

Morning Rundown: Is it a Sin for a Christian to Use Transgender Pronouns?

Here's a quick summary of the top stories on :

Is it a Sin for a Christian to Use Transgender Pronouns?

It's one thing for us to recognize that it is impossible for a man to become a woman or vice versa. But is it ever right to call a trans-identified person by their preferred gender pronouns (PGPs)?

Could this be the compassionate, Christlike approach? And what happens when you're required to give your own PGP? Is it better to conform rather than to rock the boat?

Let's tackle the second question first.


3 Spiritual Challenges in the Wake of the Trump Indictment

There's no question that we're living in an upside-down world where good is called evil and evil is called good.

The woke agenda continues to push against Christian and conservative voices who won't stand for the indoctrination of children, the removal of God from our society or for a socialist government. We're seeing history in the making in this upside-down world.

Just take a look at the indictment of President Trump. No former president has ever had to go through this kind of mockery, and it is setting up a dangerous precedent that could affect future leaders.

BREAKING NEWS: Unprecedented for US Presidents, Trump Arraigned, Pleads Not Guilty to 34 Charges

 It is a historic day for America.

On Tuesday, April 4, Donald Trump became the first former or sitting U.S. President to be arrested and face criminal charges, according to a leak from the sealed indictment. He was charged with 34 felony counts of falsifying business records and conspiracy.

Trump pleaded not guilty all 34 felony counts tied to a “hush money” payment to adult film actress Stormy Daniels. {eoa}

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3 Ways You Can Form a Special Bond With the Holy Land and Bless Israel This Passover

Passover and Easter are only days away. Here in Israel, that means our historic cities, iconic markets and holy sites will be filled with activity on these sacred holidays.

As we are all eager to finally put the coronavirus restrictions behind us, many tourists are finally making a long-awaited pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I hope Israel can now return to its special place in the world as a beacon of hospitality.

As these holidays approach, you’re likely thinking of the historical, physical places where the Israelites longed to be when God spared them during Passover, or the streets where Jesus spent His life and ministry – at least I hope you are!

So as this time of year draws your hearts and your minds toward the land of the Bible, here are three practical ways you can form a special bond with the Holy Land and also bless Israel as commanded in Genesis 12:3.

1. Plan that trip to Israel you've been putting off for so long. Nothing compares to being here and seeing the Garden of Gethsemane, the Sea of Galilee or the Western Wall for yourself. Walking the ancient streets of Nazareth or the Via Dolorosa helps you physically engage with the origins of your faith unlike anywhere else in the world.

This is a special place. And it's truly a miracle that Israel was restored in the 20th century and that these sacred landmarks are still preserved. I hope you will consider visiting, perhaps even this year. I've never met anyone who's regretted their journey to the Holy Land. It would surely be the most impactful journey of your life.

Don't put it off any longer. Come and see your friends here in Israel and watch the Bible come to life.

2. Support local artisans and small businesses right here in Israel. Perhaps traveling to the Holy Land sounds great to you, but it's just not possible for you in the immediate future. Fortunately, there are ways you can smell the aromas, taste the spices and enjoy the handiwork of Israel without leaving your home. And you can even get to know my friends who run shops all across the Holy Land, and support their businesses that were under great financial stress when COVID-19 decimated our tourism industry. I know many of those personally who have been dealing with the daily reality that they may have to close their doors.

Many vendors are selling their gifts and artisanal goods online, or even in monthly subscription boxes that are shipped right to your front door. This is actually one of the ways that we at Artza have found to help these shopkeepers get

creative in unforeseen circumstances. We provide a way for you to get familiar with those who make up a critical component of Israel's economy, many of whom have run family-owned shops here for generations. The unique treasures we ship to your home come from different cities and towns all across the Holy Land and help you walk in the footsteps of Jesus from afar.

3. Pray for the senseless violence to end and terrorist plots to be thwarted. Against the backdrop of excitement as we welcome back more visitors with each passing month, Israelis are once again faced with reckless violence from Hamas and others trying to disrupt our peace. In just one week, three separate terrorist attacks have left 11 dead. Stabbings, car rammings and shootings have killed Jews and Christians alike in the month of March.

