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Religion Watch is a monthly newsletter monitoring trends in contemporary religion.

For more than two decades we have covered the whole range of religions around the world, particularly looking at the unofficial dimensions of religious belief and behavior.

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Christian immigrants join the ranks of the culture wars?

A hate-crime trial taking place in California may also be revealing a new and more global front in the culture wars.

The trial concerns the assault and eventual killing of a man by Slavic immigrants that prosecutors charge was motivated by anti-gay sentiment. The *Christian Science Monitor* (January 4) reports that gay leaders in Sacramento say that the incident followed several years of escalating tensions with Slavic immigrants who are largely evangelical Baptists and Pentecostals. Sacramento has a Slavic community of about 100,000, many of whom gained entry to the U.S. as Christian asylum seekers after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Gay activists and hate-crime monitors particularly focus on a group known as Watchmen on the Walls, which is led and promoted by American and Slavic evangelicals, such as Scott Lively and the charismatic Latvian-based New Generations Church. Lively is the author of *The Pink Swastika*, an anti-gay book with a wide circulation among Slavic evangelicals in the U.S. and abroad. The group has led street demonstrations in response to gay parades in Sacramento. A gay rights demonstration in Oregon has likewise met counterprotests from Slavic evangelicals, mainly Russians and Ukrainians, though they are not necessarily connected with Watchmen on the Walls.

Watchmen conferences in the U.S. and abroad often feature anti-gay themes, sometimes using militant language, calling Christians to fight anti-Christian influences in their countries. The New Generations Church, which has branches in the U.S. and other countries, belongs to a network of charismatic megachurches that has emerged in former Soviet nations, particularly Ukraine (the church has close ties with the Kiev-based megachurch, the Embassy of God). These churches are increasingly seeking to influence their respective societies. [For more on Ukrainian evangelicals, see the review of the book *Communities of the Converted* by Catherine Wanner in the November 2007 *RW*.]

Spokespersons say the Watchmen does not teach hatred or approve of violent actions against gay people. Observers say that some in the Slavic community in Sacramento who grew up persecuted in the Soviet Union and see their children's progress thwarted by officials feel that U.S. educators look down on their Christian children, Ben Arnoldy writes. The *Intelligence Report* (Fall), the newsletter of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors far right (and increasingly Christian right) groups, cites an editor of a Russian newspaper in Seattle who claims that

God is bringing Slavic evangelicals to West Coast cities to fight gay influence (*The Intelligence Report*,

<http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?id=809>).

New technology puts religious journalism in the hands of amateurs, volunteers?

The rise of blogs and websites and the decline of print media tends to favor amateurs and volunteers over professionals—a tendency that may eventually have a significant impact on religious institutions and their public image. Writing in the conservative Catholic magazine *New Oxford Review* (December), journalist Tom Bethell mainly focuses on Catholic publications when he notes how the Internet revolution is squeezing out the traditional print media. Among other publications, in the last year, the conservative *Crisis* magazine has ceased publishing its print version, and the influential liberal *National Catholic Reporter* announced that it is reducing its publication schedule to 24 issues a year, 18 fewer than at

present. What all this means in both the secular and Catholic media is that as the “high-maintenance professionals retire, often without being replaced, and as the newsrooms begin to resemble ghost towns, flotillas of amateurs are taking up the slack” in the form of “hundreds of bloggers” and websites.

Already, Bethell notes, magazines are letting online amateurs take over certain areas of their work. For instance, once influential magazines such as the *Latin Mass* have taken a back seat to bloggers and websites in driving up interest in the Tridentine (or Latin) Mass (and listing available Masses) now that the pope has allowed its more frequent use. Bethell adds that in Catholic

press, the “professional/amateur divide roughly corresponds to the liberal/conservative divide. For reasons that are hard to fathom, conservatives are temperamentally uncomfortable with the idea of reporting.” This could be seen in the liberal *National Catholic Reporter* employing paid staff and correspondents while the conservative *Wanderer* relies on unpaid volunteers as correspondents. But ironically, the *Wanderer* may be the model of the future, “in which unpaid volunteers who love their subject will find themselves better placed to tell us what is happening than once well-paid professionals who are rapidly becoming unaffordable” (*New Oxford Review*, 1069 Kains Ave., Berkeley, CA 94706).

