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RELIGION WATCH
A NEWSLETTER MONITORING TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGION

INSIDE

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.

RELIGIOSCOPE
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The big tent of organized secularism gets bigger

A more diverse, activist and, in some cases, tolerant secularism is emerging, according to several papers presented at the recent meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR) in San Francisco in mid-August. Although those involved in secularist "free-thought" groups are often identified as belonging to one monolithic group of atheists, there is more diversity in this community than one might expect. In a survey of 911 affiliate members of 20 secular groups, researcher Frank L. Pasquale found that while they may share a rejection of monotheistic ideas and institutional religious affiliations, such participants do not all have a strictly naturalistic worldview and may entertain different ideas about religion. Pasquale's survey covered such secular groups as atheists, secular humanists, Unitarian humanists, skeptics, and Jewish humanists, and found that "organized secularism in the US is, in the main, a Euro-intellectual and cultural reaction to monotheism." When most of such participants speak of "religion," they usually have Christianity and, more recently, Islam in mind. Although Asians usually comprise a significant percentage of the unaffiliated, or "nones," they tend to be uninvolved in such groups and movements, according to Pasquale.

Pasquale found an overrepresentation of Jews and a negligible representation of Latinos, African-Americans and Asians. These participants in secular groups are overwhelmingly the product of religious upbringings, with only about 12 percent reared in strictly secular households. Secular group affiliates raised Roman Catholic were the "most likely to view their religious or philosophical upbringings as strong or strict and were also the most critical of something called religion compared with those raised Protestant, Jewish or Judaic, or even secular," Pasquale writes. While nine in 10 rejected the idea of God or the soul, only seven in 10 rejected an ultimate purpose to life, and only six in 10 rejected an impersonal connecting force in nature. In short, "only about a third of the sample indicated rigorous naturalism—rejecting all ideas categorically." Those involved in Jewish and Unitarian humanist groups were the most likely to use the terms "spirituality" or "spiritual" to describe their views. Pasquale concludes that participants in secular groups in particular are far from uniform in beliefs and attitudes and actually show a more "cafeteria," eclectic approach rather than one of "deliberate, thoroughgoing philosophical naturalism."

Meanwhile, organized atheism has undergone something of a transformation in the former Soviet Union (FSU), according to another paper presented by Leontina Hormel of the University of Idaho. Notorious for its role in the anti-religious repression of the communist era, organized or "scientific" atheism was part of the educational curriculum of the Soviet Union, but was quickly forsaken during the fall of communism in the early 1990s. Hormel notes that even during the popular and official acceptance of religious faith in the years since, the percentage of atheists and non-believers in the

FSU remains relatively high; except for Armenia (8.4 per cent), most of the republics in the FSU exceed the U.S. (9 per cent) in their rate of atheism and unbelief. There is little advantage in claiming an atheist identity today, especially since most charity and free goods and services are administered through religious organizations.

> **In the former Soviet Union, there is little advantage in claiming an atheist identity today.**

Hormel found only one atheist organization active in Russia today, the Liberty of Conscience Institute. In Ukraine, there is also the organization Atheism in Ukraine. The Liberty of Conscience Institute is the most organized and is tied to the larger International Humanist and Ethical Union. Far from seeking to advance scientific atheism and eradicate religion from society, the institute seeks to advance freedom of conscience on regional, national and international levels and reduce the role of the state in regulating religious activity. Hormel concludes that the atheism that "remains intact is not a relic of Soviet scientific atheism, but one which seeks to build a post-Soviet society upon the principles of freedom of conscience valuing human rights."

Of course, aggressiveness still characterizes the hard atheist core of the secularist movement. A paper by Bradley Nabors (University of Southern California) traced the evolution of atheist organizations from concentrating on legal and church–state issues to their current focus on "justifying their nonbelief to others, and often debasing religion with their own combative rendering of the scientific method." Along those lines, the latest trend at atheist conventions across the US is that of ceremonies of debaptism, reports G. Jeffrey MacDonald (*Religion News Service*, July 20). From reading reports on such mock ceremonies (using a hairdryer named "reason" in order to blow away the waters of baptism), the strong flavor of satire is obvious, and intended, since it is meant to make religious rites appear laughable. At the same time, the spread of such practices testifies to the development of secular activism and reveals some flair on the part of those involved for creating a media sensation.

"Debaptism" is not a purely American practice, although the ceremonies are. In the United Kingdom (UK), the National Secular Society makes a "certificate of debaptism" available for download on its website. While admitting that such certificates are "a bit of fun," the society adds that baptism itself is "a complete fantasy." Some "debaptized" atheists push it a little bit further, asking for their debaptism to be recorded in the church of their (infant) baptism. Catholic parishes have agreed to enter the information that a person has left the church in the margins of the register, but other churches can be less cooperative.

> **The spread of "debaptisms" testifies to the development of secular activism**

In the UK, a wave of "debaptisms," if this were ever to happen, could actually have deeper implications, remarked *The Times'* religion correspondent, Ruth Gledhill (March 18): the baptismal figures of the Church of England (25 million, but a Sunday attendance of 1.1 million) are used by bodies such as the World Council of Churches or the Anglican Communion itself, as well as the House of the Lords. When some day the number of baptized Anglicans decreases, this might also have consequences for the weight of the Church of England in social life, as well as in international religious relations. If only the number of practicing UK Anglicans were to be counted, instead of all who were once baptized in the Church, the official size of the Anglican Communion would be "cut by nearly a third," Gledhill writes.