Please pray the violence will end. Pray that God would protect us from further attacks, and pray that peace will prevail. The Jewish people have increasingly been able to count on the fervent and genuine support of our Christian friends, and we greatly covet your petitions to heaven as well at this difficult time. {eoa}

Itai Schimmel *immigrated to Israel 10 years ago and is one of the founders of Artza, a new direct-to-consumer company delivering a taste of the Holy Land to Christians across America.*

Read articles like this one and other Spirit-led content in our new platform, CHARISMA PLUS.

How Spirit-Filled Christians Can Save America

Christian apathy has spread over the years, partially due to the fact that according to the Bible Jesus triumphantly returns and forever vanquishes sin and death.

Until that time however, there is much work to be done for the kingdom of heaven because Christians are seeing the tip of the iceberg when it comes to a society that consciously removes God everywhere possible.

This is why author and founder of The Western Journal Floyd Brown wrote his newest book, "Counterpunch" to help reclaim the narrative in America.

If Christians are truly honest with themselves, they'll admit they are losing the culture war in America.

"This book 'Counterpunch' is really a handbook for our movement. To recapture the agenda on narrative. And also, for us to learn about the important strategies we need to pursue in order to push back and capture ground," explains Brown.

God is assuredly omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. Within the pages of the Bible He spells out very plainly His call for Christians to put their faith into action and take His gospel message about the saving knowledge and grace of Jesus Christ to all the world.

Do people think the Israelites would have been led by Moses to reach the Promised Land if he had not answered the call God had on his life and went to tell Pharaoh to let God's people go?

Would David have ever become king of Israel had he not stepped up to Goliath in honor and obedience to the Lord?

Do Christians around the world today think there is going to be any change made in society if they do not take up the call of the Great Commission and display the love of Christ to those still mired in sin?

When it comes to looking for a savior to change the status quo, nobody does this better than Christians, which is one area that Brown calls out in his book: "Why have we failed [to change the culture]? We're always looking for somebody, Newt Gingrich, Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump, to ride into Washington and save us from the top down," Brown bemoans.

"The book 'Counterpunch' is all about having Christians show up in the culture, in what Lance Wallnau calls 'The Seven Mountains.'...We can't win unless we're in the battle," he added.

Even when God won battles for Israel when they took the Promised Land, they had to get in formation and fight! God won the battle, but not while the Israelites were still in their camp sleeping.

God often uses unconventional humans to accomplish his goals. Gideon was no leader until God called him; David was a shepherd not a king; Ronald Reagan was an actor in Hollywood and Donald Trump was a playboy billionaire.

All them were used by God, yet once they left their positions of power, the people they had been in authority over often turned away from the Lord to live in sin.

Christians must understand that being a disciple of the one true King is a 24/7 commitment.

"We are commissioned by our Savior to go out into all the world and to speak truth to power. Every Christian needs to do it. Now," Brown says.

"The key is for Christians to occupy where they're at.

Remember, Satan comes to bring chaos, to bring disunity, to bring hate. We come to bring love, we come to bring unity. And first we have to have unity within the church. Then we can bring unity to society through our love. It's all about love," Brown added.

So if you want to make a difference right in your own neighborhood and start the movement that will street by street, town by town and state by state radically transform the world by the love and power of Jesus Christ, get "Counterpunch" today and start making a difference in your community for the Lord. {eoa}

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James Lasher is Staff Writer for *Charisma Media*.

Unprecedented for US Presidents, Trump Arraigned, Pleads Not Guilty to 34 Charges

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Trump pleaded not guilty all 34 felony counts tied to a "hush

money” payment to adult film actress Stormy Daniels.

The indictment was released to the public after Tuesday’s arraignment in Manhattan, New York.