Growing number of women priests serving Catholics on the margins

Frustrated with the refusal of the Vatican to discuss the ordination of women, a growing number of women are taking matters into their own hands and ordaining

themselves as priests, and in the process are drawing disaffected and marginal Catholics to their ministries. The *National Catholic Reporter* (December 7) notes that

the organization sponsoring such ordinations, Roman Catholic Womenpriests, “has grown exponentially since it began just five years ago with the ordination of

the Danube 7 (seven women ordained on a boat in the Danube River).” With its leading edge in North America, there are now about 50 priests, including six men, who have been ordained through the organization, with another 100 or so in training for ordination. In many cases, the women who have come forward to be ordained were active in the leadership of mainstream Catholic structures, and their action has brought them swift censure and expulsion from their positions by the hierarchy (although the Vatican has not responded to this issue).

These women, who are mostly in their 60s, were encouraged to take such actions by developments such as the decision by the

Greek Orthodox Church to ordain women as deacons, and the decision of a few bishops (active and inactive) to support the movement. In fact, the leader of Roman Catholic Womenpriests, Patricia Fresen, a South African nun and theologian, claims to have been recently consecrated as a bishop by three active Catholic bishops in Europe; as might be expected, their identities are a closely guarded secret. Fresen said that support of the women priests from Catholic clergy and laity is more likely to come from Europe than the U.S. Because many of these ordinations have taken place on boats—partly to put participants outside of the jurisdictions of local bishops—there have not been many conflicts.

But that is changing as the ordinations move to land and churches (and synagogues) of other denominations. In some cases, the congregations hosting the ordinations were pressured by their denomination not to hold the events because of concerns about ecumenical relations with the Catholic Church. Patricia Schaeffer reports that so far the women priests are attracting (usually to home-based services) those who also feel excluded from or disenchanted with the church—fellow feminists, gays and lesbians, pro-choice people, and divorced and remarried Catholics (*National Catholic Reporter*, 115 Armour Blvd., Kansas City, MO 64111).

Messianist split among Chabad-Lubavich Jews developing?

A long-expected split within the ultra-orthodox Chabad-Lubavich Jewish movement over messianic beliefs may be in the wings, and politics as much as religion may be the most immediate cause of such a schism, reports *Forward.com* (January 9). A long-standing conflict in the Chabad-Lubavich ranks over the status of its leader, Menahem Schneerson, with a group holding

that he is the messiah, came to the surface recently when one of the leaders of the dissidents declared that, were Israel properly run, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert would be “hanged from the gallows.” Rabbi Shalom Dov Wolpe, the most popular leader of the messianic strand of the movement, made this statement, along with other critical remarks, when speaking about negotiations with

the Palestinians at a right-wing gathering. The Chabad is said to occupy a privileged place among Israel’s ultra-Orthodox groups, being the only major Hasidic group whose members serve in the army. Its rabbis are also considered informal chaplains. Wolpe’s comments have raised the ire of Chabad leaders and spokesmen, with one claiming that his remarks have done such

damage to the sect's reputation "that it could be necessary to publicly declare that the messianists cannot act or speak on its behalf," reports Nathan Jeffay.

Immediately after Schneerson's death in 1994, a rabbinical court ruled that the movement should not split in two, nor should the two factions undermine each

other. In the wake of Wolpe's remarks, an Israeli politician has urged all Chabad activists to be banned from Israeli army bases. Such threats to Chabad activity could force the group to declare the messianists separate from the movement. The organization might be willing to expel the messianists if it means retaining its influence in Israel. And if the

Israeli heads of the international movement made such a statement, the U.S. Chabad would likely fall into line. The messianists have tended to promote hard-line and right-wing positions in Israel, holding that such views are integral to their belief that the rebbe is the messiah

(<http://www.forward.com/articles/124444>).

Exorcism embraced by secular therapists

A new breed of therapist is seeking to heal "the mentally ill not with talk and drug therapy but by releasing troublesome or malevolent spirits who have attached themselves to their victims," writes California State University professor Stanford Betty in the *National Catholic Reporter* (December 28). These therapists are not religious healers, but secular and often licensed psychologists and psychiatrists, "who have discovered, often by accident, that this new therapy works better than what they learned in medical or graduate school." What is called "spirit release" therapy teaches that drugs only mask symptoms and talk therapy does not solve deeply rooted problems. The bible of the movement, William Baldwin's 1995 book, *Spirit Release Therapy: A Tech-*

nique Manual, deals with spirits in a more conciliatory manner than religious exorcists, seeking to heal both these entities and the victims to whom they are attached, writes Betty.

