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Religion Watch is a
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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New labor movement finds Jewish inspiration, leadership

American Jews are returning to the labor movement, although this time more as professional leaders rather than rank-and-file members and activists, reports *Forward.com* (April 23). The recent growth of the labor movement due to the economic downturn and the raised expectation of new economic models under the presidency of Barack Obama also reveals a new generation of Jewish labor leaders who are different from the Jewish labor movement of the 1930s. Before World War II, the Jewish labor movement, as represented in such unions as the Ladies Garment Workers Union, fueled wide social changes in American society, such as welfare and labor protection laws. Today, there are few Jewish workers in the unions, but without much concerted effort, the new college-educated leadership of unions has tended to have a high Jewish representation. Often, these young

leaders were inspired by their grandparents' involvement in labor. The reality of Jewish leaders of largely non-Jewish unions has fueled conspiratorial views of Jewish influence in American society in some cases.

Today, there is not a direct connection between the Jewish community and the labor movement, but as the leaders have become aware of one another's Jewish backgrounds, there is a new interest in exploring their roots. Stuart Applebaum of the Jewish Labor Committee says he sees a greater willingness among labor leaders to identify with the Jewish community. For instance, a Yom Kippur Break Fast event held by an AFL-CIO official is part of a conscious effort to try to make the link between work in the labor movement and being Jewish, suggesting that it is no accident that these leaders chose this line of work and that it is tied to Jewish roots and values.

2012 and the revitalization of the New Age?

The growth of expectations about end-times events alleged to take shape in 2012 are revitalizing New Age ideals and hopes, according to an analysis by German theologian Matthias Pöhlmann, published in the German journal *EZW-Materialdienst* (May). Based on the Mayan calendar, various authors and groups have been claiming for several years now that dramatic events will take place on December 21–22, 2012. There is no consensus on the nature of the event, which is said to be the end of a

cycle: depending on different scenarios, it ranges from the end of the world to a "solar tsunami" breaking down all electronic communications, or the beginning of a new global era. A large number of "channels" and authors have been publishing their views on the coming events. Some of them provide survivalist advice to their readers. The Internet helps spread such ideas in an unprecedented way, eventually impacting popular culture. The movie *2012*, which will be launched in

November 2009, should contribute to popularize them even further.

As was already the case with New Age currents, adherents of which hope that the 2012 prophecies will provide a new impetus, not all

forms of expectations concerning the year 2012 are catastrophic. Several people connect it with a major evolutionary step for humankind and the start of a new cosmic cycle after a transitional period. There is little doubt, writes Pöhlmann, that as soon as year

2012 has passed, new dates will be suggested by authors on the esoteric circuit.

(*EZW-Materialdienst*, Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen, Auguststrasse 80, 10117 Berlin, Germany)

Campaign linking terrorists with “cultists” falters

In the wake of 9/11, anti-cult groups attempted to tie terrorist groups with “mind-controlling cults,” but the effort has been less than successful, according to an article in the journal *Nova Religio* (May). Stuart Wright writes that anti-cult organizations and spokespeople drew clear connections between terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and religious and political “cults,” especially over their allegedly common use of mind control in pushing members toward violent actions. Very early after the attacks of 9/11, anti-cult groups “launched a media campaign” putting the events in an anti-cultic framework. Groups such as Al Qaeda were referred to as “terrorist cult organizations,” and such home-grown terrorists as Richard Reid (the shoe bomber); Jose Padilla, an Al Qaeda operative; and John Walker Lindh, the Californian who joined the Taliban and Al Qaeda, were

singled out as victims of mind control. The anti-cult movement's narrative of unsuspecting converts and Muslims being brainwashed in terrorist training camps gained a wide hearing in the media, as well as from the parents of such suspects, who had reported that their sons had experienced sudden personality change.

Wright argues that in the long run, the anti-cult effort to link terrorism with cultic activity failed to gain much support among terrorist experts. One reason is that the psychological factors in terrorism often cited by anti-cultists have largely been discounted by specialists, who more often focus on cultural, political and economic influences. A review of the literature by the Research Division of the Library of Congress concluded that there was “no single terrorist personality.” Another reason is that scholars believe that anti-cult

activists may have overstated the similarities between new religious movements and terrorist groups. Aside from apocalyptic new religious movements, the violence of most “cults” is “more contextual and interactionist” than that found in terrorist cells. Terrorist groups are trained in and based on warfare, which is far different from the reality of most new religious movements. Even suicide bombing—thought to be the prime case of indoctrination and mind control—is being found to be motivated as much, if not more, by nationalism as by religion. Wright concludes that while the cult-terrorist link has not found much empirical support, the anti-cultists' approach could still be exploited by military leaders for propaganda purposes (see the March/April issue's cover story for more on this).

