

RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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ENVISIONING AMERICAN RELIGION IN THE NINETIES

Last month RELIGION WATCH suggested that some aspects of religion in the 1990s may differ sharply from the religious situation of the 1980s. The following forecasts provide a look at different strands of American religion and how they may change (or remain the same) during the '90s. Since some of these reports don't pretend to be unbiased, they also provide a barometer indicating how various religious groups are greeting the new decade.

For a forecast of the Christian situation 1990s, pollster George Gallup Jr. says in an interview with Christianity Today (November 17) that the momentum of evangelical growth started in the late 1970s will continue. He adds that the demographics alone would indicate such continuity. "Younger people, for example, tend to be more evangelical, while the mainline churches have a higher proportion of older people, which points to a higher drop-off rate in the years ahead." Gallup adds that the "sex-related issues are going to be among the most important issues facing all churches in the foreseeable future. Abortion, AIDS, premarital sex, homosexuality, all those are all going to be at the vortex of the problems confronting all churches." In reporting on the new book by Gallup and Jim Castelli, The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90s, the Atlanta Journal and Constitution (January 13) quotes the authors as saying that the "American population that will emerge in the 1990s will be more Catholic, more non-Western, more Mormon, more unaffiliated and less Protestant than it is today."

Moody Monthly (January), the conservative evangelical magazine, forecasts several other issues that will increasingly concern evangelicals in the 1990s. The New Age movement will continue to occupy evangelicals' attention, providing "one of the most serious challenges to the church in the 1990s," writes evangelical pastor and author Erwin Lutzer. Missionary strength will increasingly move from the First World, missionary-"sending" countries" to the Third World, where both converts and missionaries are growing faster than in the West, according to missions expert David Hesselgrave. Women in the ministry may become an evangelical issue, just as it was a mainline Protestant issue during the past three decades. The increasing number of women now in evangelical seminaries will make this issue far from theoretical for many congregations, according to Richard Mayhue. With a growing charismatic presence in "nearly all Christian communions...it seems likely that in the 1990s, the charismatic movement will be a pivotal issue with continual influence," writes Edith Blumhofer.

In the charismatic magazine Charisma & Christian Life (January),

forecasts for the 1990s often run into "prophesies," of revival of Christianity, the persecution of Christians and just plain turbulence. The magazine asks 11 "prophetic ministers," those who are said to have the gift for prophesying the future, to present their visions for the 1990s. Almost all of the contributors see an intensification and growing militancy of the faith in the face of secular opposition, and, at the same time, more humility among charismatic ministries for the years ahead. As might be expected, the fallout among televangelists in the late '80s figures highly in the contributors' calls for humility and criticisms of "self-promotion." Says a pessimistic Bob Mumford, "Over the next 10 years, we will see more and more men and women in the ministry fall morally, quit or lose their anointing, causing them to become plastic and unreal." The more upbeat tone of the contributors is reflected in Grace Ministries' John Paul Jackson, who says that the '90s will see a revival "like no other seen in America."

Twin Cities Christian, (January 11) an evangelical newspaper in the Twin Cities, looks at possible prophetic events unfolding in the '90s and finds quite a few-- from the growth of occultism and the New Age to the intifada in the Middle East. Holding a high place in such scenarios is the linking of globalism or "one-worldism" (as evidenced in the spread of democratic reforms to Eastern Europe) with biblical prophecies regarding the Anti-Christ. On the other side of the spectrum, the radical Christian Sojourners magazine (January) is optimistic about current world developments (as opposed its more pessimistic mood during the Reagan years) and where they are leading. Danny Collum writes that a new form of populism, stressing economic and political democracy for working people, will emerge in the '90s. The sources of such populism will not "be in the center of the Democratic Party...[but] in the varied landscape of popular culture and local institutions," particularly religious institutions, which are "among the only remaining social structures that have both access to a broad section of the American people and the capacity for independent action and thought."