Such spirits may come in the form of "earthbound" entities, which are departed ones still attached to people or vices they have left behind or "dark force entities" that have evil intent towards their victims. But both kinds of entities can be coaxed out of their victims and then "released into the light." Betty writes that the proponents of spirit release therapy believe that everyone at one time or another has been inflicted with spirits. This claim is made on the basis of hypnosis sessions with their patients. The therapists often say

that they discovered these entities by accident during the normal course of therapy, and some, such as West Virginia psychiatrist Shakuntala Modi, are not even sure that they actually exist. Yet all the therapists agree that treating spirits *as if* they were real is "often the key to a startlingly quick recovery," writes Betty. Spirit release therapy is said to be practiced by the credentialed and non-credentialed therapists and healers. William Woolger, a well-known transpersonal psychologist, sees the movement as the "next and essential stage in the development of psychology, a kind or return to the source."

CURRENT RESEARCH

► **Recent immigrants are less likely to practice their faith than in their home countries, especially in the period when they first come to the U.S., according to a new study.** In a preliminary study of the religious involvement of new immigrants, Phillip Connor of Princeton University found a decline in active religious participation among respondents from 64 percent during the pre-migration period to 42 percent in the post-migration period. There has been considerable variation and debate regarding the issue of the impact of immigration on religious belief and practice. Connor, who presented his findings at the November meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Tampa, based his findings on the newly released National Immigrant Survey (NIS), which is among the few studies to track the immigrants from pre- to post-immigration time periods. Increasing levels of religious pluralism in the two periods were associated with lower levels of religious participation.

Although there was a general decline among immigrants in reli-

gious observance, there was some variation. Higher ages among Catholics predicted more probability of religious involvement, while the reverse was true for Eastern Orthodox and other religions. Among Muslims, being male predicts a higher probability of religious participation, a finding supported in past studies. Connor points out that the NIS study only studied the period immediately after immigration, and that further study is needed to ascertain if these changes persist as new immigrants become more settled.

► **A study of Seventh Day Adventist churches finds community involvement and service more than intentional evangelism projects are the main factors in church growth.** The current issue of the Adventist magazine *Spectrum* (Fall) reports on research by church researcher Monte Sahlin, who surveyed 647 Adventist churches in the northeastern U.S. He found that no correlation existed between the number of Bible seminars (evangelism meetings conducted by local churches) and “soul-winning.” Such programs are run as regularly by churches that do not grow as by churches that do. In contrast, Sahlin’s research found that the strongest correlation with church growth was engaging with the community in active service.

But he concludes that “very few Adventist churches are involved in the types of programs that have the strongest correlation with church growth.”

The correlation between church growth and community involvement was also found in sociologist Peter Ballis’ study of Adventists in New Zealand. The early dramatic growth of Seventh Day Adventism occurred as Adventists “found themselves joining committees, speaking before audiences that under different circumstances would have been inaccessible to them, and, at times, cooperating with clergy of other denominations. All this has the effect of creating a favorable image of the church Such interaction with the public served to acquaint Adventists with large numbers of their community” (*Spectrum*, P.O. Box 619047, Roseville, CA 95661-9047).

► **Nearly two-thirds of Americans believe that the founding fathers meant the U.S. to be a Christian nation, according to a survey conducted by the First Amendment Center.** Of that total agreeing that the founders meant to establish a Christian nation, 46 percent strongly agreed and 19 percent mildly agreed. The *Christian Century* (December 11) reports that the survey

also found that more than half of the respondents (38 percent strongly agreeing, with 17 percent mildly agreeing) believe that the U.S. Constitution established a Christian nation. Twenty-eight percent also believe that the provision for freedom of worship never meant to give such liberty to groups that the majority of Americans consider to be on the religious fringe.

► **Exposure to theistic affirmations emphasizing God's love and self-acceptance tended to improve women's body image, according to a recent study in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (December).**

Bucknell University researchers conducted an experiment where one group of college women were given theistic, Christian-based affirmations to read, while another group read general spiritual affirmations. Members of a third control group were given random statements to read about campus issues. After they read such statements, the women viewed photos of "thin ideal" fashion models in order to generate concerns about body image. Finally, the women underwent a test on their images of and esteem for their bodies. Even for young women who were not religious, the reading of

religious affirmations with a theistic-Christian as well as a generic spiritual tone subsequently felt better about their bodies than did the women in the control group.