(*Religion News Service*, http://www.religionnews.com; National Secular Society, http://www.secularism.org.uk; *The Times*, http://www.timesonline.co.uk)

ELCA's gay rights decision re-forming American Lutheranism? An analysis

Long perceived as a "moderate" member of mainline Protestantism, the recent decision by America's largest Lutheran body to allow for homosexual relations and approve of the ordination of gays and lesbians came as a shock in some quarters. But seasoned observers of the 5.5 million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) registered little surprise at the action; the repercussions that these decisions will have on American Lutheranism and mainline Protestantism are far less predictible. The ELCA's decision concluded a long struggle in the denomination over the contentious issue as delegates voted by 559–451 to approve a measure allowing those involved in "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" to serve as official ministers. Many observers drew parallels between the ELCA action and the 2003 decision of the Episcopal Church to consecrate a homosexual bishop and the ensuing split this caused between the global Anglican Communion and the American denomination. But because of the more autonomous nature of Lutheran churches, the recent decision is less likely to cause a crisis in global Lutheranism. Yet the new stance of the ELCA, along with that of other Lutheran bodies in Europe supporting gay rights in the church, is increasingly clashing with the traditional positions of Lutheran churches in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

Since the August decision, a number of clergy and members announced their decision to leave the body. In the weeks after the event, churches have declared themselves to be out of communion with the denomination. Ethnic congregations—mostly black, Hispanic and Asian—were opposed to this change all along and several observers have predicted that they may be among the first to leave. A late September meeting in Indianapolis will draw many of the dissenters to deliberate about their next course of action. The likely result will be a new non-geographical synod (or diocese) for traditionalist churches. Departing congregations may join one of the newly created conservative bodies, such as Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC). The LCMC, a "post-denominational" body allowing for dual affiliations, may be particularly appealing to congregations hesitant or unable to completely break ranks with the ELCA.

But there may not be the protracted battles over property as in the Episcopal Church, since the ELCA allows departing congregations to leave with their buildings if they can get a two-thirds vote from their members to do so. However, in polarized congregations, dissenters may face legal and denominational battles. Because of the moderate, "middle American" reputation of the ELCA among mainline Protestant churches, the recent decision may push other liberal denominations, such as the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA) (which have recently narrowly defeated gay rights measures of their own) to press further on such issues. There is some speculation that the church's involvement with dialogues and other forms of cooperation with Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox and the more conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod may be adversely affected by the decision.

Fledgling Catholic–Mormon alliance faces theological obstacles

The LDS (Mormon) church is courting the Catholic Church in the US, attempting to form alliances over moral and social issues, and Catholic leaders are finally warming to such overtures, writes James Massa in the newsletter *Ecumenical Trends* (July–August). Mormons were particularly interested in how Catholics have turned out electable politicians while still being a minority religion. Massa, the ecumenical and interreligious director of the US Catholic Bishops Conference, writes that the failed candidacy of Mitt Romney and the public antagonism towards the Mormon opposition to gay marriage has led the LDS church to increasingly seek advice and alliances with the

Catholic Church. The Catholics, for their part, have been appraising the Mormons, along with evangelicals, as new partners on social and moral issues as cooperative efforts with mainline Protestants have stalled.

While evangelicals and Mormons have engaged in in-depth dialogues, this has not been the case for Catholics, who have been hard pressed to determine how the church should view the LDS. The Vatican has declared that Mormon baptisms are invalid, but the LDS church argues that it should be viewed as a Christian church. The dilemma came to a head in 2008 when the LDS church requested to be part of an ecumenical Christian service when the pope visited the US. After some indecision, the Catholics permitted LDS representatives to attend the service (although they were seated in a less prominent position so as not to offend evangelical and Orthodox participants). While this event strengthened Mormon–Catholic relations, the conciliatory spirit was soon threatened when the Vatican issued a directive to dioceses that would prevent LDS members from drawing information from baptismal records (to carry out their practice of baptizing for the dead). Massa concludes that Catholic–Mormon relations are still "at the beginning of a journey."

(*Ecumenical Trends*, P.O. Box 306, Garrison, NY 10524-0306)

Non-denominational evangelical currents challenge ethnic Indian Orthodox Christians

The clash between immigrants and the evangelical-influenced second generation in the Indian Orthodox Mar Thoma Church in the US is significant enough to change the nature of this liturgical and mystical church, according to Syracuse University sociologist Prema Kurian. In a paper she presented at the ASR conference in San Francisco in mid-August, Kurian found wide dissatisfaction among Mar Thoma young people, similar to the alienation experienced by other second-generation members from their ethnic churches. The Mar Thoma Church, based in India, is an ancient Oriental Orthodox body that is strongly liturgical, with about 60 parishes serving 8,000 families in the US. In Kurian's interviews with Mar Thoma youth and young adults, she found a persistent identification with non denominational evangelical Christianity and criticism of the formality and lack of spiritual fervor in the church in which they grew up.