(*Nova Religio*, University of California Press, 200 Center St., Suite 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223)

Reiki therapy draws Catholic women's orders—and raises U.S. bishops' ire

Reiki therapy, a Japanese spiritual healing system, has found a welcomed place in Catholic religious orders and retreat centers

—enough to compel the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to condemn the practice in a special statement. While Catholic officials

have condemned non-Catholic or unorthodox spiritual practices in the past (such as the Vatican's criticism of New Age and Eastern

forms of meditation), the bishops' more specific target suggests that the use of Reiki is especially widespread among a segment of American Catholics. The *National Catholic Reporter* (April 17) notes that "many women in Catholic religious orders have become Reiki masters or practitioners and regularly teach or practice Reiki therapy at their orders' retreat facilities or spiritual centers around the country." The newspaper's web search reveals "scores of such U.S. centers as

well as several retreat centers run by women religious in Canada offering similar programs.

The bishops' six-page statement criticizes Reiki as a superstition that operates in a "no-man's land between faith and science." Such alternative practices as aromatherapy, tai chi and massages are not criticized, as they are viewed as neutral psychological techniques, but Reiki moves into pantheism and Gnosticism with its assertion of a

universal life force or energy that Reiki masters say they can manipulate for healing purposes, according to Fr Thomas Weinandy, who heads the doctrinal affairs office for the U.S. bishops. Practitioners defend their use of Reiki as a way of spiritual enrichment that takes place in the context of prayer and a belief in Christ as the healer.

(*National Catholic Reporter*, 115 E. Armour Blvd., Kansas City, MO 64111)

Bad economy drives down religious books on the supply side

While the economic downturn may help increase religious involvement (see the article that follows), it is having a strongly negative impact on religious publishing, reports the *Christian Century* (May 5). Even if the demand for religious literature is there, the retailing end of religious publishing has been as adversely affected by the current economic problems as any other business. It is the retail end of religious publishing that is affecting the supply of these books; bookstore closings and reductions in store inventories are forcing publishers to be "nimble in present and future demands," writes Marcia Z. Nelson. Non-denominational Christian publishers, such as Eerdmans, Baker, and InterVarsity Press, have all faced cutbacks in their operations. Denominational publishing has the benefit of offering a diversity of resources outside of bookstore venues (such

as Sunday school literature) and has not faced as many difficulties. But financially strapped bookstores that sell denominational publications, such as Cokebury and seminary outlets, do impact the sales of such literature. Nelson writes that the "downturn in bricks-and-mortar operations" has compelled such major denominational houses as Westminster-John Knox to deliver more content electronically.

The larger religious publishers, such as Harpers One, report that their parent companies' cutbacks have not yet adversely affected their publishing programs, though there is a general decrease in sales of religious books. Academic publishers have the advantage of having their offerings as required reading for college courses, and a major publisher such as Oxford University Press is actually seeing growth in its religious studies

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The "downturn in bricks-and-mortar operations" has compelled major denominational houses to deliver more content electronically.

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area. Nelson concludes that on the "positive side of the ledger, some religion books are still selling. The Bible business remains good," with traditional versions, such as the Scofield Reference Bible (centennial edition), as well as new-fangled ones like the Green Bible, selling well.

(*The Christian Century*, 407 S. Dearborn, Chicago, IL 60605)

CURRENT RESEARCH

▶ **Economic shocks, both negative and positive, have significant effects on religious activity and involvement, according to economist David Beckworth.** Presenting a paper at the conference of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics and Culture (ASREC), which met in Washington, DC, in April, Beckworth looked at quarterly figures of the Seventh Day Adventist Church (the only denomination keeping quarterly data) from 1950 to 2008. He found that negative economic shocks typically led to an increase of religious participation, but a decline in religious giving. Thus, an unexpected increase in unemployment led to significant changes in the growth rate of converts and membership. Conversely, a one percent increase in real disposable personal income per capita led to larger than average growth rates in tithes and offerings. A one percent increase in real stock prices led to a growth of tithing, but a decline in conversions and membership, with the latter dropping more persistently. Beckworth concluded that religious participation and religious giving act as substitutes for each other during economic booms and downturns. He added that economic shocks help explain one-third of the variation or “forecast error” in Adventist religiosity.