But the social activism that became a hallmark of American Catholic bishops and their organization, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), in the 1980s, may be in retreat soon, says the National Catholic Register (December 10). Archbishops Daniel Pilarczyk and William Keeler, the newly elected president and vice president of the NCCB are expected to moderate the American bishops' ~~course in the next~~ decade, according to observers. Reporter Todd Ackerman writes that such observers "say the pastoral letters, like the ones on war and peace and the economy won't dominate the 1990s." NCCB watcher George Weigel adds that Pilarczyk and Keeler will "lead a shift of Catholic identity...Evangelism, leadership, education, preaching-- those will be the issues occupying the conference in the coming decade." Abortion is likely to remain on the bishops' agenda, observers add. Thomas Reese, a specialist on American bishops, however, disputes such a trend, seeing both bishops more as followers than leaders, who will "go in the same direction as the rest of the conference."

Meanwhile, in his newsletter Context (January 1), Martin E. Marty, a noted interpreter of American religion, examines the New Age movement at the start of the new decade and says its impact may be waning. Citing reports in Publishers Weekly magazine, Marty notes that booksellers (since the movement is so unorganized, New Age book sales are considered the best way to monitor its growth) are retiring the "New Age" name and that book sales are dropping. But writer Margaret Jones says that

"whatever gives the movement impetus... appears to be flourishing as we enter the 1990s," but now it deals less with "metaphysics and the occult" and has crossed over to influence the "entire spectrum of non-fiction," such as business and science (although goddess religion remains popular). One bookseller says that "Almost all booksellers agree that crystals and channeling are history." (Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60187; Moody Monthly, 820 N. LaSalle Dr., Chicago, IL 60610; Charisma & Christian Life, 600 Rinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746; Twin Cities Christian, 1619 Portland Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55404; National Catholic Register, 12700 Ventura Blvd., Suite 200, Studio City, CA 91604; Context, 205 W. Monroe St., Chicago, IL 60606)

THOSE WITH NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES ORGANIZING FOR SUPPORT

With an increase of near-death experiences being reported, support groups for those who have experienced such phenomena are springing up across the U.S., reports the Hartford Courant (January 11). The support groups are to help those with such experiences "resolve the conflicts that can arise because their personalities change," reports Gerald Renner. To help people open up about these usually suppressed experiences, 24 associations have been set up throughout the U.S. within the last four years. Others have formed in England, Western Europe, Australia and Japan. A 1981 Gallup poll estimated that eight million Americans have had brushes with death that included encounters of a supernatural manner. And the number of such reports are growing as medical technology is able to pull back more people from the edge of death.

Researchers have been divided between "materialists," who believe that the stress of dying triggers a natural-physio-chemical reaction that results in delusions and those claiming the experience to be a genuine encounter with another dimension. Studies at the University of Connecticut Health Center--a major center for scientific inquiry into the subject of near-death-death experiences-- and elsewhere have shown that people who have the experience, which usually includes a sensation of floating apart from the body and being encompassed by a radiant light, "become more spiritual and compassionate. They see life has purpose and desire to help others," Renner reports. Bruce Greyson, a psychiatrist who is editor of the Journal of Near Death Studies, says that "Our western materialistic culture tends to pooh-pooh these things, so that it is even harder for someone who has gone through this to lead a normal life."

GROWING HINDU INFLUENCE IN AMERICAN COMICS?

Eastern spirituality, especially Hinduism, is increasingly finding a prominent place in American popular culture through comic books, according to Hinduism Today newspaper (January). In examining popular comic books published by such mainstream names as Marvel Comics and D.C. Comics, the newspaper notes that "it's obvious that many have orbited way out of Western thinking into the outer and inner space of Hinduism." Examples of such influence would include the comicbook, "Arak, Son of Thunder," which has references to the Hindu deity Lord Ganesha and features the hero, IronFist sitting in lotus position meditating; in the popular Batman series, Hinduism moves into the comics scenarios either as "an exotic element....or as a sublime teaching difficult to find in a

cynical world."

Other examples are Dr. Fate's "Night of Brahma," series, where the "philosophical focus is on the Hindu concept of mahapralaya, 'great withdrawal,' the absorption of all existence back into the mind of God." The newspaper adds that comic books traditional emphasis on "sheer adventure" has been phased out, although the old characters are living on in new form. Alan Moore, a British writer with a "wide knowledge of Hinduism," has transformed the once-sour-tempered "Swamp Thing" into a "gentle giant of a plant" who sits in yoga meditation and recites Japanese Haiku poetry. Another comic writer with "Hindu sensibilities" is J.M. De Matteis, who mentions the Hindu visionary sage, Meher Baba on the title page of his Hindu-influenced graphics novel, "Dr. Strange into Shamballa." (Hinduism Today, 1819 Second St, Concord, CA 94519)

MODERATE WING OF MAINLINE PROTESTANTISM GROWING?