Drawn to the evangelical churches, many of the second generation left the church in the 1990s. But in the early 2000s, a group of "activist, evangelically-influenced Mar Thoma youth returned, with the goal of trying to minister to the second generation and to challenge and transform the church. Consequently, second generation members are often picking up evangelical ideas from within the Mar Thoma church through Sunday school classes taught by older youth, youth meetings, and regional and national Mar Thoma youth conferences," according to Kurian. The evangelical incursion is also challenging the church's traditional reluctance to take up hard-line positions on many contemporary debates (including the ordination of women).

CURRENT RESEARCH

▸ **Although more Americans are joining the ranks of the unchurched, most of the movement away from organized religion took place earlier than 1991, according to a study by Michael Hout and Claude Fischer presented at the meeting of American Sociological Association in San Francisco (held the same time as the ASR)**. Reports that the number of the unchurched doubled during the 1990s have to be qualified by the figures showing that the exodus from organized religion started before the 1990s and doubled over a 14–15-year period. By using data from the General Social Survey from 1973 to 2008, Hout and Fischer found little decline in religious beliefs, such as belief in God, since 1988. The groups that increased were those whom the re-

searchers call "unchurched believers." Hout and Fischer add that the trend of dropping out of organized religion continued through 2008 and was probably fueled by the growing number of Americans who were likely raised without any religions. In an initial study in 2002, the authors argued that church political involvement, especially in the Christian right, was a factor in alienating more liberal church members from attending. The recent study shows that while conservatives are just as likely to identify with a church now as they did 20 years ago, liberal and moderate Christians are much less likely to report a religion now than they did in 1988. The study also found that Americans were more likely to report anti-religious views in 2008 than they did in 1998 (for instance, two-thirds agreed that "religion brings more conflict than peace," while only one-third held that view in 1998).

▸ **A concern about family stability tends to drive up church attendance in general, and it appears stronger for conservative Protestants in particular, according to a recent study by Young-Il Kim of the University of Virginia.** Kim, who presented a paper on his findings at the ASR meeting, analyzed longitudinal data from the National Survey of Families and Households, specifically the years 1987–88, 1992–94 and 2001–03. Looking at positive attitudes toward marriage and childbearing, Kim found that such values had little effect on church attendance. However, concern about family stability was a significant factor in increased levels of religious attendance among conservative Protestants, as compared with mainline Protestants, Catholics and Jews. There was also a relationship between support for elderly parents and increased church attendance among conservative Protestants, although, unlike the family stability factor, there was no main relationship between such support and greater religious involvement. Because the questions concerning family stability often emphasized the welfare of children, it might be expected that people who have sacralized such values would also be more involved in organized religion.

▸ **Canadian evangelicals have sharply departed from the Liberal Party in the last decade, although this change is due less to the emergence of a Canadian religious right than to the party's marginalization of evangelical and other religious voters, according to a new study.** In each of the federal elections in 2004, 2006 and 2008, the Liberal Party only managed to retain half of the evangelical voters it had had at the previous election. The departing evangelicals mainly went to the Conservative Party and the New Democratic Party (NDP), in a 2 to 1 ratio, respectively. The study, by Don Hutchinson and Rick Hiemstra and cited in *Church and Faith Trends* (August), notes that prior to 1996 there was little difference between the votes cast by evangelicals and those by the rest of Canadians; evangelical support for right- and left-leaning parties was roughly evenly split, taking into account regional variations. As mentioned above, at least one-third of evangelical voters who formerly voted Liberal subsequently moved to the left-leaning NDP, while Green Party support doubled among evangelicals from 2003 to 2008.

It was not even so much the policy positions of the Liberal Party that caused the evangelical exodus (both the NDP and other left-leaning parties support such initiatives as gay marriage), but rather actions by the party perceived to be discriminatory toward evangelicals. These actions included derogatory remarks about evangelicals by Liberal Party leaders, as well as defending policy changes involving same-sex marriage in a way that was seen as limiting their religious freedom involving such measures. The newly formed Conservative Party attracted a large segment of evangelicals as a viable alternative because of its stress on moral issues reflecting its values. In effect, moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage also became rallying points for concerns about religious freedom and the role of religion in public life.

(*Church and Faith Trends*, http://files/efc-canada.net)

▸ **Belief in reincarnation among Chinese Christians is relatively unaffected by Christian beliefs and practices, with the exception of Bible reading, according to a paper presented at the ASR conference.** Hsing-Kuang Chao and Wei-Chun Chiu (Tunghai University) previously found that 25 percent of Christians in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan believe in reincarnation. Their follow-up study of four Christian groups looked at the variables of age, scripture reading, church service involvement, Christian identity, Christian conservative belief, religious utilitarianism and ancestor veneration, and whether they could predict respondents' belief in reincarnation.