(Most of the papers presented at the

ASREC conference can be found on the association’s website, at http://www.religionomics.com/asrec/ASREC09_Papers/)

▶ **Bad news and world crises do not put a damper on evangelical financial speculation and investment and may even encourage it, according to Christopher Crowe of the International Monetary Fund.**

Crowe, who presented a paper at the April ASREC conference, hypothesized that evangelicals would see an upside to economic turmoil, since it would be a sign of Christ’s imminent return, and it would therefore not deflate speculative excess as it would with other people. To test this idea, Crowe looked at the relationship between house price growth in metropolitan areas and the presence of high proportions of evangelicals shortly after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Between the second and fourth quarters of 2001 there was a “statistically significant upward shift in house price growth for areas with a high share of evangelicals, but a marked drop in areas with a low share,” he said. This pattern was not discernible in 2000.

Using the “Rapture Index,” an evangelical Internet resource that monitors world events and rates whether they may be indicators of the end-times, Crowe compared it with housing prices in areas with high and low proportions of evangelicals. He found that house prices fell significantly in response to increases in the Rapture Index in non-evangelical areas, but that the effect shrinks as the share of evangelicals in the area increases. Crowe also finds

from a survey of religious beliefs and personal finances that end-times beliefs are associated with significantly lower asset holdings. This supports his theory that these end-times beliefs provide an “insurance function” for evangelicals, and therefore result in “lower precautionary demand for financial assets to smooth consumption.” Crowe concludes that evangelical believers’ “psychic insurance” could actually generate positive spillovers for non-believers by “smoothing the housing cycle.”

▶ **A comparative study of megachurches with other churches finds that the two types of congregations are not as different as many might think.**

A paper at the April ASREC conference, attended by RW, presented a survey of about 2,500 megachurch attenders and then compared the findings with those from the Presbyterian Congregational Survey. Scott Thumma of Hartford Seminary, who conducted the survey, noted that the average age of the megachurch attender is 40, while the average age of the non-megachurch attender is 50. Fifty-two percent of megachurch attenders are college graduates, versus 41 percent of non-megachurch attenders. But megachurch attenders are about on par with those from other churches in tithing, at 33 percent. Thirty-six percent of non-megachurch attenders say they serve in the wider community, while 46 percent of megachurch attenders do. Yet 45 percent of megachurch attenders say they never volunteer.

Thumma found that megachurch attenders are distinctive in several areas. They are not hesitant to invite people to church—31 percent invited 3–5 people to church in a year and only 13 percent did not invite anyone. It was also found that they were more likely to attend other churches and not have an exclusive membership allegiance. Megachurch attenders did not report a conversion experience from their involvement as much as an intensification of faith (evidenced in the finding that 40 percent are giving more to the church than before). Yet the survey found that not even one-third of megachurch attenders are involved in a small group and, more surprisingly, 41 percent are not involved in any group.

▶ **A follow-up survey from last year's Pew study of religious switching finds that even more Americans than previously thought may have changed their religions and that most people who switch do so before the age of 24.** The new survey is a follow-up to the 2007 Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, which found that 44 percent of American adults have changed their religious faith or denomination from the one in which they were raised. But the new survey found that among the 56 percent of the population that belongs to the same religion in which they were raised, one in six (16 percent) say there was a time in their lives when they had a different faith to the one they have now. When combined with the 44 percent of the public that currently hold to a faith different than their

childhood religion, this means that roughly half of all American adults have changed religion at some point in their lives. The new survey also showed that roughly two-thirds of those raised Catholic or Protestant, but now say they are unaffiliated, have changed faiths at least twice in their lives (including those who have changed within the unaffiliated camp, such as from atheist to agnostic). It was found that very few report changing religions after reaching age 50; most who did leave did so before reaching the age of 24.

▶ **Enrollments in religious colleges and universities grow more than in secular colleges, particularly at those institutions with a strong faith component, according to University of Georgia economists Neil Meredith and David Mustard.**

The economists presented a paper at the ASREC conference studying the degree to which enrollment grew from 1991 to 2005 in religiously affiliated colleges relative to their counterparts. Meredith and Mustard found that just being a religiously affiliated Catholic or Protestant school is correlated positively with growth. Enrollment in religiously affiliated colleges and universities grew 13 percent more among whites, 19 percent more among blacks, and 13 percent more among Hispanics than in other institutions. The largest increases in enrollment consistently occurred among the most intensely religious institutions affiliated with the evangelical Council for Christian Colleges and Universities

(CCCU). The researchers found that the CCCU schools experienced 25–26 percent more growth than their non-CCCU counterparts.

▶ **By the year 2043, Catholics will be the largest American religious group due to immigration, while Protestants will continue to decline and Muslims will outnumber American Jews, according to a paper presented at the ASREC conference by demographer Eric Kaufman of Harvard University.** Basing his projections on the General Social Survey, census immigration statistics and Pew small religious group data, Kaufman noted that Hispanic immigration will power the Catholic growth to outnumber Protestants, enabling this group to grow from 10 to 18 percent of the American population between 2003 and 2043. Meanwhile, high Muslim fertility and a young age structure will propel the growth of this religious group past that of Jewish Americans, who have low fertility and a mature age structure, by the year 2023.