The study also showed that women reading the theistic-Christian affirmations had a more positive subsequent body image than did those reading the spiritual statements. It could be that the more explicit statements rich in imagery about the body being holy and sacred may have been important in influencing "body esteem." The researchers conclude that these "positive affirmations about one's looks seem to have offered a constructive counterpoint—even for our young women who were not highly religious—to the ubiquitous messages and images women receive about their appearance" (*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Commerce Place, 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148).

► **As college students move toward graduation, there is a rising interest in integrating spirituality into their lives, even though their attendance at religious services does not show any related increase, according to a recent study.** The study, conducted by UCLA's Higher

Education Research Institute, followed a group of 14,000 students from their freshmen year in 2004 to the spring of 2007, when they were juniors. The survey found that more than 50 percent considered "integrating spirituality into my life" essential in 2007, an increase of more than 10 percentage points from 2004. But while their spiritual interests increased, their worship attendance did not. Slightly more than half the students said they attended services in college at about the same rate at which they attended them in high school. Almost 40 percent said they worshipped less frequently. Only seven percent said they worshipped more, reports the *National Catholic Reporter* (December 28).

► **A survey widely reported to reveal the problems of the pioneer megachurch Willow Creek also shows the shortcomings of other churches, reports *Charisma* magazine (January).** The study, known as Reveal, was first conducted among the Willow Creek Church in 2003, and gained wide publicity when it was found that nearly one of every four members of the church was "stalled in their spiritual growth or dissatisfied with the church—and many of them were considering leaving." The survey

was subsequently expanded to 30 other congregations outside of the “seeker” or megachurch movement, and is currently including an additional 500 congregations. The findings from these larger samples still largely show that the church plays a primary role in the early stages of an individual’s spiritual life. But as a person develops “spiritually, it shifts to a secondary role ... disappointment with the church was significantly higher among ‘spiritually stalled’ and mature believers” (*Charisma*, 600 Rhienehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746).

► **Although charismatics and Pentecostals make up only slightly more than one percent of all 26 million Protestants in Germany, they account for 20 percent of worshippers on an average Sunday.** These figures, reported by the German news service *Idea* (December), were released during a recent gathering of German charismatic leaders. The mainline Protestant churches have 25 million members on their rolls, but only about four percent worship on a regular Sunday. Of the 26.6 million Catholics in Germany, about 14 percent attend Mass (*Idea*, P.O. Box 1820, D-35528 Wetzlar, Germany).

Danish cartoons marked the start of Christian backlash?

The Danish cartoons caricaturing Muhammad that enraged Muslims around the world in 2005 may also have started a Christian backlash in Europe. Historian Philip Jenkins writes in the conservative magazine *Chronicles* (January) that since the cartoon controversy, “the prospects for Christianity in Europe seem better than they have for decades.” It wasn’t so much that Muslims challenged Christians as that the debate over Islamic militancy, religious tolerance and multiculturalism brought up old questions of religious identity and common European values. Just as the secularists went on the defensive, the “more directly Christian ideas and institutions are challenged, the more need there is to justify and defend these, to think more, say, about why Catholic schools maintain crucifixes on their walls.” Even in Denmark, where few care about the People’s Church, “most deeply resented the challenge to its role in national life. And some asked why Danish high schools required pupils to read the Koran but not the Bible.”

The right in Britain may also have been invigorated by the con-

troversy. In recent years, the “growing independence of the different components of the United Kingdom has encouraged a new sense of English identity, using as its flag not only the old Union Jack, but the Red Cross of Saint George, and the related celebration of St. George Day. Although few English people currently use the new cult as an explicit token of religious confrontation, extremists exploit its Crusader associations,” Jenkins writes (St. George allegedly appeared to Christian forces during the Crusaders’ siege of Antioch in 1098). Even the establishment Church of England has become more forthright about reminding Europeans about their Christian roots. In 2006, a report by the church charged that multiculturalism tended toward “privileging Islam,” and suggested that “there is an agenda behind a claim that a five percent adherence to ‘other faiths’ makes for a multi-faith society” (*Chronicles*, 928 N. Main St., Rockford, IL 61103).

After peace comes secularism in Northern Ireland?