According to the report, among the seven variables in the model, ancestor veneration had the strongest positive influence on the belief in reincarnation. In contrast, Christian socialization, especially scripture reading, had a negatively impact on respondents' belief in reincarnation. Yet other Christian variables, such

as identity and a conservative faith, only had a very weak effect on respondents' belief in reincarnation.—*Reported by Weishan Huang, a research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Gottingen, Germany*

▸ **A new survey of Muslim life in Germany confirms that most Muslims in that country do not feel represented by existing Islamic associations, and similar results could probably be found in several European countries.** The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees conducted the study and the results were released in late June. Six thousand Muslims with roots in 49 countries were interviewed. The research included not only religiously affiliated Muslims, but also non-practicing ones, in contrast with similar previous studies. This obviously raises the issue of the definition of who is a Muslim and who is not. Researchers were surprised to find that there are more Muslims in Germany than had been assumed until now. According to the study, there are between 3.8 and 4.3 million Muslims living in the country (previous estimates were between 3.1 and 3.4 million). Sixty-three percent have Turkish roots (between 2.5 and 2.7 million), 14 percent come from Southeastern Europe, 8 percent from the Middle East and 7 percent from North Africa. From those with an immigrant background, half have already acquired German citizenship. Sunnis make up 72 percent of the Muslim population in Germany, Alevis 14 percent and Shiites 7 percent.

The level of integration is better than expected: more than 50 percent of German Muslims belong to some German association. Most young people participate in mixed sports activities on school premises, although 7 percent of Muslim girls stay away from swimming lessons when males and females attend together. The level of organizational religious affiliation is low. Although 36 percent describe themselves as "strong believers," only some 20 percent of Muslims in Germany belong to a Muslim association or congregation. Less than 25 percent feel fully represented by the leading Muslims organizations in Germany. Only 10 percent know that there is since 2007 a coordinating council of Muslims in Germany. But 76 percent (84 percent among Sunnis) wish that Islamic religious education should take place in state schools. Some side results of the study also yield interesting insights; for instance, 40 percent of immigrants from Iran consider themselves as non-affiliated with any religious community. Only 10 percent among people coming from Iran (mostly Shiites) describe themselves as strong believers.

(*The full study in German can be found at the following URL: http://www.bmi.bund.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/566008/publicationFile/31710/vollversion_studie_muslim_leben_deutschland_.pdf)*

▸ **According to a recent study conducted by the Zentralinstitut Islam-Archiv-Deutschland, Muslim support for the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in Germany has started to decrease, reports Ali Kocaman in *Islamische Zeitung* (September).** Until recently, the Muslim vote could virtually be taken for granted by German Social Democrats. Only two years ago, 52 percent of German Muslims expressed support for the Social Democrats. According to the new survey, the percentage is now down to 35.5 percent. Social Democrats are followed by Greens, with a support rate of 18 percent (marking an increase). All the other parties represented in the German parliament get less than 5 percent of Muslim votes. Muslim associations in Germany advise against founding a Muslim political party.

(*Islamische Zeitung*, http://www.islamische-zeitung.de)

Portugal's Catholic way of secularization

While Portugal shows signs of secularization, the pattern of religious decline is far from uniform, with the Catholic Church enjoying greater social and media influence, according to Steffen Dix. Throughout its history, the trajectory of secularization in Portugal has been anything but unidirectional, according to Dix, who presented a paper at the ASR conference in San Francisco. Even as early as the 19th century, the vigor of Catholicism was significantly weakened by liberalism and anticlericalism. At the start of the century, religious observance was down to about 10 percent of the population, mainly consisting of poor, elderly women in the rural north of Portugal. But that situation was radically reversed starting in the 1920s, first as a reaction to the Republicans' anti-religious policies and then through a Marian devotional revival sparked by the Fatima apparitions of 1917.

The vigorous state of Catholicism in Portugal continued up until

Vatican II and the 1974 revolution, then weakened, mainly through the increasing segmentation of religious belief and practice by region (secular south versus Catholic north), age groups, gender, levels of education and class. While today Catholicism is finding it difficult to revive religious practices and beliefs and transmit them to the younger generation, the church is finding influence in the fields of political, economic, ethical and aesthetic values "by means of a powerful presence in the media, demonstrating religious resistance against the 'ideology' of secularization and thereby remains a relevant factor in the construction of modern society in Portugal," Dix writes. By "modernizing and even secularizing itself and in its function to criticize some decisions in socio-cultural life and regulate popular religiosity, Portuguese Catholicism should be understood as an important forming factor of a modernity that is singular and typical only to the Portuguese … this country is three things at the same time: secular, religious and Catholic."

Jewish women moving into leadership role in Europe' synagogues, organizations

More Jewish women are taking leadership roles in Europe, reports Toby Axelrod (*Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, August 6). Female rabbis have held high positions in several countries of Western and Eastern Europe. One currently heads the Central Council of Jews in Germany. While the number of women on such positions is still small—the German case being an exception—there is a growing feeling that opportunities are opening for those willing to seize them. Changes were slow in coming, but pace is now picking up.

