

SPIRITUAL AND THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF OUR WORLD?

(This document to be further developed and upgraded by Global Citizens and founders of the Earth Union.)

Humanity is becoming more interconnected without becoming religiously uniform. The central spiritual challenge is therefore not simply the existence of different religions, but whether people with deeply different beliefs can live as equal members of one human family without coercion, dehumanization or political domination. The sections below set out fifteen pressures that shape that question in 2026. Each figure is drawn from the most recent published source available at the date of this update.

1. Religious pluralism: conviction without hostility

The world is neither becoming uniformly religious nor uniformly secular. Pew Research Center's global reconstruction of the religious landscape estimates that in 2020 about 75.8% of humanity identified with a religion, while 24.2% was religiously unaffiliated — down from 76.7% affiliated in 2010. Christians remained the largest group at 28.8%, followed by Muslims at 25.6%, the unaffiliated at 24.2%, Hindus at 14.9%, Buddhists at 4.1% and other religions at 2.2%. Muslims grew fastest, the unaffiliated grew mainly through religious switching, and Buddhists were the only major group to decline in absolute numbers. This creates one of the defining theological problems of the 21st century: billions of sincere people belong to traditions containing different and sometimes incompatible claims about God, revelation, salvation, scripture, incarnation, prophecy, karma, rebirth and ultimate reality. Globalization has brought these communities into the same cities, workplaces, schools and political systems.

Can a person regard his or her religious understanding as true while fully accepting the equal dignity, citizenship and rights of people who believe differently?

Attitudes towards religion itself are not uniformly negative. Across 36 countries surveyed by Pew, a median of 77% said religion mostly helps society. Views on whether religion encourages tolerance are more divided: large majorities in Tunisia (98%) and Indonesia (95%) say religion encourages tolerance, while in Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and Australia more people say religion encourages intolerance than tolerance. The challenge is therefore conviction without hostility — not the abolition of conviction.

2. Freedom of conscience, religious hostility and persecution

A One Human Family cannot be built if people are punished, intimidated or excluded for believing, changing belief, rejecting belief, or belonging to a minority tradition. Freedom of religion or belief therefore has two inseparable dimensions: freedom to practice faith and freedom from religious coercion. Pew's global restrictions study released on 15 June 2026, covering 2023 data from 198 countries and territories, found that 58 countries had high or very high government restrictions on religion, 55 had high or very high social hostilities involving religion, and 27 had both. Taken together, 86 countries scored high or very high on at least one of the two measures, and those countries contained about 78% of the population covered by the study. Religious minorities are disproportionately affected. Persecution, sectarian hostility, mob intimidation, hate crimes and coercive restrictions are therefore a central spiritual as well as human-rights challenge. Independent monitoring points the same way. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended 18 countries for designation as Countries of Particular Concern in its 2026 report, along with 11 countries on its Special Watch List and 7 non-state Entities of Particular Concern.

3. Blasphemy, apostasy and anti-conversion laws

Legal architecture, not only social attitude, restricts conscience. Pew found that 79 of 198 countries and territories (40%) had laws or policies penalizing blasphemy, and 22 (11%) penalized apostasy — the abandonment of faith. Several countries additionally restrict religious conversion or the propagation of a faith, and penalties in a minority of jurisdictions extend to imprisonment or death.

Such laws create a specific theological problem for any project of spiritual union. If sincere inquiry into the nature of God can be prosecuted as a crime, then comparative study of scriptures — the very method by which shared truths are discovered — becomes legally hazardous. Freedom to inquire, to publish, to disagree and to change one's mind is a precondition of the search for the Universal God, not an optional liberal addition to it.

4. The politicization of religion and religious nationalism

Religious belief becomes especially dangerous when fused with national identity and state power. Pew's comparative survey of nearly 55,000 people across 36 countries, conducted between January and May 2024, found wide differences in religious-nationalist attitudes, including whether belonging to the historically predominant religion is necessary to be a 'true' member of the nation and whether sacred texts should shape national law. The theological shift is subtle but consequential: religion can move from the personal question, 'What does God require of me?' to the political question, 'Which religious community should control the state?' Once the second question dominates, doctrinal disagreement can become political exclusion. The challenge is to protect both religious participation in public life and equal citizenship for people of every faith and no faith.