In the wake of the peace settlement in Northern Ireland, secularism has advanced among both Protestants and Catholics, according to David Porter, director

of the Center for Contemporary Christianity in Belfast. Although Northern Ireland has always been at the top of the charts on belief and church attendance (both among Protestants and Catholics) and the churches were instrumental in peace talks, “every church has shown a rapid decline,” said Porter during a talk at Columbia University in New York in mid-November. He added that the “Presbyterians in east Belfast are collecting around supercongregations, for example. A small number of churches attracting a disproportionate number, who are evangelical. More traditional forms are falling away.”

Porter adds that there is a “religious weariness in Northern Ireland. Everyone is tired. Our energy is spent [by] religion. In the south it is gone. It is a totally secular, globally capitalist society.” Asked what will take the place of religion, he responded, “A hedonistic nightlife. Gangs. Drinking. Money. Materialism.” Yet Porter said that there is evidence that the younger generation in Northern Ireland is more radical and divided than older ones. Today’s students are more Catholic and are more likely to vote for Sinn Fein, often angry at the discrimination and sometimes violence their parents faced. The

number of intermarriages is still “very small,” and there is still de facto Protestant-Catholic segregation, even in schools that are officially integrated, Porter said.

Extremist Muslims step up efforts to influence the west and youth through the Internet

Extremist Muslims are seeking to reach and influence non-Arabic speaking audiences by setting up English-language pages on existing Arab websites, reports *Memri* (December 4), an Israeli news service that monitors and analyzes Middle Eastern media. One of the apparent goals of the Islamist forums and blogs in English is to erode support among the Western public for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The English-language Islamist forums and blogs also frequently quote reports from the Western media that cast doubt on the effectiveness of the war on terrorism and of Western policies in general, such as reports suggesting that the war in Iraq and Afghanistan could jeopardize, rather than promote, the security and prosperity of Western countries.

Occasionally, the English-language forums and blogs post messages addressed particularly to Muslims living in the West en-

couraging them to play an active role in online activity in support of jihad. One example is a message entitled “A Dream and Reflections,” posted October 5, 2007 on the Al-Ekhlaas forum (<http://ekhlaas.org/forum/>) by an individual calling himself Anbar Bikr. The message castigates Muslims in the West for being too passive in their support of jihad. It further states that visiting jihadist websites is not enough, and urges Muslims to establish “an Islamic media [network] that will slap the West in the face,” emphasizing that Western freedom of speech allows them to do so at no risk. The Islamists are not only recruiting Muslims in the West for media jihad; some of the postings in English explicitly call on Muslims in the West to carry out martyrdom operations.

Meanwhile, the *Christian Science Monitor* (December 28) reports that terrorist specialists see jihadist groups increasingly targeting young people, including teenagers, for their cause. Security analysts find that in both Western and Arab countries, younger jihadists are being recruited over the Internet, or inspired to act on their own—apart from a centralized group—through exposure to militant Islamic literature and

videos. Jonathan Evans of MI5, the British security service, recently said that teenagers as young as 15 and 16 have been implicated in “terrorist-related” activities as a result of a deliberate strategy by radical Islamic groups. Shortly before Benazir Bhutto was killed in late December, a 15-year-old boy was arrested for allegedly trying to blow himself up at a rally for the ex-prime minister. In November, the first minor to be potentially tried for war crimes was detained for killing a U.S. soldier in Afghanistan and conspiring with Al Qaeda. But analysts say that these youthful operatives are making the jihadist terror network more diverse and unpredictable. Some observers, such as Gabriel Weimann, who wrote *Terror on the Internet*, says there are more than 5,000 jihadist websites, though others say that “serious” Al Qaeda-inspired sites

number in the hundreds (<http://www.memri.com>).

Kazakhstan targets unofficial Christianity

Although granted most favored nation status by the U.S. government, Kazakhstan, under the authoritarian president Nursultan Nazarbayev, is cracking down on Christians, particularly Protestant groups that have been established in recent years. *Chronicles* magazine (December) reports that as the U.S. seeks to establish a strategic position in the Central Asian country because of its oil resources, the Nazarbayev regime has cracked down on non-Orthodox Christians, not only by forcing them to register with the government, but also by detaining church members, confiscating church property and other forms of official harassment.