Denmark's "late modern" form of Theosophy draws seekers

After decades of quasi-hibernation, the Theosophical Society (TS) in Denmark has started growing again. The number of its members quadrupled over the past twenty years, from 300 to nearly 1,200, writes René Dybdal Pedersen (University of Aarhus, Denmark) in the latest issue of *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* (9(2), 2009). Many TS branches in other countries have not been able to reach the number of members that they had in the early decades of the 20th century. The case of the Danish section presents some notable features, since it suspended relations with the international TS (headquartered at Adyar, India) in 1989, following disagreements on leadership and policy. Pedersen describes it as a being "late modern," in contrast with the Adyar TS: the Danish TS has renounced hierarchical organizational model and has adopted a flat leadership structure, with emphasis on local autonomy and doctrinal autonomy as well, allowing for cooperation with a variety of religious groups. The Danish TS has adjusted to trends toward individualization.

Moreover, while the TS historically has played a crucial role in spreading ideas that would inspire the New Age, it has not necessarily followed through on this shift to experiential religion. In contrast, the Danish TS has managed to become "an adequate harbor for those involved in the widespread New Age or holistic milieu," Pedersen observes. His respondents in the Danish TS suggest that it has shifted from being an elite group to a group welcoming spiritual seekers looking for something more substantial. But other factors were also involved in this change: an economic recovery of the section, the fact that the group was already organized, and national leaders able to create bonds with other people.

(Aries, c/o Hilda Nobach, Faculty of Humanities, Dept. Art, Religion and Cultural Studies, Oude Turfmarkt 147, NL-1012 GC Amsterdam)

Sufi orders an unlikely alternative to political Islam in North Africa: An analysis

In Morocco and Algeria, Sufism is increasingly seen as an alternative to political Islam, either because it plays that card, such as the Alawiyya in Algeria, or because Sufi orders are politically instrumentalized by the regimes in power, as it is by the Moroccan monarchy and the Bushishiya order. But such hopes could prove to be misplaced. The celebration of the centenary of the Alawiyya Brotherhood, which took place in late July 2009 in Mostaganem (Algeria), which **RW** attended, drew

more than 5,000 followers or sympathizers of Shaykh Khaled Bentounes, current head of the order. The event provided an opportunity to clarify why betting on Sufism as an alternative to political Islam is a miscalculation.

Firstly, despite a highly favorable political context (the end of the pressure on reformist movements, the end of the civil war and a political flirtation with the Algerian presidency), the Alawiyya order is not able to recruit beyond its traditional constituency (i.e. family ties networks of the Bentounes in rural areas and urban cosmopolitan people who joined to the Alawiyya under the influence of René Guénon's esoteric works). One of the leaders of the order in France suggests that it is now in a phase of weakness due to the rise of Salafism, among other things. Moreover, a sociological study conducted at Oran University revealed that less than 1 percent of the students declared being affiliated to a Sufi order and that more than 90 percent of them had a negative opinion of Sufism, equating it with superstitions and obscurantism.

Secondly, the strategy of radical modernization of Khaled Bentounes, pushing the order from traditional marabutism into religious post-modernity (religious ecumenism, philosophical humanism and cultural syncretism) has led to strong reactions. Actually, all religious actors in Algeria—except for the Muslim Brethren, but they now play a purely political role in Algeria—reacted negatively to the orientations chosen by Bentounes during the celebration of the centenary and seized the opportunity to stress the basics of the Sunni Muslim orthodoxy during a one-month controversy following the centenary ceremonies. Instead of benefiting from the political opening to the Sufi orders decided by President Bouteflika in order to boost his own support, the Alawiyya seems to have no other choice but to become sect-like (not as a deliberate choice, but as a result of external perceptions, with the group now being denounced as religiously deviant, as well as suspected of brainwashing and links with freemasonry). Sectarianism here would be a product of an excess of modernization. This also leads to other suspicions being spread in Algeria: it is claimed that the path followed by the shaykh is serving the interest of the Rand Corporation in search of Western-friendly Islam and relying for that purpose on "deviant orders," as was stated by a leader of the Association of the Muslim Algerian Ulemas.

Thirdly, the virulence of the reactions of other Sufi orders showed that the conflict is not between moderate, open-minded Sufism and radical Salafism (as depicted by some journalists), but between the Alawiyya and all other forces in the religious field. According to a shaykh from a dissident branch of the Alawiyya, the excess of modernity as a response to the previous excess of traditionalism is like "washing blood with blood." More crucial is the criticism that Bentounes' Alawiyya is neglecting the sharia, a widely shared view by most of the Sufi shaykhs, with one of them considering it as "the only path leading to Truth". This emphasis on sharia shows that, at the ideological level as well, Sufism is far from being an obvious alternative to political Islam, since members of the latter grouping seem to adhere to a Sunni orthodoxy characterized by the pre-eminence of sharia.—*By Patrick Haenni, a researcher at the Religioscope Institute*

Hizbut Tahrir movement makes progress in Malaysia

The Islamic Liberation Party, Hizbut Tahrir (HT), is becoming increasingly prominent in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia, reports Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (July). The article focuses especially on HT in Malaysia, a country where it had never been researched before. A truly transnational Islamic political movement, HT has attracted growing attention in recent years due to its expansion to new areas (starting with Central Asia, where it has met sometimes very harsh repression) and also to discussions over whether it is a radical but non-violent Islamist movement or a conveyor belt for terrorism.