5. Religiously framed violence and extremism

A small number of movements claim divine authorization for mass violence, and their actions shape global perceptions of entire traditions. The Global Terrorism Index 2026 records 5,582 deaths from terrorism in 2025, with Islamic State and its affiliates responsible for just under 17% of all recorded attacks, and a rising share of fatalities in Western countries even as the global total fell to a decade low.

Two distinct theological tasks follow.

- The first is internal: religious authorities must be able to say clearly, from within their own scriptures and jurisprudence, why the killing of non-combatants cannot be sanctified.
- The second is external: societies must resist the temptation to treat a whole tradition as responsible for the acts of a violent minority, because collective blame is itself a driver of the next cycle of radicalization.

6. Theology used to justify war between nations

Extremist movements are not the only actors who sacralize violence. In several current interstate and internal conflicts, established religious institutions have supplied blessing, narrative and legitimacy to national war efforts — a pattern documented in recent scholarship on the Russian Orthodox framing of the war in Ukraine. Where the sacred is enlisted by the state, the moral restraint that religion is supposed to place on power is inverted: the tradition ceases to judge the war and begins to bless it. **For The Earth Union this is a decisive test.** A spiritual union of humanity requires religious authorities capable of criticizing their own governments in the name of God, rather than legitimizing whatever their government does in the name of the nation.

7. Attacks on sacred sites and the destruction of religious heritage

Places of worship, shrines, cemeteries and manuscripts carry the memory of a tradition, and their destruction removes what cannot be rebuilt. UNESCO's satellite-verified assessment of the Gaza Strip has recorded damage to 164 cultural sites, including 14 religious sites, while more than 500 cultural sites have been verified as damaged in Ukraine. Open Doors reported 3,632 attacks on churches and Christian buildings in its 2026 World Watch List. Heritage loss is not only material. When a community's sacred geography is erased, the sense that its faith has a legitimate place on Earth is damaged with it, and grievance can pass to generations that never saw the building destroyed.

8. Intra-religious division, absolutism and religious literacy

Religious conflict is not only between religions. Most major traditions contain multiple denominations, sects, schools of interpretation and reform movements that disagree about authority, scripture, ritual and doctrine. Internal disagreements can become as bitter as interfaith disputes, and in several regions sectarian division inside a tradition causes more casualties than conflict between traditions. At the same time, social media allows

decontextualized quotations, inflammatory preaching and false claims about other religions to circulate globally in minutes. The challenge is therefore not merely interfaith tolerance, but religious literacy: understanding what other traditions actually teach, recognizing diversity within each tradition, and distinguishing criticism of an idea from hostility toward the people who hold it.

Closely related is the question of interpretive authority. Scriptures reach most believers through translation, commentary and preaching rather than in their original languages, and the authority to decide which reading is legitimate is contested inside every tradition. Any argument for One God of humankind must therefore engage not only with texts, but with the institutions that control how those texts are read.

9. Inherited hierarchy: caste, ethnicity and marginalized spiritual traditions

Religion has sometimes been used to justify permanent social hierarchy. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on racism reported in 2025 that caste remains a central axis of oppression affecting more than 250 million people, sustained in part by religiously sanctioned notions of purity and pollution, and reproduced in diaspora communities beyond South Asia.

At the other end of the spectrum, the spiritual traditions of indigenous peoples are disappearing along with their languages: UNESCO estimates that at least 40% of the world's more than 6,700 languages are endangered, most of them indigenous, and these languages carry ceremony, cosmology and ethical teaching that exist in no written scripture. A union of humanity that recognizes only the large scriptural traditions would silently complete this loss.

Equal dignity is a theological claim before it is a legal one: if all human beings descend from the same source, no birth can confer permanent spiritual rank.

10. Women, religious authority and contested moral norms

Rapid social change is forcing religious traditions to revisit questions that touch deeply held moral convictions: gender roles, marriage and family, sexuality, reproductive ethics, end-of-life decisions, equality before the law and the limits of individual autonomy. These disagreements occur both between religions and within them.