The Christian Century (January 17), known as the flagship magazine of mainline Protestants, recently ran a survey of its readers which suggests that "moderates" are becoming a significant force in the once liberal-dominated world of mainline Protestantism. Among the surveyed subscribers (of whom 83 percent are ordained) it was found that the Century's political stance was described as "liberal" by two-thirds and politically "moderate" by 30 percent. But only 55 percent of the respondents agree that the magazine's theological stance was "liberal," while 42 percent consider it to be "moderate." Only eight percent of Century readers describe themselves as "very liberal," while self-described "liberal" (45 percent) and "moderate" (40 percent) readers dominate.

On the issue of homosexuality, only 41 percent of readers would have the church "move toward fully accepting and ordaining homosexuals." The majority (54 percent) chose the moderate position: they would "accept homosexual people but be mindful of moral and scriptural objections to homosexual practice." It was found that longtime readers tended to be more liberal on this question. On abortion, the pro-choice position was selected by just over half the respondents (52 percent), while the more moderate option of balancing the rights of the fetus with those of the mother was endorsed by 37 percent. Again, it was found that the strongest pro-choice vote was among long-time readers, and the "strongest moderate bloc was among those who have been readers for only a couple of years." (The Christian Century, 407 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60625)

CANADIAN SOCIAL ACTIVISM TO SUFFER IN MAINLINE CUTBACKS?

The future of Canada's influential ecumenical social action coalitions are being threatened by the financial crunch affecting the Canadian mainline churches, according to the United Church Observer (January), the official magazine of the United Church of Canada. Like its U.S. counterparts, the United Church, Canada's major mainline body, is making major reductions in its budget, resulting in "significant cuts" starting in 1991 or withdrawal of support from some coalitions altogether "unless alternative solutions are found." The coalitions, which were formed in the early 1970s, have been "widely praised as the 'cutting edge' of church justice efforts, providing research, lobbying and in some cases

national support networks" for liberal activism on such social issues as human rights in Latin America and Native land claims in Canada.

By the end of 1989 the church-funded coalitions (numbering about a dozen) had grown into a "formidable ecumenical force," with their offices operating with budgets from \$100,000 to \$500,000. Even without the financial troubles, there is a need for changes in the coalitions, according to one ecumenical official. They have lost the sense of being part of a movement which sparked their formation, and they need closer ties with church constituencies, the official adds. (United Church Observer, 85 St. Clair Ave., Toronto, Ont., M4T 1M8 Canada)

MORE ON GAIA AND SCIENTISTS' RELIGION

In the December and January issues, RW reported that scientists have taken up the New Age-influenced Gaia theory--that the earth acts with a sense of purpose in maintaining its functions-- with some secular-scientific adaptations. But Scientific American magazine (December) claims that the difference between new age and scientific concepts of Gaia are growing wider rather than narrower. Writer Tim Beardsley notes that the mystical ideas surrounding Gaia that were originally part of the theory devised by British researcher James E. Lovelock in the 1960s has been changed enough by many scientists (including Lovelock) to render any New Age connections obsolete. Original Gaia theories, such as that the earth creates optimal conditions for itself and regulates itself, are coming under attack by biologists (including long-time Gaia proponent Lynn Margulis). Beardsley asks if "Gaia is anything more than the simple persistence of life? If so, she has yet to reveal herself. Her many lay followers, however, seem unwilling to hear that the goddess of their temple is nowhere to be found."