Here are the facts of the situation in New York:

- Trump was indicted last Thursday by a Manhattan grand jury as part of the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office’s years-long investigation into his alleged hush money payments by his former lawyer Michael Cohen to adult film actress Stormy Daniels and former Playboy model Karen McDougal ahead of the 2016 election, Fox News reported.
- The Associated Press reported that Trump surrendered to New York authorities prior to his arraignment. He was not photographed or finger-printed, and the AP says he entered the courtroom just before 2:30 p.m. “stone-faced” but without saying a word.
- Fox News reported that multitudes of protestors gathered outside the Manhattan courthouse, including a woman wearing a “MAGA” hat who fell to the ground after trampling an anti-Trump flag strewn across the ground. Fox News says the woman took a large banner from an anti-Trumper with the words “Trump Lies All the Time” written on it, and then “she fell onto the ground and laid on the flag before she was confronted by protestors wearing shirts calling for Trump’s arrest.”
- Trump’s attorneys voiced all weekend that they expected to file a motion to dismiss all charges stemming from in the investigation headed by Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg. Trump said earlier Tuesday that the case should be moved to nearby Staten Island, which has a larger demographic of Republican voters than Manhattan.

Trump wrote in a post on Truth Social Tuesday:



“VERY UNFAIR VENUE, WITH SOME AREAS THAT VOTED 1% REPUBLICAN. THIS CASE SHOULD BE MOVED TO NEARBY STATEN ISLAND—WOULD BE A VERY FAIR AND SECURE LOCATION FOR THE TRIAL. ADDITIONALLY, THE HIGHLY PARTISAN JUDGE & HIS FAMILY ARE WELL KNOWN TRUMP HATERS. HE WAS AN UNFAIR DISASTER ON A PREVIOUS TRUMP RELATED CASE, WOULDN'T RECUSE, GAVE HORRIBLE JURY INSTRUCTIONS, & IMPOSSIBLE TO DEAL WITH DURING THE WITCH HUNT TRIAL. HIS DAUGHTER WORKED FOR “KAMALA” & NOW THE BIDEN-HARRIS CAMPAIGN. KANGAROO COURT!!!”

- In a poll conducted by McLaughlin & Associates of 1,000 likely primary voters, published Monday, indicated that after the indictment, Trump led Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis by 33 points in a head-to-head primary battle. That's up from 12 points in January.



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Shawn A. Akers is the online editor at Charisma Media.

3 Spiritual Challenges in the Wake of the Trump Indictment

There's no question that we're living in an upside-down world where good is called evil and evil is called good.

The woke agenda continues to push against Christian and conservative voices who won't stand for the indoctrination of children, the removal of God from our society or for a socialist government. We're seeing history in the making in this upside-down world.

Just take a look at the indictment of President Trump. No former president has ever had to go through this kind of mockery, and it is setting up a dangerous precedent that could affect future leaders.

I believe Donald Trump was a man who was set in place by God to lead our nation, which I discuss in my book, "God and Donald Trump," and our country was better because of his presidency.

Is it possible God has a plan for this nation? Is it possible He has a plan for His people? I've tried to make the case that President Trump won the evangelical vote by the largest margin in history. I haven't tried to analyze his spiritual condition—only God knows the heart. Yet I've been told that the way of salvation has been explained to him, and if he believes in his heart that Jesus Christ is risen and the only begotten Son of God, then he is a born-again Christian.

The very best thing I can do now is pray for the safety and success of President Trump and hope that millions will join me.

Despite the challenges that we face, I believe it is important to understand how God uses them for our good. There many types of challenges in life, but here are three especially important ones during this time:

Some hardships are a result of this fallen, upside-down world. When the Antichrist comes and terrible things begin to happen, there's not much we can do except persevere and rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us. Much of the craziness we see in the world today is due to the fact we are nearing the end times.

Some challenges are tests from God. The apostle Peter knew adversity could be a good thing. He wrote that we may have to "suffer various trials, in order that the genuineness of your faith, which is more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tried by fire, may be found to result in praise, glory

and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Some trials, however, are a result of our own bad decisions or our fallen, sinful nature. Going through a horrible divorce may be a trial brought on by a choice to marry the wrong person. Being fired may be a terrible trial, but you may have brought it on yourself by not being a reliable employee. If you’ve let bad habits and addictions control your life, changing your behavior can sure feel like a trial. But these are all hardships of our own making.