Within the white population, there will be continued decline among liberal Protestants. “White Catholics will also lose due to a net outflow of converts. Fundamentalist and moderate Protestant denominations will hold their own within the white population, but are set to decline as a component of the national total,” according to Kaufman. He does not see a clear winner between secularism and fundamentalism by 2043. The secular population will grow because of religious defections

and because of its young age structure. However, the low fertility of this population and the continuing flow of immigrants will cause this “secularization process within the total population to plateau before 2043.” As for contentious moral questions, the mix of all these groups and trends will likely produce “stability on the homosexuality issue and a slight increase in the proportion opposed to abortion... However, in the very long run, i.e. to 2100, the fertility advantage of traditionalists point toward a more conservative society.”

▶ **A survey of Buddhists in the U.S. finds a large, if unstable denominational system emerging, according to new religious movements specialist J. Gordon Melton.** At the ASREC conference, Melton presented preliminary results from a “Buddhist census” he is conducting, particularly regarding his efforts to track down the myriad Buddhist centers and *zendos* (meditation centers) around the country. Melton said that it is particularly difficult to categorize Buddhist groups, because much of organized Buddhism has a “fuzzy” identity, trailing off into various new religious movements and Theosophy. Melton has so far found 1.5 million Buddhists, representing 0.5 percent of the population. He also found that 70–80 percent of the Buddhists are from immigrant or ethnic backgrounds, while 20–25 percent are Euro-American or “white” Buddhists.

There are 199 Buddhist denominations in the U.S.,

ranging from one group representing a half-dozen *zendos* to the denominational network of Sokka Gakkai, which may be the largest. Melton said that there are approximately 2,300 Buddhist centers in the U.S. and that 90 percent of them are attached to one of these Buddhist associations. But these centers tend to be weak and unstable, frequently moving from one home to another or lacking property. The most Buddhists were found in Hawaii, followed, more surprisingly, by the New England states. Yet 40 percent of ethnic Buddhists live in the counties of Southern California.

▶ **The growth of the welfare state in Western Europe is a primary factor in the secularization of this region, according to a new study by Raphael Franck and Laurence R. Iannaccone.** The researchers, who presented their research at the ASREC conference, used recent data from the International Social Survey Program (which asked respondents to retrospectively report their attendance rates) to reconstruct church attendance patterns in 30 countries in Europe and the U.S. from the 1920s to the 1990s. They found that GDP per capita did not have any effect on the change in religiosity over time. Although church attendance was not influenced by health- and family-related expenditures, the results did show that the “growth in public spending on education and the growth in old-age expenditures led to a decline in religiosity.”

Franck and Iannaccone theorize that public spending on charitable

activities had the effect of “crowding out” the Protestant and Catholic churches who traditionally sponsored such works, thus making religious participation less valuable. “It changed the supply conditions of religious activities and triggered the secularization process that took place in the Western world during the 1960s, as individuals who looked to churches for social services were henceforth able to obtain them from governmental agencies.” Franck and Iannaccone suggest that the promotion of a secular welfare state may be the best way to undermine extremist religious movements in politically unstable regions, such as Muslim countries in the Middle East and Central Asia.

▶ **While recent research has shown an association between happiness and religious faith, a new study suggests that it is the social setting of religion that is most important for life satisfaction.** At the ASREC conference, Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn of Harvard University’s Institute for Quantitative Social Science presented a paper drawing on the World Values Study and World Indicators that focused on the social context of happiness. He found that religion can bring negative or positive effects, usually relating to the society to which one belongs. Although on average religious people are more satisfied with their lives than non-religious ones and convinced atheists, there are also more “very dissatisfied” and fewer “quite satisfied” religious people than non-religious ones and atheists.

Kozaryn found that individual religious measures, such as belief in God and belonging to a religious denomination, were actually found to have a negative effect on happiness in some settings. "People who believe in God are less happy than those who do not believe in God, but if they live in countries where many people believe in God, they are much happier than non-believers," he said, for instance, in religious countries. This finding suggests that "[m]ost of the happiness that religion brings about seems to come from the social setting it offers. It satisfies the so-called 'need to belong' that is one of the most fundamental conditions for human happiness," Kozaryn concludes. The study also found that work context may matter in whether religion has an effect on happiness. Kozaryn found that religiosity makes manual workers unhappy, even when controlling for education and personal income. The results are the opposite for professional workers, showing a significant correlation between their faith and happiness.