The question of who may teach and lead is central. Even in traditions that formally permit women to hold senior office, practice lags far behind: Pew found that of nine large United States religious bodies that allow women in their highest leadership position, only four had ever been led by a woman. Since women constitute the majority of active participants in many congregations, the distribution of religious authority is a live justice question inside faith itself. The challenge for plural societies is not to pretend that these disagreements do not exist. It is to create a civic framework in which people can advocate strongly for their moral beliefs while the dignity, safety and legal equality of others are protected. This is one of the most difficult tests of coexistence because the issues involve conscience, identity and law simultaneously.

11. Institutional trust, abuse and the credibility of religious leadership

Doctrine is judged by conduct. Decades of documented abuse scandals, financial impropriety and cover-up across several traditions have damaged the moral standing of religious institutions in the eyes of both believers and non-believers. In the United States, Gallup's long-running measure of confidence in the honesty and ethical standards of clergy fell to a historic low of 27% rating them high or very high. A parallel concern is the commercialization of religion: prosperity preaching, paid intercession, and mass-media ministries in which financial giving is presented as a route to divine favor. Where faith becomes a transaction, its capacity to call the powerful to account is weakened. Restoring credibility through transparency, accountability and protection of the vulnerable is therefore a spiritual precondition for any wider union.

12. Secularization and the weakening of inherited religious authority

A counter-trend is occurring at the same time. World Values Survey analysis by Ronald Inglehart found that from roughly 2007 to 2019, 43 of 49 countries studied became less religious. Pew also finds substantial religious switching in many countries: globally, the largest flows are away from a childhood religion towards no religion,

with about half of adults raised in a religion in South Korea no longer identifying with it. In the United States, no recent birth cohort has become more religious as it aged, and a non-religious upbringing is increasingly likely to persist into adulthood.

This does not mean that atheism will simply replace religion; inherited religious authority increasingly competes with science, individual autonomy, consumer culture, digital communities and alternative spiritual philosophies. Religious traditions must explain why their ethical insights remain relevant without relying on coercion; secular societies must sustain solidarity and moral responsibility without assuming a common theology.

Where does a society obtain a shared moral language when neither religious institutions nor secular political institutions command universal trust?

13. Meaning, belonging, loneliness and human flourishing

Material progress does not automatically produce purpose or belonging. The WHO Commission on Social Connection reported in June 2025 that about one person in six worldwide experiences loneliness, that 17–21% of people aged 13–29 report loneliness, and that social disconnection is linked to more than 871,000 deaths each year — roughly 100 deaths every hour.

Evidence also suggests that communal religious practice is associated with measurably higher wellbeing. The Global Flourishing Study, covering 202,898 adults in 22 countries, found a mean flourishing score of 7.67 among people attending religious services more than weekly, compared with 6.86 among those who never attend. Religious communities therefore face the challenge of providing belonging without intolerance or coercion; secular communities face the corresponding challenge of building meaning and solidarity without requiring conventional religious belief.

14. Migration, diaspora faith and the reshaping of religious geography

Human movement is redrawing the religious map. Pew estimates that of the world's more than 280 million international migrants, about 47% are Christian, 29% Muslim, 13% religiously unaffiliated, 5% Hindu and 4% Buddhist. Migration places traditions that formerly developed in separate regions into permanent neighborly contact, tests whether a faith can transmit itself to a second generation in a new cultural setting, and makes religious identity a proxy in political arguments about borders and belonging.

This is simultaneously the greatest opportunity and the greatest risk for spiritual union. Shared neighborhoods can normalize the idea of one human family, or they can harden into parallel communities with competing grievances, depending on whether receiving societies protect equal dignity in practice.

15. AI, biotechnology, neurotechnology: what is a human being — and who speaks for God?

Artificial intelligence, genetic engineering and neurotechnology are moving questions once confined to philosophy and theology into practical public policy. They raise questions about consciousness, free will, moral responsibility, human uniqueness, personhood, enhancement, mental privacy and the meaning of death.

UNESCO's ethics work places human dignity and intrinsic human worth at the center of technological governance. Its Recommendation on the Ethics of Neurotechnology, adopted by the General Conference at its 43rd session in Samarkand on 11 November 2025, specifically addresses personal identity, mental privacy, freedom of thought, autonomy and the risk of manipulation.