When you’re living in the power of the Holy Spirit, you’re not facing life on your own. You’re not limited to what you can accomplish in your own strength. No matter what kind of trial you may be going through—whether it’s a financial, relational or health crisis, or even something else—you can tap into His strength to keep pressing forward until you see victory.

At the same time, many good things come to you when you serve God and live by His Spirit: joy, health, purpose, forgiveness, and miracles, just to name a few. But the Spirit-led life is filled not only with peaks but also valleys, and there are many powerful, Spirit-filled Christians who persevered despite having to endure terrible circumstances.

I personally believe Donald Trump is being led by the Spirit and will survive this as he has nearly everything thrown his way by the woke crowd. Join me in praying for this. {eoa}

I’ve written about this in my new book “Spirit-Led Living in an Upside-Down World” which releases May 16. I go more in depth in the book.

☒ ☒ You can pre-order my new book and also read more from “God and Donald Trump” by visiting .

Stephen E. Strang is the bestselling author of *God and Donald Trump*. The founder and CEO of *Charisma Media*, Strang was voted by *Time magazine* as one of the 25 most influential

evangelicals in America. He has interviewed four U.S. presidents and has been featured on Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, CBN, Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, and in many Christian outlets.

Morning Rundown: Pastors John and Debbie Lindell Stepping Down from James River Church

Here's a quick summary of the top stories on :

Pastors John and Debbie Lindell Stepping Down from James River Church

After more than 30 years as lead pastors of a southwest Missouri megachurch, the Lindell's have begun the final stage in those roles.

The leadership transition for James River Church will take place over a four-year cycle that will see the Lindell's sons and their daughters-in-law become co-lead pastors starting in 2027.

"One of the surprises in our ministry has been blessing and the joy of getting to work with our kids—David, Brandon and Savannah," said Debbie Lindell, in the video. "When we started this journey, we honestly never imagined that it would be possible."

Feucht Prays Spirit Baptism Over Nashville After Covenant School Murders


An afternoon of prayer, worship and healing in Nashville drew tens of thousands of citizens, police, pastors and leaders to

the Tennessee state capitol grounds Saturday, where they lifted the name of Jesus above the heartbreak of six innocent deaths at a Christian elementary school.

About 5,000 people including Nashville-area worship leaders gathered six days after a demonic attack carried out by a murderous former student killed six people—three students and three staff members—at The Covenant School.

Healing and comfort through prayer, worship and community were the hopes for the Nashville Day of Prayer.

King Charles' Coronation Will See Millions Evangelized

 Great Britain is reporting markedly lower numbers in those who actively practice Christianity, and the nation is preparing for what was once considered a holy moment ordained by God.

As faith struggles across England, Evangelist Ray Comfort has asked God to bless his plan to evangelize millions at the coronation of King Charles on May 6.

There are few times in history when such a gathering takes place; it will have been 70 years since Queen Elizabeth's coronation in June of 1953, and it is simply too ripe of a field not to harvest the souls who desperately need Jesus in their life. {eoa}

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The Only Real Weapon Satan

Possesses

Like many people today, I am looking at our world and watching the things taking place with concern. We are surrounded by news of wars, disease and political crises.

Many faith leaders are pointing to these events as the signs that we are closing in on the time the Bible calls the End of Days. While I agree that these are signs of the times we are living in, I believe that the battle we are in as believers isn't a battle against wars, disease or political crisis.

So, while I agree that we need to be aware of and pray about the things listed above, I believe each of those things are the results of the earthly battle that is raging, and not the actual battle.

The battle is closer to home and closer to our hearts. Our battle is not against wars, disease nor politicians. No, our battle is against our enemy known as the Satan, or in English, the adversary. His weapon is not war, disease or politics; it is deception, and it is those deceptions that result in war, disease and political crisis. In John 8:44, Yeshua (Jesus) said the following concerning the Satan: "Whenever he speaks lies, he is just being himself—for he is a liar and the father of lies."

