruption that undermines the family. Its denizens are not very numerous but have a high profile through social media. And its influence exceeds its numbers because it is aligned with much of MAGA Christianity. Its chief literature is **Stephen Wolfe's** *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. Many of its followers descend from Calvinist entrepreneur **Doug Wilson** of Moscow, Idaho. *The American Reformer* is its chief online exponent.

Perhaps all these contemporary Protestant political streams illustrate the difficulty Protestants have with forming a Christian political witness deeply rooted in historic Christian teaching while adapting to modern circumstances. The TheoBro right champions Protestant traditions but mostly confines its version to the 1600s, especially the Westminster Confession of 1647.

Continued at top of page 9

All these streams struggle with forming a vision for the wider common good. All of them frequently mistake their policy preferences as “THE” Christian final word about justice on earth. And all of them, except the old Religious Right, are discomfited by civil religion, which was the original American Protestant tool for sustaining American democracy, preserving religion in public life, and harmonizing society.

In our polarized times, America needs a renewed Protestant political witness speaking widely to the whole nation while affirming the traditional Protestant emphasis on individual conscience and the eventual but essential Protestant affirmation of dignity and liberty for all. ✚



Mark D. Tooley is the President of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

Post-Liberalism in Conversation: Why Is Liberalism Becoming Illiberal?

continued from page 7

to deal with the consequences of their bad policies. As seen in New York, cities with bad policies will be forced to change or suffer the consequences of their people fleeing to more favorable states. Furthermore, polarization could weaken if the entire nation is not constantly subjected to the imposition of the other's view.

Additionally, Vallier argued for stigmatizing political bigotry in a similar manner to religious belief. For example, when meeting a Muslim, we are expected to listen to his views without automatically assuming we understand his view. Yet, when meeting a Republican or Democrat, we immediately assume knowledge of their entire worldview. While Vallier did not provide practical steps, this goal could greatly restore the quality of political dialogue.

Vallier's practical solutions depend, at least in part, on the restoration of the

Christian values that enable liberalism in the first place. We cannot restore liberalism while shunning the Christian values that establish dignity, equality, and individuality.

While we may lament current politics, Vallier and Littlejohn addressed concerns that demand recognition and action. The causes weakening our liberal system will not miraculously disappear and the system is only further jeopardized when separated from the very foundations that created it. ✚



Davison Drumm is an intern with the Institute on Religion & Democracy. After departing The King's College, he graduated Summa Cum Laude with a B.A. in Political Science from Fordham University.

From the President: White House Religion?

continued from page 3

Reinhold Niebuhr thought not. In response to President **Richard Nixon's** hosting Sunday worship services in the White House, with preachers and audiences he personally selected to reward supporters, the architect of Christian Realism was scathing in an article titled “The King's Chapel and the King's Court.” He warned “a combination of religious sanctity and political power represent a heady mixture for status quo conservatism” that evokes a “new form of conformity.”

“It is wonderful what a simple White House invitation will do to dull the critical faculties, thereby confirming the fears of the Founding Fathers,” Niebuhr wrote. He derided Nixon and his friend **Billy Graham** for regarding “all religion as virtuous in guaranteeing public justice.” This view, he said, “seems indifferent to the radical distinction between

conventional religion—which throws the aura of sanctity on contemporary public policy, whether morally inferior or outrageously unjust—and radical religious protest, which subjects all historical reality...to the ‘word of the Lord,’ i.e., absolute standards of justice.” And Niebuhr noted that “established religion, with or without legal sanction, is always wary of criticism, especially if it is relevant to public policy.”

According to Niebuhr, “It was this type of complacent conformity that the Founding Fathers feared and sought to eliminate in the First Amendment.” He further observed:

It made our high degree of religious pluralism compatible with our national unity. By implication it encouraged the prophetic radical aspect of religious life, which insisted on criticizing any defective and unjust social order. It brought to

bear a higher judgment, as did the prophet Amos, who spoke of the “judges” and “rulers of Israel” who “trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end (Amos 8:4).”

