

NEWSLETTER

Believing

Introducing: *Believing*, Our Newsletter on Religion and Spirituality

Each week, we'll be covering how faith shapes our politics, culture and society — and how it's appearing in new forms.



By **Lauren Jackson**

I am an editor for The Morning and the host of Believing. Sign up here.

Sept. 14, 2025, 8:59 a.m. ET

Sign up for the Believing newsletter. A weekly newsletter about how people live religion and spirituality now, with Lauren Jackson. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

In the 1940s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a dissident German pastor, wrote hundreds of letters while facing execution inside a Nazi prison. From his small, dank cell, Bonhoeffer asked: “How do we speak in a secular fashion of God?”

The line has both inspired and inflamed theologians in the decades since. It's also a question that animates this newsletter: The mission of Believing is to speak about the sacred, in all its forms, in a very secular space.

Why are we doing this?

Earlier this year, we published a series of articles about how people experience religion and spirituality now. In response, thousands of you told us you wanted more: You wanted us to expand our reporting on how ancient ideas are appearing in our very modern lives. You wanted a space for both believers and nonbelievers to share their stories. You wanted, above all, for us to take the subject seriously.

We agree. So we've decided to create a weekly newsletter exploring these topics. I'll be your host, and I'll be writing most weeks about how religion shapes our politics, culture and society — and how spirituality is appearing in new forms. The newsletter will also showcase relevant reporting from around The Times, especially by our excellent national religion correspondents, Elizabeth Dias and Ruth Graham, who've both been covering this beat for many years. Finally, it will point you toward the interesting, important and viral ways faith is appearing online.

And what a week we've picked for our debut. Religion interlaces the story of Charlie Kirk's assassination. It's a tragedy that exhibits how faith is elemental in America. Below, we explore the religious significance of Kirk's story and take a look at how people are using spiritual chatbots. But first, here's what you can expect in your inbox each Sunday.

What you can expect

Each week, we'll write one original piece of reporting and highlight how religion is appearing in the headlines. We'll also answer your questions about faith, and share individual stories of sacred rituals, texts and pilgrimages.

In doing so, we'll explore how religion is relevant to, well, everything: Congress, the White House, war, psychology, relationships, raw milk, assisted death, the Kansas City Chiefs, Chappell Roan, Dolce & Gabbana and your friend's new tarot habit.

Over the past few months, I've heard from so many different readers — MAGA bros, wellness influencers, climate activists, professors, actors and high school students. They all had something in common: seeking a space where they could think about the sacred.

A space where, as Bonhoeffer wrote, they could speak in a secular fashion about God.

Who am I?

In reporting on belief, I've found that the fastest way to build trust is to share where I'm coming from. So here it is: I was raised a devout Mormon, or a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in Arkansas. I know how luminous and enchanted life can be when you really believe in something. I also know what it feels like to leave a religion, which I wrote about [here](#) and [here](#).

I now live in London, and my main job is working on The Times's flagship newsletter, *The Morning*. (If you don't subscribe, sign up [here](#)!) I am not religious, but I go to many religious services and events as a reporter. This summer, that included a Greek Orthodox festival where people danced under pealing church bells at midnight, kissed icons of the Virgin Mary and grilled souvlaki skewers over an open flame. It was magic.

DM me: Say hello at believing@nytimes.com, or use [this form](#). I'd love to hear from you.

Share: We're new here. So please share this newsletter with your friends, family, congregations or group chats. They can sign up [here](#).

Charlie Kirk's Assassination



Erika Kirk Diannie Chavez/The Republic, via Reuters

Faith is present in nearly every detail of Charlie Kirk's assassination.

He was an evangelical Christian who often spoke about religion. Moments before he was shot on a college campus in Utah, he spent about eight minutes in a theological debate about whether Mormonism or Protestantism is more historically accurate.

After the assassination, President Trump and other elected officials, as well as clergy members and influencers, called Kirk a martyr — someone who died “while fulfilling a greater purpose,” as Elizabeth and Ruth reported. Erika Kirk, his widow, held his cross pendant as she escorted his coffin alongside Vice President JD Vance and his wife. Erika said her husband had gone to “see the face of his Savior” and was now fulfilling his dream of “making heaven crowded.”

Religion appeared in the suspect’s life, too. Ruth and I learned on Friday that he was raised Latter-day Saint, at least as a young boy. A minister was involved in his apprehension. Gov. Spencer Cox of Utah wove mentions of prayer throughout the news conference announcing the arrest.

I was just in Utah last weekend. I made the same drive the suspect is said to have taken, across the flat belly of the state, surrounded by mountains and red rocks. It’s a place I love. It’s also a place, like most of America and the world, that can be understood only by engaging thoughtfully and curiously with faith.

Related

- As Erika grieves in public, she’s melding the personal and the political, my colleague Emma Goldberg wrote.
- Kirk’s forthcoming book about keeping the Sabbath has become a best seller.
- **Opinion:** Ross Douthat, a Times columnist, wrote about Kirk’s “evolution from college bro to Christian dad.”