Osman clearly considers HT as being consistently non-violent. But the aim of the article is primarily to show how HT reached Malaysia and developed there. As

in the case of several other countries, it came to Malaysia not primarily from other Muslim countries, but via the UK. There had been scattered HT study circles in Malaysia before 1997, connected to HT Indonesia. Then, between 1997 and 2005, several HT members of Malaysian origin living in the UK started to actively recruit Malaysian students at places where they seek to meet other Malaysians when feeling homesick. This resulted at the same time in the recruitment of some students from Singapore. It also means that recruitment actually took place among Malaysian elites.

The movement started to be active in the public arena in Malaysia from 2004 to 2005. Although still small and with limited support, membership is growing rapidly, especially at universities, where several of its members teach. It also produces a weekly pamphlet, distributed at mosques and prayer halls across Malaysia, in order to spread the ideals of re-establishing the Caliphate beyond its own ranks. Since it does not "excommunicate" other Muslims (in contrast with some other groups cultivating a radical ideology), it also invites representatives of other Muslim groups or senior religious scholars to address its seminars. While some people within the Malaysian religious bureaucracy appreciate HT, the group seems not to have been very successful in its attempts to influence leaders of established, much larger Islamic parties or police and military officers. There have been no attempts by the government to ban HT (but it is being monitored), since its size remains small; it is not involved in violent activities and it may also be seen as a group that might weaken the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS); indeed, some PAS members are reported to have left it to join HT.

(*Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Taylor & Francis Group, 325 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, PA 19106)

Hindu extremists target Nepal's Christian institutions

Christian institutions in Nepal are getting regular threats from Hindu extremist groups since the May bomb attack against a Roman Catholic church, which killed three people and severely wounded 15 others, reports *Eglises d'Asie* (September 1). This represents a case of non-Muslim terrorist activities claiming a religious background. A number of prominent Hindu leaders, including representatives of the Hindu World Federation, had strongly condemned the attack, but this does not prevent extremist groups from continuing their campaign against Communists, Muslims and Christians (both Catholics and Protestants), in the hope of restoring a Hindu state in Nepal (where the monarchy was abolished in 2008, following the electoral victory of the Communist Party). They have been warning pastors, priests and nuns that they should leave the country and are threatening more attacks. But in early September, the leader of the Nepal Defense Army, allegedly responsible for several of the bomb attacks, was arrested. Estimates of Christians in Nepal range from several hundreds of thousands up to more than a million or even 1.5 million. Catholics form a small minority in the nation (at around 8,000).

FINDINGS/FOOTNOTES

The new password for access to the RW archives, at www.religionwatch.com, remains: Seventhangel.

■ The new book ***Holy Mavericks*** (NYU Press, $20) casts a wide net in its study of evangelical innovators, profiling charismatic televangelists Joel Osteen and Paula White, megachurch pastors Rick Warren and T.D. Jakes, and "emerging church" pioneer Brian McLaren. Co-authors Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere see these evangelical innovators as helping to create the competition and vitality of America's religious marketplace. The authors argue that these innovators bring change by bridging or collapsing the distance between religion and contemporary culture by offering a more relevant and appealing message than their institutional counterparts. These innovators' unique "social, cultural and spiritual dexterity" can be seen in Osteen's blending of cognitive psychology ("choose to be happy") with charismatic spirituality, Jakes' use of pop culture in his preaching and teaching, and McLaren's post-modern vision. With their focus on competition and the religious marketplace, Lee and Sinitiere take a

religious economy approach. Yet they argue that these innovators' lax and accommodating stance toward the culture challenges the religious economy school's theory that a certain degree of strictness is required for religious growth and vitality.

■ Already the author of two books and a number of articles on Islam in cyberspace, plus a guide to world religions online, Gary Bunt is no novice to the field. His new book, ***iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*** (University of North Carolina Press, $24.95), is more than a repetition of his previous work, since it takes into account further developments, especially the presence of Islam in the context of Web 2.0 and online jihad. It also raises issues on the ways in which Islamic societies might be impacted by the possibilities of networking that are now available to Muslims—a crucial issue, since such networks go across political boundaries. Obviously, there are some difficulties in defining what is "religious": for instance, the primary focus of many bloggers in the Muslim world is not necessarily religion, although they might also discuss it from time to time. "Islamic zones" are indeed emerging online, ranging from social networks, such as MuslimSpace (20,000 users, primarily in the US), to a virtual Ramadan tent set up in 2007 in Second Life. Similar to what happens in other religions, the Internet can become a sacred space for Muslims (e.g. the presence of the Quran online). Online religious counseling has also developed in Islamic cyber environments.