Niebuhr may have been overly harsh. He despised Nixon. And chaplains in the king's court can have utility. Not all religionists must be on the outside, like John the Baptist, metaphorically throwing rocks against the walls of the king's palace. But Niebuhr of course has a point about the price of excessive collegiality between rulers and priests.

As organized Christianity continues its decline in America, the focus needs to be on winning new souls to faith, not fierce prophetic denunciation of or affirmatively chaplaining the king. The most important prayers usually occur in private, without photos. ✚

Should Calvin University Divorce Its Denomination?

by Aaron Vriesman

Calvin University should sever ties with the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) now that the denomination has reaffirmed its historic stance on marriage and sexuality, insists Calvin professor **James K. A. Smith**.

In an abrasive editorial for the Calvin University newspaper *Chimes*, Smith claims that CRC Synod 2022 “moved the goal posts” with its “narrowly dogmatic decision” that homosexual sex is a violation of the Seventh Commandment (alongside adultery, premarital sex, extra-marital sex, polyamory and pornography).

Smith hails the university’s “Reformed Christian” vision for its future and declares “the time has come for our BOT [Board of Trustees] and administration to recognize that this ambitious ‘Reformed Christian’ vision is hampered and hobbled by remaining a ‘Christian Reformed’ denominational entity.”

The Calvin professor asks, “Why would a university with aspirations to global leadership bind itself to a shrinking church body that provides infinitesimal financial support and fewer and fewer incoming students?”

After all, “Divorces happen all the time,” Smith notes.

The published author and academic’s editorial has struck a nerve, already generating multiple responses. The agitation primarily arises from Smith’s disingenuous

articulation of what has transpired within the CRC.

Smith displays thinly veiled contempt by misrepresenting recent synods. When synod adopted the Human Sexuality Report in 2022, Smith says, “...this means sex was deemed ‘a salvation issue.’”



Calvin University Professor James K. A. Smith has argued that the school should disaffiliate from the Christian Reformed Church over its reasserted historic Christian viewpoint on sexual ethics. (Photos: James K. A. Smith and Calvin University).

No. Synod 2022 did not use that language and Synod 2024 specifically rejected a proposal to make such a statement.

Has the CRC really been taken over by outsider influence, as Smith repeats? He writes, “I mourn what the CRC has become” on account of “The clergy of the denomination” who “are increasingly trained at conservative and evangelical seminaries and bring those sensibilities to the CRC.”

In reality, nothing Synod 2022 decided was new. A Synod 1973 report declared all homosexual sex to be sinful. Synod 2011 deemed the 1973 report sufficient and refused to start over with a new report. Synod 2013 commissioned a new report but specified that the new report only expanded on the 1973 position. When the

new report stretched the tether too far and said CRC ministers could perform same-sex civil ceremonies, Synod 2016 made the unprecedented move to only recommend the minority report, which stated that CRC ministers may *not* perform any same-sex ceremonies.

At a crossroads on marriage and sexuality, Synod 2016 commissioned the Human Sexuality Report. When Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, declared that the 1973 report was merely “pastoral advice” and ordained a deacon in a same-sex

marriage, Synod 2022 instructed Neland Avenue to cease and desist. When Neland Avenue refused to comply with synod’s directives and other congregations joined in open rebellion, Synod 2023 repeated its instructions to Neland Avenue and to any other congregation in violation. When still more congregations openly defied synod, Synod 2024 placed all ministers, elders

Continued at top of page 11

and deacons from publicly defiant churches on “limited suspension” whereby they could not be delegates to broader assemblies or serve on CRC agency boards. The only change in the CRC is a small minority of congregations that succumbed to the presumptions of the sexual revolution and decided to push the envelope.

As CRC minister **Darrin Compagner** told *Christianity Today*: “They thought they were taking the lead and the denomination would come around ... they were shocked when it didn’t.”

Smith himself has changed, with a noticeable shift in viewpoint across several years. His 2009 book *Desiring the Kingdom* envisioned a rich connection between church and university to shape not just minds but the desires of students.

In 2012, Smith authored a blog post chastising the CRC baby boomer elite for trying to “eviscerate our confessional Reformed particularity” while younger generations were looking for something more robust. He wrote at that time, “Some of us Gen Xers and rising millennials are not interested in your ‘updated’ faith: we’re looking for the thick, rich particularity of historic Reformed faith, understood as an expression of catholic Christianity.”