The truth is that the Satan's only real weapon is deception and his goal is to deceive mankind. When mankind accepts his deceptions, the result is war, disease, and political upheaval. However, the Satan's goal is not to cause war, disease, nor political crisis; his stated goal is something he can and will never achieve. His goal is a deception so powerful that he believed his own lie. The Satan's goal is found in Isaiah 14:12-14:

"How you have fallen from heaven, O Brightstar, son of the dawn! How you are cut down to the earth, you who made the

nations prostrate! You said in your heart: 'I will ascend to heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. I will sit upon the mount of meeting, in the uttermost parts of the north. I will ascend above the high places of the clouds—I will make myself like Elion.'"

Notice that the Satan's goal is to make himself like G-D. It is important to note that while the Satan is an angelic being, he is not omniscient (all-knowing), he is not omnipresent (everywhere) nor is he omnipotent (all-powerful). But the Satan's desire to be like G-D is rooted even more deeply than the attributes listed above. His greatest desire is the ability to create. That's correct—because it is through creative power that all of the other attributes above exist.

And it is because the Satan cannot create that he is waging a battle against humanity that is more dangerous than all wars, disease, or political power struggles. You see, G-D gifted mankind with a gift that he never gave to the angels: the gift to participate in creation. Through the gift of pro-creation we join with G-D in His creative process. It is because humans are blessed with this gift that the Satan is waging the greatest spiritual battle that humans face today.

Remember, we don't wrestle against flesh and blood; our battle is against deception. The Bible tells us that the Satan comes to steal, kill and destroy, and we often look at those words through the earthly lens of stealing possessions, killing people and destroying stuff. However, souls are not lost when a believer's possessions are stolen, when people are killed or when stuff is destroyed.

I believe these words should be applied to the Satan stealing, killing and destroying humanity's ability to procreate, to be what he desires to be, but can never be, and that is to be like G-D. In other words, to be able to participate in the creation process.

This is the reason that the Satan is attempting to deceive so many into believing that they were creative mistakes, that they were born the wrong gender or that they are attracted to the same sex. A belief in any or a combination of these lies will result in the Satan's ability to steal G-D's gift of creation from those who are deceived. If enough people are deceived, the result would be the killing off or the end of humanity, which would result in the destruction of G-D's plan and the redemptive work of Yeshua.

Three things to remember: first, deception, while feeling real, is not truth, and truth shared in love can and will prevail. Second, those who were deceived can be fully restored through repentance. Third, the end of the story is already written by G-D and the Satan's plan fails.

According to 1 John 3:2, the children of G-D will, through love and truth, achieve the goal that the Satan wanted to achieve through lies and deception:

"Loved ones, now we are God's children; and it has not yet been revealed what we will be. But we do know that when it's revealed, we shall be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is."

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Eric Tokajer is the author of "Overcoming Fearlessness", "What If Everything You Were Taught About the Ten Commandments Was Wrong?," "With Me in Paradise," "Transient Singularity," "OY! How Did I Get Here?: Thirty-One Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me Before Entering Ministry," "#ManWisdom: With Eric Tokajer," "Jesus Is to Christianity as Pasta Is to Italians" and "Galatians in Context."

A Call to Prayer Over the Battle for Israel's Future

As Israel is about to celebrate its 75th anniversary in just a few weeks, the Jewish State finds itself in possibly the greatest internal crisis since the establishment of Israel in 1948.

The heated national debate over judicial reforms has drawn masses of demonstrators into the streets every week since early January. While the new government hoped early on that the protests would fade out over time, the opposite has taken place. The protests have grown not only in number but also intensity.

Major highways in and between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem have been blocked multiple times, causing havoc to many commuters. In a more serious development, hundreds of Israeli reserve soldiers, particularly in such elite units as Israeli air force pilots and intelligence officers, have refused in increasing numbers to show up at their bases for their annual "miluim" (reserve duty) that every soldier in Israel is asked to fulfil until age of 40. Hi-tech leaders here in the renowned 'Start Up Nation' have divested hundreds of millions of dollars out of their Israeli accounts to foreign banks. According to some bankers, up to \$4 billion in total was removed from the country so far, partly in protest and partly in fear of Israel's economic future.