A newer and less anticipated development concerns religious authority itself. Barna Group research published in 2026 found that 48% of practicing Christians in the United States would trust artificial intelligence to help them grow spiritually, that 30% of United States adults consider AI-generated spiritual guidance as trustworthy as a pastor's (rising to 44% of Millennials), and that only 13% of pastors surveyed make no use of AI, with 24% using it to write or edit sermons. As machines imitate more intellectual capacities and technologies gain access to the brain itself, religious and secular philosophies alike will have to articulate more clearly what makes a human person worthy of unconditional dignity — and who may legitimately speak in the name of God.

The central spiritual task for One Human Family

- No list of spiritual challenges can be exhaustive. **But these pressures point to a common task: humanity must find a way to preserve sincere conviction, freedom of conscience and cultural identity while affirming the equal dignity of every person.**
- A durable Spiritual Union cannot depend upon forced theological uniformity. It must grow from truth-seeking, mutual understanding, freedom of belief, moral responsibility and the recognition that disagreement does not cancel our shared humanity.
- Encouragingly, institutional initiatives exist. Pope Leo XIV led the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of Nostra Aetate on 28 October 2025, and the 8th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions met in Astana in September 2025. **These are precisely the constituencies through which the idea of One God of humankind can be introduced patiently, across generations, without coercion.**

Selected current sources (All figures above were verified against these sources on 15 September 2026).

1. [Pew Research Center — How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020 \(9 June 2025\)](#) — global religious composition
2. [Pew Research Center — What impact do people around the world think religion has on their society? \(28 January 2025\)](#) — 36-country attitudes; 77% median
3. [Pew Research Center — Comparing levels of religious nationalism around the world \(28 January 2025\)](#) — nearly 55,000 respondents, 36 countries
4. [Pew Research Center — More countries had elevated levels of social hostilities involving religion in 2023 \(15 June 2026\)](#) — 86 countries; 78% of population
5. [Pew Research Center — Four-in-ten countries and territories worldwide had blasphemy laws in 2019](#) — 79 blasphemy, 22 apostasy laws
6. [USCIRF — 2026 Annual Report country recommendations](#) — 18 CPC recommendations
7. [Institute for Economics and Peace — Global Terrorism Index 2026](#) — 5,582 deaths in 2025
8. [UNESCO — Damage assessment of cultural sites in the Gaza Strip](#) — 164 sites, including 14 religious sites
9. [Open Doors — World Watch List 2026 \(via Vatican News\)](#) — 3,632 attacks on churches
10. [UN Special Rapporteur on racism — 2025 report, caste-related excerpts](#) — caste as an axis of oppression
11. [UNESCO — International Decade of Indigenous Languages](#) — at least 40% of languages endangered
12. [Pew Research Center — Women relatively rare in top positions of religious leadership](#) — women in senior religious office
13. [Lifeway Research — Americans' trust in pastors hits historic low \(January 2026\)](#) — 27% rate clergy highly
14. [World Values Survey — Inglehart, secularization analysis](#) — 43 of 49 countries less religious, c. 2007–2019
15. [Pew Research Center — Around the world, many people are leaving their childhood religions \(26 March 2025\)](#) — religious switching
16. [World Health Organization — Social connection linked to improved health and reduced risk of early death \(30 June 2025\)](#) — 1 in 6 lonely; 871,000 deaths a year
17. [Global Flourishing Study — religious attendance and flourishing \(Nature Mental Health\)](#) — 202,898 adults, 22 countries
18. [Pew Research Center — The religious composition of the world's migrants \(19 August 2024\)](#) — faith profile of 280m+ migrants
19. [UNESCO — Recommendation on the Ethics of Neurotechnology \(adopted 11 November 2025\)](#) — mental privacy, freedom of thought
20. [Barna Group — Christians, trust in AI and spiritual authority \(2026\)](#) — 48% would trust AI for spiritual growth
21. [Barna Group — Pastors using AI in ministry \(2026\)](#) — 24% use AI to write or edit sermons
22. [Holy See — Pope Leo XIV, 60th anniversary of Nostra Aetate \(28 October 2025\)](#) — interreligious dialogue