In contrast, the Smith of today now refers to the ultra-progressive United Church of Christ as among “other Reformed denominations.”

Calvin University has long been the darling of CRC progressives. Geographically situated amidst CRC congregations that constitute Classis Grand Rapids East, arguably the most revisionist classis in the denomination, Calvin University has resided on the leftward edge of the CRC. Much of its faculty and staff populate congregations such as Neland Avenue.

When the CRC released its Human Sexuality Report in 2020, approximately one-third of Calvin University faculty and staff wrote an official letter to then-President **Michael LeRoy** against the report, arguing that “The report and its potential adoption by Synod could undermine the academic freedom of faculty and our standing as a reputable academic institution in the Reformed tradition.”

Moreover, the report “would cause harm to our Reformed community by

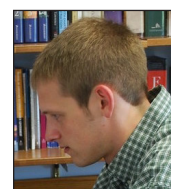
severely impairing staff and faculty’s ability to care for our LGBTQ students in the way that our conscience dictates and the scholarship supports.”

Now that synod has adopted the Human Sexuality Report and is standing its ground against open defiance, revisionist Calvin professors want the university to divorce the CRC. This is the familiar path of many universities. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Dartmouth, Brown, Rutgers, Duke and many others began as ecclesiastical institutions but have become thoroughly secular.

The church needs academic institutions, but academic institutions also need the church. The academic world is unforgivingly disparaging of the claims of Christian faith. It’s not a coincidence that the coldest feelings among higher education faculty are towards Evangelical

Christians. The pressures in academia to become like Harvard and Princeton are great. Calvin University is proud of its academic standing and has great incentive to maintain its reputation. However, Calvin needs the church to stay grounded in the historic Christian faith against the pressures of academia.

Ultimately, the CRC had the courage to desire God’s kingdom and stand against the world’s desires. Calvin University needs the CRC to help it stay grounded in what God has said over and against what the world promotes. ✚



The Rev. Aaron Vriesman is pastor of North Blendon Christian Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan.

International News

continued from page 5

sides while still laying the responsibility on the GMC.

Most of his statement was concerned with reiterating complaints about the property dispute previously mentioned and blaming the GMC Nigeria for an incident of violence that occurred in December. He did state that he was “committed to peace” and called on the GMC to do the same.

The GMC has released multiple statements condemning violence on all sides.

The Global Methodist Church Nigeria also released a statement stating that members of the UMC were responsible for this attack along with several other incidents that have taken place.

The annual conference was able to proceed, and ordinations took place. During his remarks at the conference, Jones called for peace and told those in attendance not to repay the violence that had occurred.

A violent incident in Munga Dosa, Nigeria, in December resulted in the

deaths of three United Methodists and the destruction of several homes. Members of both denominations had homes destroyed in the incident. The UMC was quick to blame the violence on the GMC and subsequently released a statement condemning the attack. GMC leaders issued a statement calling for peace on all sides and condemning the violence that occurred. They also asked people not to jump to conclusions as conflicting reports surrounded the reason for the attack.

The Christian Post reported on the complexities of the situation, stating that it was possibly part of a “decades long” family dispute and that the tensions between the GMC and UMC may have been only one of the reasons for the attack. Family disputes like the one the *Christian Post* described are not uncommon in Nigeria and do lead to violence, making it difficult to assign motives for outbreaks of violence. ✚

Anglicans in Danger of Becoming a 'Boutique' Church?

by Jeffrey Walton

I've long been critical of the Episcopal Church for effectively resigning itself to the role of a "boutique" church.

Episcopalians, broadly, no longer believe that they offer something unique to the world or that most people would be particularly interested. Instead, they've found themselves catering to a caste of highly educated (and increasingly aged) white liberals. The problems are apparent; the group is less likely to procreate and, when they do, their children do not remain within the Church. Data bears this out, and the denomination's priorities reflect this skewed demographic: The caricature of the Episcopal Church as a chaplaincy to lefty professors and a handful of identity groups is often deserved.