► **Religious beliefs and practices may have a significant effect on how people perceive and experience pain, according to recent research reported in the British Catholic weekly *The Tablet* (April 4).** Oxford University psychologist Miguel Farias reports on a study where 40 atheists, agnostics and practicing Catholics went through an experiment testing their tolerance of pain, in which they received small shocks administered by an electrode to the back of the left hand. Each subject was then

shown images of both the Virgin Mary and a secular portrait. The painful stimulus would continue for 12 seconds while the subjects were shown the images, and then they were asked to rate their level of pain. Twenty-four of the subjects took part in a brain scan as part of the study. Farias notes that "[r]esults showed the Catholics experienced less pain when presented with the religious image and that atheists and agnostics experienced the same level of pain, regardless of what image was being shown. For Catholics, looking at the religious picture was also associated with increased blood flow in a part of the brain known to be involved in the cognitive modulation of pain."

He adds that the Catholics who looked at the Virgin Mary reported feelings of peace, safety and compassion, as well as a feeling of respect for Mary's humility in her relation to God. It was not a matter of Catholics liking the picture better that set off these effects. The atheists and agnostics said they liked the secular portrait more than the religious one, but they did not experience less pain. Farias notes that the activation of the right ventro-lateral pre-frontal cortex has been shown to regulate emotion, which occurs not as a result of liking or distraction, "but of cognitive strategies of reinterpretation or cognitive detachment." In other words, these Catholics were reinterpreting the painful stimulation by activating religious beliefs and experiences learned over a lifetime. (*The Tablet*, 1 King Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0QZ UK)

► **Religious people show less activity in the region of the brain linked to anxiety, reports a new study cited in the *New Scientist* magazine (March 17).** Neuroscientist Michael Inzlicht of the University of Toronto tested 50 college students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, including Christians (the majority), Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and atheists. Each subject was monitored with electrodes measuring the part of the brain known as the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which tends to show high activity for people with anxiety disorders. Subjects were given a test to measure anxiety involving identifying corresponding or contradictory letter and color patterns, and then were asked about their religious beliefs. Even after accounting for self-esteem, intelligence and other personality traits, Inzlicht's team found that religious devotion predicted volunteers' ACC activity. While the finding could mean that those born with a certain kind of brain tend to be more religious, Inzlicht suspects that religious belief is driving the association. In unpublished experiments, his team asked religious volunteers to write either about their favorite season or their faith. Those who wrote about their connection to God exhibited reduced ACC activation, compared with volunteers writing about the weather. (*The New Scientist*, <http://www.newscientist.com>)

► **Rather than leading people to accept their fatal medical conditions, religious faith may actually encourage the pursuit**

of heroic measures in an attempt to prolong life, reports a new study. The study, first appearing in the *American Medical Journal* and cited by the *Christian Century* (April 21), finds that cancer patients who saw themselves as collaborating with God to overcome illness were three times more likely to seek intensive measures in the last week of life. Researchers at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston were caught off guard by the results, since it may be reasoned that religious people would be more willing to believe in the sovereignty of God in their circumstances and accept their fate. It may actually be the case that because religious faith leads to optimism, such patients might see hope where others might not. Other factors may be that faith gives meaning to suffering, allowing people more stamina to undergo invasive treatments, or the belief in the sanctity of life may encourage a quest to prolong life at any cost.

► **One hundred and fifty years after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origins of the Species*, the British population remains uncertain and divided about evolution and the role of God in creation, with at least one-quarter showing some sympathy to intelligent design or creationism, according to a recent study.** Theos, a British think tank on public theology, commissioned quantitative and qualitative (or ethnographic) surveys on the attitudes of British to evolution, creation and intelligent design. The survey found that 17 percent of

respondents held to a “young earth” or creationist view, while 11 percent agreed with intelligent design and about two-thirds supported evolution (both theist and non-theist varieties).

All three of these positions tended to draw a core of highly certain individuals, while including a larger percentage of more skeptical respondents. Thus, although the percentage of intelligent design supporters was small, one in three respondents were uncertain enough about Darwinian evolution to “hedge their bets ... and cite some form of designer intervention as a way of joining all the dots.” (From the report *Rescuing Darwin: God and Evolution in Britain Today*, <http://www.theosthinktand.co.uk>)

► **Pentecostal men converting in Brazil have considerable higher incomes than they had before conversion, according to a new study.** In a paper presented by Joseph Potter, Ernesto F. L. Amaral and Robert Woodberry at the ASREC conference, it was found that the most substantial effect of Pentecostal conversion on income was found among those with low levels of education. The study, which compared income levels from Brazil's censuses taken in every decade from 1970 to 2000 in the country's 502 microregions, also found that the first wave of converts showed the strongest income-raising effect. The researchers speculate that the difference across the decade may be because Pentecostal congregations became less strict over time, or it could be that the first men to convert to

Protestantism were the “most desperate, and the ones who would most benefit from conversion. Later recruits might have fewer difficulties or problems such as severe alcoholism.”