As in his previous books, Bunt also raises the important issue of challenges to religious authority through the multiplication of Islamic voices claiming to be authoritative online, as exemplified through the phenomenon of cyber fatwas. "Shopping around" for a religious opinion has now become a prominent attitude. And jihad in cyberspace is not ignored as an unintended consequence of Web development: the Internet has offered unprecedented marketing opportunities for Al Qaeda and similar groups. There is a kind of "viral jihad," with statements, videos and news spreading rapidly. While more and more people are of the opinion that the Internet has become a primary tool for propagating radical views, other observers put the emphasis on physical interaction (such as propagation at mosques). Whatever the case, Bunt's book provides a quite detailed panorama of jihadi online activities—not only their current status, but also how they unfolded over the years. Whether used for jihad or for benign purposes, the Internet has created alternative routes for accessing knowledge on religion, Bunt adds. A number of interactions that required face-to-face meetings can now take place online. It is necessary today to study Internet activities related to Islam for approaching contemporary Muslim discourses, and not only jihadi activities, for the study of which funding will usually be more easily available. This has consequences not only for Muslims, but for scholars studying Islam too, as Bunt makes clear.

■ Though less focused on the Internet than Bunt's work, the new book ***Jews, God and Videotape*** (NYU Press, $16.10) by Jeffrey Shandler reveals the many ways in which text-oriented Judaism, at least on an unofficial basis, has adapted to the digital media age. Shandler looks at such far-flung places of media–Jewish interaction as Holocaust memorializations in the new media, Jewish holiday cards, and the Hasidic Chabad movement's use of video and the Internet both for promotion and for internal purposes, such as the transmitting of the image and words of the esteemed late Rabbi Schneerson to followers. Another chapter examines Jewish involvement in "Second Life" or computer-simulated gaming and role-playing environments, finding a close connection (even a replication) between how the faith is lived in real life and Second Life—even if one doesn't have to be Jewish to participate in Second Life Judaism. Shandler also provides an intriguing account of the recent practice of home videotaping Jewish ceremonies (from bar mitzvahs and weddings to funerals) and how this has taken on popular religious overtones, as Jewish laypeople appropriate these rituals for their own purposes and meanings.

■ Along with its use of media theory to address religious questions, ***Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age*** (Ashgate, $89.96), edited by Christopher Deacy and Elizabeth Arweck, brings together a number of interesting studies that suggest a continuing "de-secularization" of the older media as well as a spiritualization of the new media. The contributions include examinations of the quasi-religious elements in the electronic dance music culture, which is based on achieving trance states and transgressing Christian morality, the secular spirituality of the films of Hong Kong filmmaker Stephen Chow, and the way in which online communities (such as the Otherkins, who believe they are other than human) function basically as religions.

Equally of interest are the chapters examining how media influence is addressed and appropriated by religious institutions. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the case of *The Da Vinci Code*, where writer Ellen Moore finds evangelical churches resorting to popular cultural icons (even to the extent of staging Da Vinci-themed events) to refute the film's message. A chapter on Seattle-based high-tech workers

looks at whether the technological culture of the city may be a factor in its high rate of unchurched residents. Michael W. DeLashmutt compares the percentage of high-tech professionals in Seattle and other cities with the rates of religious affiliation and finds no correlation between such work and religious disaffiliation. In fact, his interviews with Internet workers found little inclination to draw spiritual or religious meanings from their involvement in technology, and little interest in doing so. Their disaffiliation stemmed from more "ordinary" factors—such as charges of intolerance and hypocrisy—rather than competing technological worldviews.

■ Shiite Islam is often viewed as overtaking Sunni Islam as a key player in world religion and politics, but among Muslims in the US, this branch of the faith is often seen as marginal. Although less numerous than Sunni Muslims, the new book ***Shi'ism in America*** (NYU Press, $35) by Liyakat Nathani does a good job of showing how the other major branch of Islam is becoming more ethnically diverse, independent from home country leadership and socially active. Nathani, who estimates the American Shiite population at two million (considerably more than many surveys have found), writes that the movement cooperated early with the more numerous Sunni Muslims, a pattern that by the 1980s changed as each group invested in its own structures and identities. The Shi'a have created many of their own institutions, but they have not embraced community involvement and inter-faith activity to the extent of Sunni organizations.

Because of their more hierarchical and centralized nature, they also have to defer to judicial rulings made by leaders, known as the marji`. The marji` are having more influence on American Shi'as thanks to the new media, but they are often out of touch with the concerns of many members, especially youth, who are adopting a post-ethnic Islam along with their Sunni counterparts. There has been a growth of black Shi'a Muslims, although the African-Americans have established fewer subgroups and mosques than the Sunni blacks and are much more integrated—even if contentiously—into ethnic Shi'ism. It is the ethnic divisions—not only between Shi'a and other Muslims, but also among the different nationalities that make up Shi'ia communities—that will prove the most daunting challenge to this movement's viability. Nathani also provides an interesting account of the Iranian influence in the US, noting that it is not usually overt, but that official Iranian ideology is often spread to the Shi'ite community through religious and social teachings on satellite TV and the Internet.

■ While the title of the book might suggest a predictive approach, the recent volume ***Quo Vadis Eastern Europe? Religion, State and Society after Communism*** (Longo Editore, €25), edited by Ines Angeli Murzaku (Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ), rather offers an assessment of various regional issues as well as of several national situations as they exist now. What is certain is that the case of countries emerging from Communism has proved that there are ways for religious groups to reverse—at least to some extent—attempts at state suppression of religion, although those have left an impact. For several countries, a key component for the future is European integration, and this in turn will have consequences for Europe, since it means—among other things—integrating the Orthodox factor into the European picture. And the truth is that there is a widespread lack of knowledge on both Eastern Europe and Orthodoxy in the Western world. A goal of the book is to contribute to fill this gap.