This is compounded by a form of universalism and religious humanism that has displaced the Gospel of Jesus Christ, sapping evangelistic energy. No children and no converts, save for a few liberal Catholics and "Exvangelicals." Readers of this journal know that this is nothing new.

Left unsaid is that Anglicans outside of the Episcopal Church could very well be painting themselves into another corner.

"Our studies show that the Anglican Church is in growth," Bishop **Derek Jones** of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA)'s Jurisdiction Armed Forces and Chaplaincy recently shared in a presentation on religious liberty and traditional Christian values. "But, I believe that what's going on is a great shift."



Bishop Derek Jones of the Anglican Church in North America Jurisdiction of the Armed Forces and Chaplaincy speaks March 1, 2025 at the St. Luke's Anglican Theology Conference on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina (Photo: Jeff Walton / IRD).

Jones pointed to data from groups like Pew and Barna showing that faithful Christian communities that maintain biblical teaching are actually growing while denominations that accommodate secular values continue their decades-long decline.

"Right now it is the historic sacramental churches: Orthodox, Roman, and Anglican that are growing, along with Messianic Judaism while all other faith groups are on decline. All," Jones emphasized. "And I believe that the Anglican Church has simply been the benefactor of those faithful Christians from Protestant denominational groups finding their way to an Anglican Church."

While Jones might be overstating Orthodox growth, and is possibly unaware that Roman Catholicism struggles with retention more than any Christian group in the United States, he's right about the nature of the present growth of Anglicanism. Even an

enthusiastic cheerleader of ACNA like me needs only look around in our most vibrant congregations to see that we're witnessing consolidation, not conversion from unbelief. We also tend to draw disproportionately from the professional class, just as Episcopalians do. But, as a century of Pentecostal growth showed, and a century of Methodist and Baptist growth before that, reaching the working class with the Gospel is essential: The Gospel message is for everyone.

Jones spoke March 1 at the St. Luke's Anglican Theology Conference in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina,

where he asked how many present had their origin in a Protestant faith group.

Nearly everyone raised their hands.

"Does that answer your question? We're coming to the end of that growth," Jones flatly declared. "It's time for us as a church to say we have a responsibility to our communities to be a beacon of light of the truth of the Gospel. It's time for us to be going up and saying 'do you know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior?'"

Jones wasn't seeking to lay blame: "I don't always do the best either," he

Continued on page 15



Jeffrey H. Walton is the Communications Director and Anglican Program Director at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.



Reconciling Methodists Tout 'DEI which the Lord Has Made'

by Wyatt Flicker

An LGBT caucus group within the United Methodist Church is seeking to construct an ecclesial response to Trump Administration moves to end federal Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs.

The Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) held a February 25 online seminar entitled "This Is the DEI Which the Lord Has Made."

Counting almost 120 attendees, the seminar opened RMN's Virtual Porch series, a slate of programs designed to meet the challenges of "this moment" and address the "legislative evils" perpetrated by the Trump Administration. The event opened with an invocation by RMN Fellow **Lynne Onishi**:

Holy One, be with us this evening as we hear from our speakers. Stir in us as we meditate on the diversity that you have created, the equity that you long for, and the inclusion that you have called us to embody. May we keep our hearts and minds open to the nudging of your Spirit. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Ophelia Hu Kinney, RMN Director of Communications, began the seminar with a discussion of the definition and history of DEI. After explaining her relevant identity group qualifications, Hu Kinney led online participants through a series of DEI-based cartoon graphics to illuminate the distinctions between equality, equity, and justice, the mainstays of most DEI training regimens. This section closed with a note that to oppose DEI policies is to oppose diversity, equity, and inclusion as concepts and an invitation to reflect on from where one's opposition to such concepts might stem.

Hu Kinney continued into a discussion of American history in terms of DEI,

beginning with the arrival of Western Europeans to the continent in the seventeenth century. In this initial settlement, Hu Kinney finds the origin of a fundamental American sin: prioritizing labor over social concerns. The history lesson continued through American immigration, suffrage, and civil rights history, with an obligatory mention of the 1969 "Stonewall uprising," billed by the speaker as a "riot... for the liberation of queer and trans people." Hu Kinney's remarks ended with a call to keep historical injustice at the fore in contemporary discourse and remember God's grace towards "all of his beloved individuals."