► **Nearly half of the articles commenting on Mitt Romney's 2008 presidential candidacy in the Italian media mentioned that his religion had something to do with polygamy, writes Massimo Introvigne in the *International Journal of Mormon Studies* (Spring).**

Practically all the articles identified Romney as a Mormon, in contrast with the lack of interest for the religious affiliation of most other candidates, which shows that it is difficult for members of some religious groups to escape their ascribed status. This indicates that the PR work conducted by the Italian Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during the 2002 Winter Olympics has not been entirely successful, comments Introvigne, who is the director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR). The same would probably apply to several other European countries. The fact that the LDS Church no longer practices plural marriage seems not yet to be generally known among the wider public in Central and Southern Europe.

According to Introvigne, the impact of popular culture (e.g. novels and movies) has greatly contributed to this situation. (*International Journal of Mormon Studies*, <http://www.ijmsonline.org>)

China promoting “harmonious” Buddhism and considering Catholicism as a source of unity

For the past few years, the Chinese Communist Party has shown an eagerness to praise “correct” Buddhism, in contrast with its criticism of the Dalai Lama. This has been evidenced again in the Second World Buddhist Forum, which gathered in the Eastern Chinese city of Wuxi in late March, writes Peter Fischer, correspondent in China for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (March 30). This also offered an opportunity for a public appearance (and a talk in English) from the 19-year-old 11th Panchen Lama, whom the Chinese leaders would like to promote as a competitor to the Dalai Lama, although most Tibetans do not take him seriously. According to the Panchen Lama’s talk, Buddhism should strive to create a “harmonious society.” Chinese Communists have come to recognize the potential of religion for social stability and for inspiring a moral attitude, reports Reuters’ Lucy Hornby (March 28). As Abanti Bhattacharya had observed at the time of the First World Buddhist Forum in April 2006, the fear of social discontent has led the Communist government to endorse the revival of Buddhism in its desire to promote “harmonious development” (*IDS Strategic Comments*, June 23, 2006).

In addition, the compatibility of Buddhism with science was stressed at the Forum. Since

“science and technology alone cannot ensure a happy life for the mankind, who still needs to possess moral ethics and values ... Buddhism can play a certain role in this regard,” the secretary general of the Buddhist Association of China told *Xinhua* (March 30).

China has also been reappraising Christianity, especially Catholicism, and the role it can play in unifying the country. In *First Things* magazine (June/July), Francesco Sisci writes that it is particularly the Catholic Church, with its Western base and structure that lacks strong syncretistic influences while preaching values compatible with modernization, that has drawn Beijing to its potential as a “unifying force.” After a long period of tension between the Vatican and China, relations have recently been thawing. Sisci adds that the Catholic Church “remains of far greater interest to the authorities than the amorphous and sometimes ephemeral denominations that comprise the ‘house churches.’” These churches often have mixtures of folk traditions and beliefs, which China’s modernizing political elite wants to avoid (as in the case of the syncretistic and dissident movement Falun Gong).

The greatest obstacle to both the Vatican and the Chinese leadership is the split between the underground and the patriotic churches. The underground Catholic Church has remained loyal to Rome, but its isolated state has led it into novel and improvised practices and doctrines that may make it difficult to

integrate. Sisci concludes that China still has difficulty understanding the Catholic Church after Vatican II and its more spiritual rather than political thrust. “Beijing wants to offer Rome a minimum presence on a trial basis, waiting to see the result. In turn, Rome is wary that the Chinese Communist Party will exploit ties with Rome without making the substantial concessions required for effective communication between the Vatican and Chinese Catholics.” (*First Things*, 156 Fifth Ave., Suite 400, New York, NY 10010)

Hindu Militias Persist and Find New Targets in India

Hindu militias are growing in India, targeting not only Muslims and Christians, but also dissident Hindus, according to political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot during a recent New York lecture. Jaffrelot, of Science Po in Paris, presented a paper at a Columbia University seminar in late March, attended by **RW**, which argued that “Hindu terrorism” is emerging as the result of the coalescing of two different schools of thought. The first school can be traced to the Hindu political leader Savarkar, who attempted to militarize Hindus in the 1930s and 1940s, engaging in violence that culminated in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. After Gandhi’s death, the RSS, which was founded in the 1920s, became the main Hindu nationalist, establishing 48,000 chapters throughout India. After 1984, the Savarkar influence began to reappear in the RSS with

the growth of militias known as Bajrang Dal, which trained in camps and were responsible for the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992. These militia training camps modeled themselves on both militant Muslims and Israelis.