The government has recently targeted Grace Church ministry, which has 13,000 members in 250 congregations, according to writer Wayne Allensworth. Government authorities leaked that police found “psychotropic” drugs during a search of Grace Church, “a move that smacks of Soviet-era KGB smear tactics,” Allensworth adds. The regime expects religious affiliation to follow nationality, with Russians being Orthodox, and Kazachs and other Central Asian nationalities part of the officially controlled Muslim body. The state, however, is wary of “Islam breaking free of official channels and becoming a threat to the Nazarbayev regime. So the crackdown on evangelical Christians—with particular emphasis on the harassment of converts from segments of the population that are traditionally Muslim—could also be part of an effort to appease Muslims.”

FINDINGS/FOOTNOTES

■ The password for access to the **RW** archives, at: <http://www.religionwatch.com> remains: Triumph. Readers may notice changes to the website by mid-February as **RW**

moves to its new publishing home of Religioscope Institute, mainly in the form of better design and more user-friendly features.

■ Several evangelical leaders made news last summer when an open letter was issued calling for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most of the winter is-

sue of the **Review of Faith & International Affairs** is devoted to the statement and the controversy and issues surrounding it. Along with reprinting the statement, the issue includes articles from the open letter’s supporters and dissenters, including Palestinian Christian and Israeli Jewish leaders. Also noteworthy is evangelical leader Richard

Mouw's account of the theological context of the evangelical debate on the Israeli and Palestinian issue and on prospects for a new dialogue on these subjects, particularly the strong role of premillennialism in the traditional evangelical support of Israel. Mouw cites the "emergent" movement among evangelicals and Jews (as represented by the group Synagogue 3000) as bringing about a new stage of dialogue both on Israel and on Jewish-Christian relations in general, as they focus on common elements of spirituality and worship, as well as social justice. For more information on this issue, write: *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, P.O. Box 14477, Washington, D.C., 20044.

■ "Aquatic Nature Religions" might seem to occupy an esoteric corner of the religious world, but the December issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* devotes a special section to the subject. Several articles examine the quasi-religious and religious aspects of such activities as surfing, fly fishing and whitewater kayaking. Depending on one's definition of religion, almost anything can be categorized as religious, but the articles make the case that participants themselves claim that such activity is spiritual in nature. In an introductory article, Bron Taylor notes that this

kind of spirituality is a form of nature religion because it is based on the perceptions that nature is sacred and that there is a need to nurture a sense of connection with and belonging to the earth.

Whitewater kayakers describe their river experiences in terms of non-Western religious, rendering the material world as sacred. Flyfishing likewise encourages a sense of the interconnectedness of nature and humans, as well as an exchange relationship, where anglers seek to give back to nature—by conservation efforts—what they feel they are given through fishing. But it is in surfing where the spiritual element is the strongest, complete with its own mythology (its Edenic beginnings in Polynesia) and subculture, known as "soul surfing." Surfing spirituality can draw on pagan, Eastern or "Abrahamic" sources as well as its forming its own "nature religion" that has a strong environmentalist component. For more information on these articles, write: *Journal of the Academy of Religion*, American Academy of Religion, 825 Houston Mill Road, Suite 300 Atlanta, GA.

■ *The Message*, a publication of the Islamic Circle of North America, devotes its current issue (September/October) to the subject of Islamic finance. The issue portrays the "in-

terest-free economy" as mandated by Islam as being a "new silk road" linking Asia, the Middle East and the West. The prohibition against interest found in the Koran has largely been viewed as detrimental to Islamic financial growth and stability, but this issue of the magazine claims interest-free finance is showing dramatic growth (the total of "Sharia-compliant assets" of the top 500 Islamic financial institutions grew 29.7 percent in 2006.) Several articles acknowledge that the risk entailed in interest-free investing and banking and lack of standardization prevents large-scale adoption of such practices. But more noteworthy is the way Islamic finance is portrayed throughout this issue of *The Message* as serving social justice and sustainable economic growth (in comparison to interest-based systems) rather than merely fulfilling religious obligations. For more information on this issue, write: *The Message International*, 166-26 89th Ave., Jamaica, NY 11432.

■ The new book, *A Sociology of Spirituality* (Ashgate, \$99.95) should help refute the notion that spirituality is an amorphous and free-floating concept without many social underpinnings and expressions. Editor Kieran Flanagan begins the book by claiming that because sociology was born in the throes of modernity, it

“was infused with capacities to kill the spirit” as it documented the “despiritualization” of society. At the same time, those who engaged in spiritual endeavors failed to articulate their experiences in a way that could be understood. But with sociology’s new interest in collective memory and post-modernity, as well as the public’s turn to outright spiritual concerns, the need for a sociology of spirituality seems obvious. Flanagan and the contributors don’t disappoint in this expensive book, as they examine topics ranging from the growth of Christian spiritual centers in secular Holland to spirituality and the state, the new and increasingly popular concept of “spiritual capital,” and the emergence of spirituality in a wide range of academic disciplines (such as medicine, education and business).