Mina Nau-Mahe, associate pastor at First United Methodist Church in Pasadena, California, offered remarks underscoring the importance of intersectionality in the work of the church. Nau-Mahe shared from her experience in the church as a female Tongan pastor. The RMN board member continued by emphasizing that because man is made in God's image, discrimination is a violation of human dignity and an affront to God. To best reflect human dignity, Nau-Mahe suggests "radical hospitality," a worldview that rejects the distinction between one's individual humanity and the humanity of others. The aim of this communitarianism, Nau-Mahe explains, is to "mobilize people to do internal work, stepping into their true embodied selves," incorporating DEI tenets into pastoral work and personal spiritual practices.

Helen Ryde, RMN Director of Mission Impact, addressed the Trump Administration's actions directly. Ryde read an excerpt of Trump's executive order on DEI, EO14151, with incredulity at the administration's use of quotation marks around phrases like "environmental

justice" and "equity." Ryde, who identifies as "agender," also accused the administration of "erasing [them] from how the government perceives humankind" through EO14168.

To best resist these policy changes, Ryde encouraged teaching about DEI in churches and advertising church DEI groups in newspapers and on radio. Dialogue with community members and staying informed on local issues were also recommended as methods of resistance.

This event and those like it emerge from a caucus amidst a process of reformation. After the pro-LGBT General Conference decisions of 2024, much of the change that the Reconciling Ministries Network historically advocated for within the United Methodist Church has been accomplished. Most importantly for the RMN, the 2024 General Conference lifted the funding embargo placed on activities "to promote the acceptance of homosexuality."

Now that the formal cordon sanitaire around denominational funding of groups like RMN is no longer, the caucus seeks to become a more formalized extension of the UMC bureaucracy, an "LGBTQ+ Resource Development and Congregational Engagement Center" for the denomination.

Events like "This Is the DEI Which the Lord Has Made" offer insight into what's to come in the future of social witness within the United Methodist Church. ✚



Wyatt Flicker attends the University of Delaware where he studies Classics, History, and International Relations

United Methodist Lobby Promotes Queer Theology Course

by Sarah Stewart

The official public policy arm of The United Methodist Church (UMC) is partnering with an LGBTQ caucus to offer pastors a course in Queer Theology.

Offered by the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) and the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN), the course is among the latest changes following last year's United Methodist General Conference. Following the exit of nearly 8,000 local churches, delegates to the denomination's governing convention removed language in the *Book of Discipline* and clergy conduct guidelines prohibiting same-sex behavior.

United Methodist officials claim that both traditionalists and progressives are welcome in the denomination. But, once again, the post-separation UMC has demonstrated that it has no interest in neutrality and instead seeks full affirmation of same-sex rites and behavior.

It is enthusiastically leaning into its new status as an "ally."

The new course's objectives are, "To introduce participants to key concepts and figures in queer theology. To equip participants with tools for critical analysis of theological texts and traditions. To foster a supportive community for LGBTQ+ individuals and allies. To inspire participants to engage in practical ministry and advocacy."

Course curriculum includes "Queer Biblical Interpretation, Queer Liberation Theologies, Gender and Sexuality in Christian Tradition, LGBTQ+ Spirituality and Ritual, and Queer Ethics and Social Justice."

Instructor Dr. **Luther Young** of Boston University School of Theology is styled in his bio as an "artist, public theologian, and social justice advocate" who

commitment to the promise of neutrality, but because pastors should receive supplementary training on so many other topics. GBCS is specifically focused on the social witness of the United Methodist Church, and it could focus on many key areas, but they have chosen to direct resources to a handful of niche issues guaranteed to alienate many UMC congregants.

The UMC once had a vibrant social witness focused on the call to spread scriptural holiness, born out of a recognition that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. While GBCS and RMN might argue that they too seek to make disciples of Christ, courses instructing queer theology contradict the historic witness of the church.