Even if Gaia doesn't have religious connotations for scientists, there does seem to be a rapprochement going on between the scientific community and religion-- or at least a certain kind of religion. The New York Times (January 20) reports that 23 "distinguished scientists, including three Nobel laureates," recently made an appeal for an "alliance between religion and science to preserve the world's environment." The appeal, sponsored by the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival in Moscow, said that "Many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe...Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred." The author of the appeal was Carl Sagan, who has been criticized for being anti-religious. Today Sagan says he has become increasingly aware of the universality and its potential as a "force for good." But the scientists view that the universe is sacred is likely to conflict with traditional believers in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the article adds. (Scientific American, 415 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10017)

YOUNG AMERICANS RANK FIRST IN CLAIMING RELIGION'S IMPORTANCE

On a recent multi-national Gallup survey, young adults in America were ranked first in the importance they attach to religion, according to Emerging Trends (December), the newsletter of the Princeton Religion Research Center. The survey shows that over nine in 10 young American adults, ages 18 to 24, believe that religion should be important in life, including 47 percent saying it should be very important. Only

seven percent said it should not be important. Eighty percent of young Brazilians also believe that religion should be important, although 20 percent said it should not be important. In Asia, respondents from Singapore (74 percent) and Korea (68 percent) are most likely to affirm religion's importance, while only 38 percent of Japanese young adults share such a view. In a first glimpse of Chinese attitudes for many years, the survey shows that only four percent of Chinese said religion should be important, although an unusual 20 percent said they had no opinion on the matter. Less than half of European young adults claimed religion important.

Young adults from West Germany and the United Kingdom were the lowest among Europeans in assigning importance to religion-- 39 percent and 35 percent respectively. Another survey, reported in the National Catholic Register (January 14), shows a sharp generation gap in religious belief between younger and older West Germans. First reported in the Bonn-based weekly Rheinischer Merkur, the survey shows that Mass attendance among Catholics is 37 percent, with Protestant practice reaching only 11 percent. But for Catholic and Protestant young people between the ages of 16 and 29, the figures were respectively 18 percent and just two percent. Basic belief was still found to be strong. Seventy percent of the general population believes in the creator, which is only eight percent less than 40 years ago. But belief in specific articles of faith fare worse: 46 percent of Catholics and 28 percent of the Protestants believe in the resurrection of the dead and eternal life. (Emerging Trends, P.O. Box 310, 53 Bank St., Princeton, NJ 08542)

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES SEE EXPANSION IN EASTERN EUROPE

With the greater religious freedom now in Eastern Europe, the Jehovah's Witnesses are gearing up for heavy recruitment and are already showing signs of growth, according to the West German evangelical news service idea (January 12). Until recently the Witnesses were officially banned in Eastern Europe and its members could only work underground. According to Stuttgart's West German Protestant Center for the Observation of Religious and Ideological Movements, the Jehovah's Witnesses are currently experiencing an eight percent increase of members in Eastern Europe. Last May, Poland officially registered the religious organization, the Watchtower Society, and Hungary followed in June.

A recent church congress in Poland--the first allowed in an Eastern bloc country-- drew about 32,000 members from surrounding countries. The report adds that Polish Jehovah's Witnesses hope that the Communist Party does not lose all its power to the [Solidarity] movement. They fear the influence of the Catholic Church, a strong opponent of the Jehovah's Witnesses and open supporter of [Solidarity]. The Witnesses' new plans and growth may also be encouraging the first "anti-cult" movement among mainstream churches in Eastern Europe. An East German study group, "Christian Responsibility," has recruited evangelical ministers to help counteract missionary efforts by the Witnesses. Protestant sources say that Italy has the largest number of Jehovah's Witnesses with 160,000 members, followed by West Germany and Britain with 113,000 each. (idea, Postfach 1820, D-6330 Wetzlar, West Germany)

CHINESE INTELLECTUALS GRAVITATING TO CHURCHES AFTER TIANANMEN

Since the Tiananmen Square crackdown last June, there has been a "remarkable phenomenon" of thousands of Chinese intellectuals turning away from Maoist philosophy to the Christian faith, according to a

special report in News Network International, (January 17), a news service focusing on religious freedom. One Chinese student interviewed says that the government-approved violence last June against the pro-democracy movement led many students and intellectuals to lose their faith in the Chinese Communist Party and have been drawn to Christianity. The Christian doctrine of original sin won a hearing among Chinese who believed that the traditional Chinese religions emphasizing the goodness of humanity could not explain the brutality of the massacres. While facts are difficult to gather in China's closed society, one China expert, Leslie Francis, says that the "turning of students to Christianity since June 4 involves not merely hundreds, but definitely thousands throughout China."