After the mosque attack and the ascent to power of the Hindu nationalist BJP party, the militias turned their attention to issues over Kashmir and targeting Christians and their evangelizing activities; in 1999, Bajrang Dal activists were alleged to have killed an Australian missionary. The militias also engaged in “controlled policing,” attacking artists, including Muslim and Hindu painters, and other dissidents and even the celebration of Christmas. The flashpoint of these attacks was the anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002. “The Bajrang Dal resort to violence in ways that the RSS can't What we're seeing is a kind of legitimization of Hindu terrorism, and Savarkar is being rehabilitated in this,” Jaffrelot said. These Hindu nationalist groups see India as being in a time of crisis, as there have been terrorist bombings linked to Indian extremist Muslim groups every few months. In turn, new militias are forming that turn to terrorism, as seen in a recent Bajrang Dal attack on a mosque.

The fact that active members of the Indian army are joining these militias and that they are not disowned by the RSS suggests a different situation from that of 1948.

Support for Islamic views not translating into growth of Islamic parties in Indonesia

Due to the increasing influence of Islamic, conservative and even radical views in Indonesian society, observers had expected a rise in the vote for Islamic parties, but this has not been the case: Muslim-based parties have secured less than 24 percent of the total votes; however, this does not mean a reversal of the trends toward a stronger Islamic influence, write Tuty Raihanah Mostarom and V. Arianti in *RSIS Commentaries* (May 5), published by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (Singapore).

There have been many signs of a growing influence of conservative forms of Islam in Indonesia in recent years, including the introduction of some forms of *sharia* in several areas, agitation against Ahmadi Muslims (considered as heretical) and trends against pluralism among Islamic teachers, according to several surveys. Considering—among others—the progress of the

PKS (Justice Prosperous Party) from 1 percent to 7 percent support at the 2004 general election, several experts had predicted that the role of Islamic parties would be prominent in 2009, but secular-nationalist parties were finally preferred by a strong majority of the voters.

According to Mostarom and Arianti, one of the explanations for this development is the tendency toward a separation of piety and politics in Indonesia, inherited from the Suharto era and its distinction between “cultural Islam” and “political Islam.” Moreover, due to the democratic context of Indonesia, there are other channels than elections and political parties for supporting Islamic views. Finally, secular parties too exploit religious symbols and support some issues on the Islamist agenda. Thus, it is not surprising that a majority of members of the two largest Muslim organizations (Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah) actually favor secular parties. But partly due to the other avenues available for pushing Islamist views, the outcome of the 2009 elections does not mean that declining votes for Islamic parties will necessarily result in a reversal of Islamic influence on society. (*RSIS Commentaries*, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg>)

FINDINGS/FOOTNOTES

■ The password for access to the RW archives, at: <http://www.religionwatch.com>, remains: Unasancta

■ Gay rights is a long-simmering and difficult subject for American Buddhists and it is currently making it into the media. The subject of homosexuality has been most difficult for American Buddhist converts who champion social and political liberalism, but acknowledge that such leaders as the Dalai Lama

have taken a more conservative stance on the issue than many of their Christian and Jewish counterparts. This was brought home recently to American Buddhists after an official in the Dalai Lama's office compared homosexuality to lying and stealing. The summer issue of the Buddhist

magazine **Buddhadharma** deals with the conflict surrounding gay rights and homosexuality. A lengthy article suggests Buddhists are facing similar difficulties as those of other religions. Author Jose Cabezón writes that Western Buddhists tend

either to sweep Buddhists' texts' negative views on homosexuality under the carpet, be uninformed about them or dismiss such teachings outright. Cabezón concludes that the matter comes down to conflicts over faith, reason

and authority. (Part of this article is on the magazine's website; the complete article is in the print version. Visit: <http://www.thebuddhadharma.com/issues/2009/summer/index.php>)

On/File: A continuing survey of people, groups, movements and events impacting religion

1) The Against the Stream Buddhist Meditation Society represents a growing movement of Buddhist "punx" consisting mainly of young people pressing for an "anti-establishment" version of Buddhism. Founded by Noah Levine, a Southern California Buddhist teacher, the society has more than 20 affiliated groups nationwide. Infused with punk rock's anti-establishment ethos, these so-called "Dharma Punx" do not wear robes or bow to statues of the Buddha. A chapter of the society can be started by anyone (although permission has to be granted by Levine) and the society de-emphasizes the notions of hierarchy found in many forms of Buddhism. Without Zen masters or Tibetan lamas, Levine said he wants to reconnect Buddhism with what he sees as its radical roots.