To be a disciple is to conform oneself to the teachings of Christ, recognizing that all of us need to relinquish

our attachment to sin, especially those sins that have the strongest hold over us. In contrast, courses on queer theology attempt to conform Christ and His teachings to one's desired lifestyle.

There was a time when the UMC realized that true discipleship was essential to social witness because it is only through sanctification that Christians can advocate a social witness that leads to true flourishing.

RECONCILING MINISTRIES NETWORK PRESENTS

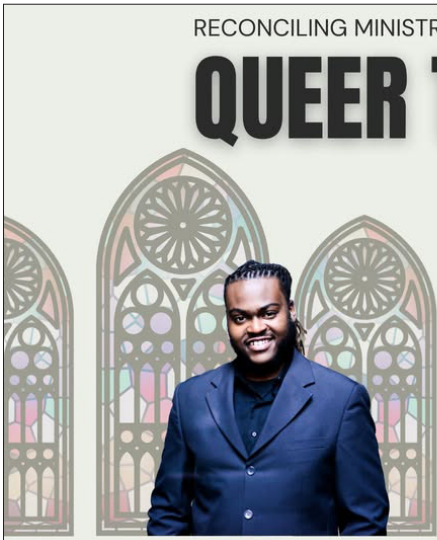

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Sociologist & Public Theologian
Boston University
School of Theology

Advertisement for a course on Queer Theology offered to United Methodist pastors by the denomination's apportionment-funded General Board on Church & Society in partnership with the Reconciling Ministries Network. (Image: RMN)

"seeks to address class inequalities, racial injustice, and systems of discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community and other disadvantaged groups."

GBCS is funded from fair-share apportionments, meaning that tithes from many United Methodists go to a church agency in support of pastoral training that opposes their deeply held religious beliefs.

The choice of GBCS to support a Queer Theology course is disappointing, not only because it demonstrates a lack of

Continued at top of page 15

Instead of focusing on niche issues, the UMC could give pastors materials to help them provide better pastoral care to their laity, particularly after General Conference when there is much heartbreak and division. I have spoken with several pastors, both inside the UMC and those who exited, whose congregants were devastated by the changes made at Conference and by the breakup of the denomination.

Those pastors would love to have resources to help them better serve their congregants, but the UMC has shown little interest in helping pastors develop the ability to provide pastoral counseling and care to their laity.

Anglicans in Danger of Becoming a 'Boutique' Church?

continued from page 12

acknowledged. But he offered a clear-eyed view that Anglican churches attracting a narrow subset of Protestants (usually Baptists and Presbyterians considering a liturgical expression or Methodists exiting a rapidly liberalizing United Methodist Church) won't see that same pipeline of new members indefinitely, and the cultural headwinds of secularism will hit Anglicans, too.

Episcopalians and other Anglicans in North America may see themselves as worlds apart, and that's not without basis. We Anglicans can be grateful that many of these faithful Protestants are deepening their Christian discipleship in our churches and that our rates of procreation appear healthier than within the Episcopal Church (yes, procreation is a form of church growth—it's how the Amish double in size every generation).

That said, we can learn from the mistakes of the Episcopal Church and not paint ourselves into a demographic corner. God's view is more expansive than our own. He's calling us not to recline and wait for others to come to us, but for us to go to them. ✝

Many worthwhile social issues could be focused upon, including work to affirm the sanctity of human life, help poor and homeless people, and prevent substance abuse that results in drug overdose. Helping pastors and laity address these issues within their local communities would further advance the social witness of the UMC.

Few in the UMC clamor to have their pastors be better able to discuss queer liberation theology on a Sunday morning. But they do need pastors who can comfort and guide them as churches split or close. They do need counseling as their communities break apart. They need practical guidance on how to faithfully live the Christian life in their specific communities. Help in meeting these needs would go a long way to support the UMC's social witness. It would help congregants live lives rooted in the scriptural holiness that was the mission of early Methodism.

United Methodist officials continue to display a startling lack of

interest in meeting congregants' practical needs. Courses like those on queer theology ostensibly train pastors to minister to those whom UMC officials wish were in their pews rather than the flock whom they are actively charged with shepherding. These officials are not neutral, nor will they allow congregants and pastors to be neutral on human sexuality.