Particularly interesting is the debate carried out through several chapters about whether the holistic and New Age movements are a sign of secularization or the “spiritualization” of religion. Steve Bruce and David Voas argue that the percentage of people participating in alternative forms of spirituality is not great and that the phenomenon is so diffuse and lacking in even basic spiritual commitment that it is actually a sign of “the sacred ... giving way to the secular.” Paul Heelas, who conducted a major

study of the holistic movement in Britain, responds that all of these different spiritualities and techniques are based on a common quest for “subjective well-being” that is fueled by dynamics within modernity that are unlikely to disappear soon.

In a chapter on post-boomers, Donald Miller and Richard Flory make the case that this generation espouses an “expressive communalism,” in which (in contrast to the “expressive individualism” of their parents’ generation) individuals find spiritual fulfillment through physical (or sense-based) experiences primarily in the context of the religious community. This can take the shape of “reclaimers”—those rediscovering liturgy and tradition, such as in Eastern Orthodoxy—or “innovators,” who include “emerging” congregations that stress visual representation of the sacred, intimacy and experiential spirituality.

■ **Branding Faith** (Routledge, \$34.95), by Mara Einstein, ambitiously turns from popular market theories to less cited marketing theories in explaining American religious growth and pluralism. Einstein, a former producer turned communications professor, argues that generational change and other factors cause a new “demand” for a perso-

nal faith and spirituality that is vastly expanded by the “supply” of new media and technologies catering to these needs. She provides an interesting overview of the growth of religious marketing and media that closely mirrors its secular counterparts. More controversially, Einstein asserts that the line between marketing and religion has become increasingly blurred. Many religious groups have become “brand communities,” where a particular product is marketed through symbols that evoke emotions, meanings and relationships beyond its physical attributes.

Faith brands—anything from the Kabbalah to the ministry of Joel Osteen, or Oprah Winfrey—are repackaged to appeal to consumers’ religious tastes. With regard to the Kabbalah, as propogated by the Kabbalah Center, one finds actual products (drinks and fashion accessories), and here marketing seems to have overtaken religion. In the branding process, these products can move from secular to religious—in the case of Oprah Winfrey—or from religious to secular, as with Joel Osteen. Einstein provides case studies of these three “products,” along with the Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven Life, and the Alpha Course. In the case of Oprah, her reliance on a team of therapists and “life coaches”

CONTACT

EDITORIAL OFFICE:
Religion Watch,
P.O. Box 652,
North Bellmore,
NY 11710

PHONE:
(516) 781 0835

E-MAIL:
relwatch1@msn.com

WEBSITE:
www.religionwatch.com

EDITOR:
Richard P. Cimino

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR:
Jean-François Mayer

(and her influential book recommendations) has further blurred the line between therapy and spirituality. Einstein sees the market-driven New Age movement as an example of the spirit being removed from spirituality and tends to see marketing—whatever its benefits—as having a similar effect on other religious groups.

■ Robert Montgomery's *The Spread of Religions* (Long Dash Publishing, \$20) provides a novel treatment of an emerging field, which the author calls the “sociology of missions.” Montgomery writes that academic interest in missions and the general question of why and how certain religions spread beyond their birthplaces has been thin mainly because intellectuals tend to reject proselytizing and uphold respect for “native” religions. But the author makes the case that this field is promising, especially at a time when almost all religions are moving beyond their original boundaries and are adopted by individual choice. Montgo-

mery focuses on the beliefs, structures, and historical and social contexts of the “missionary religions” of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism.

He theorizes that it is those religions teaching a transcendent source of power and moral guidance that have voluntary structures that enact “interactive rituals” and organize “emotional energy” for their members. On a social level, the “receiving” society of new religions should not have strong official religions nor manage religion in a coercive way. From these and other theoretical considerations, Montgomery forecasts that religions will likely succeed to the extent that they offer a sense of social belonging and “intrinsic rewards” based on members’ individualism. He predicts that there will be a decrease of conflict as religious political power and the cultural identities it represents will be increasingly trumped by a stress on the right of individuals to make their own religious choices.

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