There are reports that from among the student population in many cities--especially those far away from Beijing-- as much as 10 percent of students have converted, and many official and unofficial--or house church-- church leaders report a sharp increase in inquiries from students. While intellectuals have been drawn to Christianity throughout the 1980s, the recent influx of intellectuals to the faith may change the Christian situation in the country. As might be expected, most of the new converts are moving into the house church movement instead of the government-approved churches. While house churches have traditionally drawn the less-educated rural believers and are often criticized as anti-intellectual, the new intellectual presence in the movement may create an "entirely new strand of Chinese Christianity," as well as cause tensions within the house church leadership, writes Ron MacMillan. Meanwhile, the government has tolerated the interest in Christianity in the hope that Christians would be less likely to attempt violent insurrection.

But the Catholics Church in China is undergoing a new wave of persecution after a period of calm by the hardline government installed after the Tiananmen massacre, according to the Catholic newsmagazine 30 Days (January). There have been several arrests of Catholic leaders in November and December, including Bishop Peter Liu Guangdong of the diocese of Yixian in the Hobei province (who has not been heard from since, Bishop Joseph Li Side of Tianian and Father Anthony Chang, leader of a large Chinese Catholic community. There have also been "many other arrests of priest, catechists and laypeople," according to the report. All of the Catholic leaders arrested are loyal to the Vatican and opposed to the government-sanctioned Catholic Patriotic Association, which eschews foreign ties. (News Network International, P.O. Box 28001, Santa Ana, CA 92799; 30 Days, 2515 McAllister St., San Francisco, CA 94118)

GLASNOST OPENS WAY FOR OCCULT IN USSR

While belief in the occult and magic has had a long history in the Soviet Union, such phenomena is spreading more rapidly and gaining a public hearing with the changes wrought by glasnost, according to the Catholic monthly 30 Days (January). Public interest in supernatural phenomena, such as faith healing, Russian folk magic and parapsychology, began to grow during the Brezhnev era, although such matters were not openly discussed, writes Irina Alberti. But in the Gorbachev era once-forbidden occult practices are now openly discussed, often with the help of television. The two most popular figures on Soviet TV are Alan Chumak and a "wizard" named Kaspirovsky, who are both faith healers. Each episode of their shows attempts to come to grips with such serious

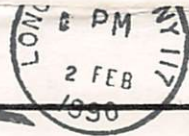
illnesses as cancer.

To gain more credibility, Kaspirovsky has tried to assure his audience that he is on good terms with the Orthodox Church, claiming that the Orthodox leader Metropolitan Filaret of Kiev has approved of his work. The church official "has not seen fit to deny such claims." It is added that "off the TV screens, Satanic worship is now talked about openly. Followers of Satan meet in Moscow parks and celebrate their rites in the cover of the bushes. They have even set up tents for their meetings. The military police stand by but make no move to dislodge them." Alberti writes that this sect may only be mimicking Western fashions, and that the occult trend may be a "superficial reaction to the recurring boredom of the Soviet lifestyle, a rebellion against socialist good behavior." But she also adds that the "government seems to encourage such activity as a kind of escape valve for society's worries and frustrations."

RISE IN SECULAR FUNERALS IN BRITAIN

There is a growing number of nonreligious funerals in Britain, according to the New York Times (January 10). The British Humanist Association says the number of secular funerals it conducts has "quadrupled in the last couple of years to several hundred a week around the country. In addition, its do-it-yourself handbook, 'Funerals Without God: A Practical Guide to Nonreligious Funerals,' is selling briskly." The association's volunteer officiants, have doubled in number to 160 over the last six months. The demand for secular funerals is not only coming from the nonreligious but also from those wanting the more innovative and personalized services the association conducts. One bishop in charge of Church of England funerals says the nonreligious funerals are growing mainly among a "sophisticated minority" in London, while most Britons remain "residually Christian." A recent opinion poll in The Sunday Times shows that nearly three-quarters of the respondents said they believed in God, while agreeing that religious services had become irrelevant to everyday life.

CORRECTION: In the November cover story on the resigned Catholic priest movement, the incorrect headquarter city was given for CORPUS, the resigned priests organization. Instead of Chicago, CORPUS is based in Minneapolis.



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