This week, the national unrest reached a dangerous peak as the Histadrut, Israel's national workers union, called for crippling nationwide strikes to stop the judicial reforms. Most notably, Ben Gurion Airport—Israel's main international air hub—temporarily stopped all flights abroad. In addition, Israel's diplomatic corps around the world halted their work. Talk of a civil war was heard with frightening frequency.

Without a doubt, this has been one of the most critical moments in Israel's modern history.

So, what is at stake that would cause such a large portion of this nation to sacrifice their time and energy to stop what they see as a coup. Emotions indeed are high! Some observers of this turmoil, including many pro-Israel Christians, reduce the anti-reform protests to a mere showdown between liberal, secular Tel Aviv and religious Jerusalem or between leftists and conservatives.

Others oversimplify matters by pointing to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the problem. For certain, all these issues are relevant to the debate, but the current crisis goes much deeper.

Interestingly enough, the vast majority of Israelis would generally welcome a set of measured, common sense judicial reforms. President Isaac Herzog, the former chairman of the left-leaning Labor party, supports judicial reforms, as does Yair Lapid, chairman of Yesh Atid, the main opposition party who started the protests in January. Even the previous Bennett-Lapid government was working on some very similar judicial reforms and could have enacted them if they had maintained their Knesset majority. So why then the protests?

Aside from the usual party politics and the anti-Bibi sentiments, there are two main reasons why an increasing number of Israelis from all walks of life, both secular and religious, are showing up at protests and calling for reforms based on a broader consensus. Even within Netanyahu's own Likud party, more and more voices are being heard calling for a compromise.

The issue at stake is how much power should the Supreme Court have and how should the Court's justices be appointed. And here nearly everyone agrees: Israel's unelected judges have too much power over laws, even Basic Laws, passed by the

democratically elected Knesset. They get too deeply involved in political matters and they are appointed by a majority of fellow judges with only limited say for the Knesset.

All this should now change. ...

So, how shall we pray for Israel in these challenging days?

Pray for the political and religious leaders of Israel to have wisdom and grace to restore the unity of the nation. This is essential as Jesus himself said a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand (Mark 3:24). Jewish tradition says that it was "sinat achim"—the hatred between brothers—which led to the Roman exile. Please pray according to Psalm 133:1, which says: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"

I am intrigued that Abraham was 75 years old when he, as the father of faith, entered the Land of Promise (Genesis 12). Let us pray that on Israel's 75th birthday, they will enter into their spiritual inheritance as a nation. Pray that out of this chaos, Israel will emerge as a light to the nations. Let us pray that this difficult time will cause a time of Israel seeking God and God answering by pouring out the Spirit of grace and supplication upon Israel (Zech. 12:10).

☒ Pray for Prime Minister Netanyahu, that God will give him wisdom to rule this nation in righteousness and justice.

"Give the king Your judgments, O God, and Your righteousness to the king's Son. He will judge Your people with righteousness, and Your poor with justice." (Ps. 72:1-2). "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes." (Prov. 21:1)

Pray for Israel's security, as some of her adversaries already sense the vulnerability of the Jewish state amid this internal turmoil. "Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." (Ps. 121:4)

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Dr. Juergen Buehler *is the President of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem.*

Trump Heads to New York for ‘Unprecedented’ Arraignment

Former President Donald Trump is flying to New York Monday in preparation for his arraignment at a Manhattan courthouse Tuesday.

The former president is facing more than 30 charges related to an alleged hush money payment before the 2016 election.

The arraignment is scheduled for 2:15 Tuesday afternoon at the district court.

“You know, this is unprecedented. I don’t know. I’ve done a million arraignments in that courthouse with celebrities and whatnot, but this a whole different thing,” Tacopina explained. “We have Secret Service involved. I understand they’re closing the courthouse for the afternoon. I just don’t know what to expect. Hopefully, what I hope is that we get in and out of there as quickly as possible.

“That at the end of the day, it’s a typical arraignment where we stand before the judge. We say ‘not guilty.’ We set schedules to file motions and whatnot or discovery and we move forward and get out of there,” he added.

President Trump is expected to fly back to Florida, where he'll make a public address from his Mar-a-Lago home Tuesday night.

- ✘ Mark Caleb Smith, Ph.D. is the director of the Center for Political Studies at Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio.