More Religion in the News

- Carlo Acutis, who died at 15 in 2006, became the first millennial saint.
- After a student at Texas A&M said in a viral video that a class mentioning gender identity conflicted with her religious beliefs, the teacher was fired.
- Trump spoke about religious liberty at the Museum of the Bible, Reuters reports.

- The newly renamed Department of War quoted the Bible's book of Joshua on social media. "Be strong and of good courage," said a video on X. "Do not be afraid, nor dismayed. For the Lord your God is with you, wherever you go."
- People on Long Island are fighting about expanding a mosque there. The case is going to federal court soon.
- At least nine pigs' heads were found outside several mosques around Paris, raising concerns about Islamophobia, The Guardian reports.

Spiritual Chatbots

**"I've done something
terrible, Father."**

These are from anonymous users on [ChatwithGod.ai](https://www.chatwithgod.ai)



ChatwithGod.ai

A few months ago, I came across a website called ChatwithGod.ai. I stopped. *Chat with God?* What a promise! The site asked my religion and whether I needed “confession, inspiration or comfort.” Then it tailored a chatbot to help me.

I soon learned this site is a small corner of a much larger universe. Tens of millions of people are turning to spiritual chatbots — late at night, in crisis or when bored. I spoke to a bunch of them, and to the tech founders behind this burgeoning industry, for an article published today.

Karen Fugelo, who works at a middle school in Pennsylvania, told me she opens her religious apps most days before getting out of bed. Recently, Fugelo has been concerned about her mother, who, as she put it, is “reaching the end of her life’s journey.” On Hallow, Fugelo asked “how to prepare myself as well as my mother for going to be with God.”

Chatbots are serving as tutors, therapists and dates, so it’s no surprise they have also become stand-ins for chaplains. But there’s something else going on here. People are turning to these chatbots seeking omniscience — asking big questions about life, death and the cosmos. But can a chatbot provide that?

You can read the full story here.

Related: Tucker Carlson interviewed Sam Altman, OpenAI’s chief executive, about his beliefs about God. “I believe there is something bigger going on than can be explained by physics,” he said.

Trending



Elizabeth Gilbert Photo Illustration by The New York Times, Photograph by Heather Sten for The New York Times

- Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of “Eat, Pray, Love,” has a new memoir. “All the Way to the River” is about cocaine, prayer, murder and redemption. Read more about the book.

- For Vogue’s October cover story, Kendall Jenner and Gigi Hadid spoke about spirituality. In the photo shoot, they also blew on dandelions — a practice that has pagan roots.
 - People online are talking about the Bible verses on the bottom of In-N-Out Burger’s cups. (See: Feed Me this week.)
 - Taylor Frankie Paul, of “The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives” fame, was picked to be the next Bachelorette, The Washington Post reports.
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Pilgrimage



In Rome. Matteo Minnella/Reuters

The Vatican officially recognized its first ever pilgrimage for L.G.B.T.Q. Catholics. About 1,000 people gathered in Rome as part of Jubilee, a yearlong celebration for absolving sins and manifesting miracles.

What did they do? People wore rainbow attire and carried crosses. They processed through the holy door at St. Peter's Basilica, which symbolizes forgiveness and reconciliation. The door is only opened in jubilee years, once every quarter-century.

Why this matters: Pope Francis pushed the church to be more inclusive of L.G.B.T.Q. people. Catholics have been watching to see what Pope Leo would do with this legacy. While Leo did not meet with the pilgrims, it's significant that the Vatican recognized the event.

Read more in CNN.

What I'm ...



Arches National Park John Burcham for The New York Times

Reading: “Desert Solitaire,” by Edward Abbey. During my road trip in Utah, Abbey’s search for absolution in the vastness of the American West resonated. (Here’s our review from 1968.)

Watching: Louis Theroux’s “The Settlers,” (Part 2). I’m late to this, but his thoughtful interviews with the religious Jews in the occupied West Bank are particularly important right now.

Following: A Hindu woman, descended from a matchmaker, who has gotten major funding for her A.I.-powered, matchmaking app.

Coveting: A “momijigari” trip to Japan to hunt for the best fall leaves among hot springs, with stops at Shinto shrines.

Questioning: Can climate activism be a proxy for faith?

One Last Thing



BigXthaPlug Jason Nocito for The New York Times

I loved the recent episode of “Popcast,” a Times podcast, with the rapper BigXthaPlug. He, like Bonhoeffer, spent time in prison, and he explained how his mind started to slip as he counted the bricks. “One day I just screamed out my

door, ‘How the hell do y’all stay sane?’” he said. “‘How are y’all able to wake up every day and be good?’”

Isn’t that what we’re all asking, in one way or another?

Thanks for being curious about how people believe with us. See you next week!

P.S. Beyoncé had a birthday. “I’m thankful to God for another year,” she wrote on Instagram. We hope she had a good one.

Lauren Jackson is an associate editor and writer for The Morning, The Times’s flagship daily newsletter.