According to Thomas Bremer (Münster University, Germany), the real divide between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church concerns attitudes toward modernity, an issue he sees as much more crucial than doctrinal differences. Some other contributions pay attention to issues of dialogue in various Eastern European countries: but interreligious dialogue as understood in the Western context still remains rare and is an import into the region, writes Paul Mojzes (Rosemont College, PA). On the other hand, in his article on Ukraine, Walter Sawatsky (Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN) mentions instances of a new scholarship with readings of history informed by ecumenical developments and able to develop a critical assessment of the history of one's own group.

At the same time as Communist regimes persecuted religious groups more or less fiercely, they sometimes also provided them with a kind of monopoly: for instance, the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria was "both persecuted and privileged" (Bert Groen, University of Graz, Austria). This also partly explains post-communist reactions against proselytism: RW associate editor Jean-François Mayer presents several cases where people in Eastern Europe have perceived missionary groups and new religious movements as threatening both their spiritual traditions and their national interests, taking advantage of a rapid transition, but the author argues that similar discourses can be found in other parts of the world as well. This should not hide other issues, such as tensions and schisms within religious traditions, evidenced by several contributions (e.g. in Montenegro, Bulgaria, Ukraine).

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■ ***Muslim Anti-Semitism in Christian Europe*** (Transaction Publishers, $35.96) is a sharply polemical treatment of the documented cases of anti-Jewish sentiment among European Islamic communities. Hebrew University historian Raphael Israeli views Muslim anti-Semitism partly as a reactive strike against another religious minority in the face of Islamic communities' failure to integrate into European "Christian" societies. The book, based largely on secondary journalistic accounts of incidents of anti-Semitic incidents and rhetoric in Europe, also sees this phenomenon as part of an ingrained anti-Jewish sentiment within Islam itself. Israeli tends to equate the anti-Zionism evident among both the European left (and segments of the right) and a large part of the Muslim population with anti-Semitic tendencies. He does unearth many accounts, although often anecdotal, of anti-Israel fervor that melds into attacks on both Judaism and Jews, particularly during crises such as the Intifada. Israeli argues that the anti-Zionist sentiment among European elites tends to make them turn a blind eye to the anti-Jewish discourse of Muslim leaders in Europe or even defend it under the banner of free speech, even though they are very sensitive toward any signs of "Islamophobia" in their countries. Since Israeli views both the anti-democratic and anti-Semitic tendencies as enduring components of Islam, he pays little attention to immigration and generational and other shifts developing among European Muslims; he sees the designation of "Muslim moderates" as little more than a strategy to subtly introduce Islamic law (sharia) to European societies. While he discounts much of the potential of interreligious dialogue and peacekeeping, Israeli concedes that European leaders (both in individual countries and in the European Union) and public opinion have lately sought to challenge anti-Semitic currents.

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

Willigis Jäger, a former Benedictine monk and highly successful Catholic meditation teacher in Germany, has recently created his own Zen Buddhist lineage, after leaving the Sanbô-Kyôdan Zen school in January. In recent years, Jäger had trained thousands of people at his center (since 2003) called Benediktushof, in Holzkirchen (Germany), a former Benedictine monastery bought by one of his followers for that purpose. The Benediktushof is described as a "center of spiritual ways" and, according to a Protestant researcher, Michael Utsch, has become one of the most significant spiritual centers in Europe. The main reason for Jäger creating his own Zen lineage seems to be that, while he had himself been made a Zen teacher, he could not obtain from the leaders of Sanbô-Kyôdan confirmation of their teacher status for people he had trained (the Sanbô-Kyôdan school has only some 50 accredited teachers around the world). Creating his own lineage will now allow Jäger to name teachers without having to request approval from elsewhere. In 2001, Rome had forbidden Jäger to continue to teach, charging that his teachings had gone astray from the Christian faith. After a time of reflection, he did not accept the decision, took leave from the Benedictine Order and left his monastery, while continuing to teach.

Jäger says that he has more than 2,000 followers and claims to represent a "modern and transconfessional spirituality" for contemporary spiritual seekers and to promote an "integral spirituality" assimilating contributions from Western and Eastern wisdom, as well as modern science. But the new step taken with the creation of Jäger's own lineage is also explained as a way to communicate timeless Zen to a Western audience. For the time being, however, reports Martin Frischknecht, all the traditional Zen artistic activities demonstrated at the summer festival for the launching of the new Zen lineage had a clear Asian background, while being practiced by Westerners, thus suggesting that there is still a long way to go until Zen becomes truly inculturated in the West.

(Sources: Benediktushof, http://www.benediktushof-holzkirchen.de; Sophia – Zen Lineage Willig Jäger, http://www.zenliniewilligis-jaeger.de; *Materialdienst der EZW*, Auguststrasse 80, D-10117 Berlin, http://www.ezw-berlin.de; *Spuren – Magazin für Neues Bewusstsein*, Rudolfstrasse 13, CH-8400 Winterthur, http://www.spuren.ch)