Smith answered a question on a lot of voters' minds, would a conviction prevent Trump from running for president in 2024?

"No, it would not," Smith said.

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{eoa}*

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As Christian Pilgrims Visit Israel for Holy Week, Local Christians Complain of Increasing Violence

While thousands of international Christian pilgrims have arrived in Israel—especially Jerusalem—for Holy Week, Old City Christians have spoken of an increase in harassment and vandalism in the months since the coalition's assumption of power in November.

The Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, told reporters last week that there has been a disruption in the “balance” between the religious communities in Jerusalem.

“What we are seeing is that, what we call the status quo, the balance between the different communities—Jews, Muslims, Christians—is not respected anymore,” he said. “That aspect is problematic for me, that they consider Christians as guests. We are not guests. We are part of the identity of the city.”

The pressure felt by the local Christian population has not affected Christian pilgrimage and tourism to Israel. Thousands of Christian pilgrims attended Palm Sunday processions in Jerusalem’s Old City, launching the Holy Week celebrations.

This year, the Holy Week for Catholics and Protestants began on April 2 and will end with Resurrection Sunday, on April 9. For Orthodox and Eastern denominations, Holy Week starts one week later.

Data from the Franciscan Pilgrims’ Office indicate that at least 261,353 pilgrims are expected to travel to Jerusalem this year, with the number of visits around Holy Week reaching even higher numbers than before the COVID pandemic.

Miral Sedrak, a 22-year-old university student and Christian from Jerusalem, said she is encouraged to see the Christian pilgrims.

“When pilgrims come to visit, it feels like the church has a soul. As Christians, our numbers are small, so when we see pilgrims, we feel part of something bigger, that we matter,” she said.

Local Christians have complained about an increase in incidents of persecution and vandalism since the start of the year. In January, two Jewish teens were arrested after vandalizing graves in the Mount Zion Protestant cemetery.

While incidents of harassment have been reported in the past, locals say there has been a noticeable increase since the government coalition came to power.

“Because of the government’s situation, some extremists, they feel like they have a protector,” said Father Alberto Pari, who holds the title General Secretary of the Custody. “Nobody will stop them if they do something that maybe they were thinking to do also before. But then there was more control from the police or they were not supported by some political leaders.”

“Unfortunately, after this government was elected, there are those who feel they can do whatever they want. That they can lift up their fists and nothing will happen to them,” said Amir Dan, spokesperson for the Franciscan Custody in Jerusalem.

In particular, local Christians have pointed to National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, whose divisive rhetoric was seen as problematic even before he joined the coalition.

In 2015, in his profession as a lawyer, Ben Gvir defended a man convicted of arson for setting fire to the Roman Catholic Church of Loaves and Fishes at Tabgha. Ben Gvir also defended the leader of the radical group Lehava, which has protested at both Christian and Messianic Jewish events and has said that Israel should expel all Christians.

Fr. Francesco Patton, the Catholic Church’s Custos of the Holy Land and guardian of the Christian holy places in the Holy Land, said that the lives of local Christians are made “unbearable by radical local groups with extremist ideologies.”

Patton noted that the Israeli government does not condone the incidents of harassment and that they are carried out by radical groups in Jerusalem.

“These radical groups do not represent the government or the people of Israel,” he said. “But as with any extremist faction, a radical minority can too easily burden the lives of many, especially if their activities go unchecked and their crimes are unpunished.”

The Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in Jerusalem, Theophilos III, said that “terrorist attacks, by radical Israeli groups, targeting churches, cemeteries and Christian properties, in addition to physical and verbal abuse against Christian clergy, have become almost a daily occurrence that evidently increases in intensity during Christian holidays.”

- ✘ Theophilos stated that, despite repeated appeals and requests for help from the authorities, there has not been an “appropriate reaction.”

Various churches in Jerusalem appealed to the government on Friday, asking authorities to ensure that Christians would be able to worship freely during the Holy Week celebrations.

Some political commentators suggest that the Israeli government needs to create a ministry to handle Christian affairs in order to improve the situation, as Israeli policy towards different Christian groups is often piecemeal and reactionary. {eoa}

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