Partnership to offer a queer theology course demonstrates that official, apportionment-funded church agencies have lost sight of what it means to have a social witness grounded in the call to scriptural holiness and disciple making. ✝



Sarah Stewart is Director of Campus Outreach and Events for the Institute on Religion and Democracy.

Post Christian France, or Pre-Christian France?

continued from page 16

or other spiritual medium. I'm not arguing that this is a good thing (arguably it is an example of re-paganization) but at the same time these are not practices consistent with atheism, and they reveal a felt spiritual need, albeit one addressed with a maladaptive response.

I was also told (by a Protestant cleric) that there is an identifiable renewal of Roman Catholicism underway in France, something that the recent French Roman Catholic baptism numbers back up.

"The influx of catechumens – adults and young people – is not an epiphenomenon," writes Archbishop of Lyon **Olivier de Germain** introducing the data from the most recent catechumenate survey. "We can see it as an encouragement from the Lord reminding us that he is the Master of the mission, it is he who attracts to him, touches hearts and reveals himself."

American Christians obviously minister in a substantially different context than French Christians do, and most Americans retain some awareness of Christian practice in their recent family history (it wasn't that long ago that 70 percent of Americans had membership in a house of worship), unlike the French. But glimmers of vitality in both French Protestant and Catholic faiths indicate that even in a post-Christian context, there is evidence for growing Christian presence in the future. ✝



Jeffrey H. Walton is the Communications Director and Anglican Program Director at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.

Post-Christian France, or Pre-Christian France?

by Jeffrey Walton

This spring I had the pleasure of traveling for two weeks in France, my first visit there. While this wasn't a work trip, French religiosity did pique my interest—enough so that I casually read up on the subject upon my return home.

My new curiosity was well timed: New data released about both Protestants and Catholics in France may have implications for American Christians ministering in a post-Christian (or is that potentially pre-Christian?) context.

Among many sights, I visited the restored and surprisingly bright Notre Dame de Paris, in addition to numerous churches in Bordeaux, Lyon, and Strasbourg (I also attended Sunday services at an age-diverse and multi-national Church of England parish in Lyon where I met Chinese, Nigerian, and Iranian believers, alongside western expats).

Walking through Notre Dame on a weekday afternoon, I inquired if a significant number of seated people were awaiting mass to begin. No, I was told – they were waiting for confession. This was unexpected evidence of religious vitality.

Indeed, just this April France's Roman Catholic Church announced the scheduled baptisms of more than 10,000 adults on Easter, the highest number of new members reported in over 20 years (a 45 percent increase in

adult catechumens compared to last year, and the largest reported number since 2002, when the Catholic Church created the annual catechumenate survey).



Jeff Walton walks through the Parish Church of St. Louis in Bordeaux, France on March 4, 2025 (Photo courtesy of Cynthia M. Walton)

Separately, new data from the French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP) shows that evangelicals now comprise a majority of French Protestants, and that there is an influx of converts from non-Protestant backgrounds. About one-quarter of Protestants in France are converts.

“In our secularised society where the dominant norm is not to have a religion, having a religion and practising it has become a non-conformist act of personal choice,” write IFOP researchers **Sébastien Fath** and **Jean-Paul Willaime**.

Interestingly, French Protestants are now more likely to self-report as “Evangelical” rather than as “Protestant.” This possibly correlates to what IRD President **Mark Tooley** has observed about a decline of denominational loyalties in the U.S.

“The evangelisation of Christianity is leading to a deconfessionalisation in relation to inherited denominational traditions,” IFOP’s Fath and Willaime write. French Christians who in a previous time might have categorized themselves Lutheran or Reformed are now simply “Evangelical.”

Does this seem familiar?

A number of cultural observers have stated that the United States has become a “post-Christian” nation, with the potential to become a “pre-Christian” nation. Notoriously secular France might already exemplify this. The country is among those listing the highest percent-

age of self-described atheists (France ranked 13th for prevalence of atheism as recently as 2020). At the same time, surveys of the French population reveal that nearly 40 percent of adults have consulted an astrologer, psychic,

Continued on page 15



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