Levine says he draws inspiration from many strains of Buddhism (including Thai, Sri Lankan and Burmese traditions), but he adds that he wants to tear down the hierarchical difference between teacher and student that is common in those forms. Informality marks Levine and his society, and this seems to be the drawing point for many members. That is what attracted Holly Brown, 39, a self-described "Goth girl" who has been a member of

Against the Stream since it opened. "We all respect the Dalai Lama, but we're living a totally different life than him," she said. "Noah's living our same life." (Source: **Los Angeles Times, May 4**)

2) Shukriy, a Puerto Rican New York D.J., has emerged as a leader of the Muslim hip-hop movement. Born as Jorge Pabon, he was a leading secular hip-hop artist until he converted to Islam 20 years ago. At his concerts, clean hip-hop lyrics are sounded out by young men in wide trousers and women in head scarves, who dance in the style of Shukriy's robotic movements. They do not touch each other unless they are married couples. Hip-hoppers like Shukriy have given Muslims a large measure of respect within the industry. Most of the pressure comes from conservative Muslims who accuse Shukriy of sinning by dancing with women on stage and acting as a D.J. for a mixed audience. Some argue that even listening to music is a taboo in Islam. The artist says such critics ignore the opportunity of reaching hip-hoppers for Islam. (Source: **New York Times, April 24**)

3) The Heralds of the Gospel, a fast-growing conservative Catholic movement, has received Vatican approval after remaking itself and distancing itself from its past. Now found in 57 countries, the Heralds of the Gospel is an outgrowth of the Brazilian conservative Catholic movement Tradition, Family and Property

(TFP) and its controversial founder Plinio Correa de Oliveira, a staunch critic of liberalism in the church and Brazilian society and an upholder of monarchism. When Correa de Oliveira died in 1995, the TFP split between those members who favored the model of religious congregation and those favoring the model of a lay movement. The opposing sides went to court in 1997 to claim the TFP trademark—a case that has yet to be settled. The group that won the right to the TFP trademark in Brazil (although not in other countries) eventually formed the Heralds of the Gospel in 1999.

By 2001—i.e. in a surprisingly quick time—the Heralds of the Gospel was recognized by the Vatican as an association of "pontifical right". The group has grown very rapidly and has several thousand celibate members worldwide, mainly young adults. The Heralds played a prominent role during the pope's 2007 visit to Brazil and in the celebrations for the 100th anniversary of the Archdiocese of Sao Paulo in 2008. Several of its leaders have already been ordained and, unlike TFP, the organization has both male and female members and has developed friendly relations with some Brazilian bishops. At the same time, the group downplays its link with Correa de Oliveira and his political ideas, although its leaders are the same people who were associated with him in TFP. The emergence of the Heralds of the Gospel can be seen as part of a long-range strategy in Brazil and other countries to cater to the

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needs of conservative and strict Catholics. **(Source: "TFP and the Heralds of the Gospel," by Massimo Introvigne, presented at the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics and Culture conference, Washington, DC, 2009)**

4) Tullian Tchividjian's recent move to the pastorate of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale signals important changes in this bastion of the Christian Right, as well as in the wider evangelical world. The 37-year-old Tchividjian (the grandson of Billy Graham), who was pastor of New City Church near Miami, was called to pastor Coral Ridge after the death of its pastor and new Christian right leader, D. James Kennedy, in 2007. Once visited by as many as 7,000 on Sunday mornings, Coral Ridge had shrunk to 1,400–1,500 regular attendees as Kennedy's attention turned to national politics. Tchividjian only agree to come to Coral Ridge if New City could be merged with the older congregation, a condition to which the elders somewhat unexpectedly agreed. New City and Tchividjian have pursued a different approach than Coral Ridge, eschewing politics and the culture wars and emphasizing worship and Reformed theology. Like other young evangelicals, Tchividjian tends to see politics as being reflective of culture (although he is

strongly pro-life), and holds that the church should concentrate more on winning the hearts and minds of people (often in the cultural centers) than on changing policies. **(Source: Christianity Today, May)**

5) The German branch of Islamic Relief has launched a hotline for helping people experiencing serious personal concerns or emotional despair. Twenty-two volunteers (among them two imams) have been trained with the help of Christian humanitarian organizations already experienced in the field, who will continue to provide supervision. Besides German, volunteers will be able to answer questions and concerns in Turkish or Arabic. In a first step, people will be able to call the hotline between 4 pm and midnight. Purely religious questions, without a situation of distress, will be redirected to other groups, e.g. local mosques. Eissler remarks that support work of this kind is a relatively new phenomenon in the Muslim world, and that it has received an impetus in Germany in recent years from the need to provide help for Muslims in hospitals or emergency situations, especially as the Christian churches have already done this for many years. **(Source: EZW-Newsletter, Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen, <http://www.ekd.de/ezw/newsletter.php>)**

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