

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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## RELIGIOUS PRESS ON GULF WAR COVERS THE SPECTRUM, WITH SOME SURPRISES

While the views of the religious press on the Persian Gulf war have generally mirrored secular opinion on the issue, there have been some different twists in such coverage that are worth noting. While the more liberal religious press has tended to oppose U.S. intervention in the Middle East, there is not a united front among conservative publications on the gulf war as there has been on past issues. It should be noted that since many of the following periodicals' positions on the war were issued before the actual conflict started, they may be subject to change as military action unfolds-- a development RELIGION WATCH will be monitoring in the months ahead.

The liberal Protestant magazines Christianity & Crisis (January 7) and The Christian Century (January 23) both issued strong condemnations of a possible war with Iraq. The Century stated that the conflict would "inflame religious passions in the region for decades, if not centuries. It could create a new cold war along religious and ethnic lines at the very moment when we see the end of the ideological war that has driven world history for the past four decades." The liberal to moderate Catholic magazines, Commonweal (January 25) and America (January 19) both called for President Bush to give more time for sanctions to work and avoid conflict, with the latter publication voicing the suspicion that the gulf war may become only "a new and improved model" of the Vietnam War. Tikkun (January/February), the journal of the Jewish left, was alone in the Jewish press for its condemnation of a war with Iraq, although it did so with some ambivalence. The journal does not rule out military action against Iraq in the future, and while it criticizes the Bush administration for not including such issues as a Middle East peace conference in negotiations with Saddam Hussein, it adds that it "is illegitimate to morally equate Israel's occupation of the West Bank...with Iraq's naked act of aggression."

More typical of the Jewish press was the weekly Long Island Jewish World (January 25), which praised the intervention of the U.S., as it "will be in a unique position to extend the peace that comes with victory to the entire region." Returning to the Christian press, the mainstream evangelical Christianity Today (January 14) editorialized that "For the U.S. and its allies to have the power to restore justice and not to do so may actually be immoral, which is why we sympathize with our President when he draws the line against Iraqi aggression." The

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conservative National Catholic Register came close to remaining neutral on the issue, presenting views both supporting and criticizing a war with Iraq. But the January 13th issue featured an editorial by neoconservative writer George Weigel that inches toward an acceptance of force against Iraq, claiming that the conflict can measure up to just war standards, and that "Hussein's ambitions and his arsenal is one that the civilized world cannot tolerate if we're to avoid a human catastrophe of staggering proportions."

But as one moves further to the right, there is something of a reversal in the religious press' view on the war, which approaches an isolationist position. The militant conservative Catholic newspaper The Wanderer (January 17), features only anti-war sentiments on the issue. Writer Joseph Sobran, who serves as a Washington columnist for the paper, says the advantages of fighting Hussein do not outweigh the "likely carnage, the foreseeable consequences, and the unpredictable risks." Sobran criticizes the growing power of the American government to wage war and the "pro-Israel" lobby's role in the conflict, which he says identifies Israel's concerns with those of the U.S. A more forceful case is made against the war in the new conservative Calvinist magazine Antithesis (January/February). An editorial charges that Bush is engaging in "internationalism" for "corrupt monarchies and cheap oil," and that such "militarism" serves to increasingly centralize the U.S. government bureaucracy. The ultra-conservative Christian News (January 21) headlines the war "A Great Tragedy," and says that Bush has "usurped far too much authority by leading our nation into what could be a bloody war...for decades we have taken issue with the 'messianic nature' of American foreign policy." [Unfortunately no fundamentalist periodicals commenting on the war were available at press time. But with the strong support for Israel by many fundamentalist groups (largely for reasons concerning the fulfillment of biblical prophecy), there will probably be less opposition to U.S. involvement in the conflict.]

## INTERVIEW: RELIGIOUS PEACE MOVEMENT LOOKS FOR POST-VIETNAM FUTURE

[The movement against the gulf war is reported to be gaining momentum in the United States. The religious presence has been a prominent part of the protests-- at least according to the number of anti-war statements issued by mainline churches. To find out more about the religious factor in the new peace movement, RW recently interviewed Chuck Fager, editor and publisher of the independent Quaker newsletter, A Friendly Letter, and a participant and observer of peace movements since the Vietnam War.]

**RW:** How strong is the religious element in the current anti-war movement?

**FAGER:** It's hard to know yet. At the [January 26th] anti-war march in Washington, D.C., there were plenty of religious people involved. But it should be noted that the themes of the protests have been more patriotic than political or religious. U.S. flags were the most frequent symbol at the march. It appears that there is a lot of religious activity against the war, but it is still uncoordinated since there hasn't been time for coalition-building. Mainstream churches had become involved in the protests before the war, such as Presiding Bishop [Edmund] Browning of the Episcopal Church. But since the war actually began, Browning and

other church leaders will probably be laying low for a while [to avoid controversy].

**RW:** Having been an observer and participant in the Vietnam anti-war movement, what do you see as the major differences between the peace movement now and the movement of the 1960s, especially when it comes to religious issues?

**FAGER:** The display of the flag and the concern for the troops in the gulf during the recent march showed two big changes. During Vietnam most of us were ashamed of the flag. We gave that symbol away to the war advocates. Today the peace movement is more politically astute. On the religious issue, what I see is that most denominations are undergoing turmoil; the leftist establishment in the churches is undergoing a challenge. People are rethinking things. The failure of communism and most forms of socialism...in Eastern Europe shows how much things have changed. Back in the '60s, the trend was very much in the other direction. There wasn't this mini-establishment of churches that was entrenched and not answerable to its members. Frankly, these church bureaucracies are generals without armies. What I am impressed with today is that people are organizing from the ground up. The changes are not going to come from press releases. Let's see the churches organize protests. I don't think they have the constituencies.

**RW:** With such a mood of rethinking, have there been challenges to Quaker's anti-war attitudes and activism, such as by evangelical and conservative Friends?

**FAGER:** Quakers are reconsidering their attachment to liberal and leftist attitudes, but that's not the same thing as opposition to war. Quakers are holding strong on this issue. There were evangelical Quakers who supported the war in Vietnam and they will probably support this war. But it should be noted that evangelical Friends can also be pacifists.

**RW:** What are some of the issues and directions in which the new religious peace movement is moving?

**FAGER:** Civil disobedience is not an issue yet but it will be. Already, members of Pax Christi, a Catholic peace organization, were the first sizable group of religious people to be arrested for civil disobedience. Another issue will be dealing with military conscientious objectors...There are churches already declaring themselves sanctuaries for military people opposing combat...Quakers were in the forefront of lay draft counseling of conscientious objectors on the local level during Vietnam. And there is great interest in doing that again. But my information is 20 years old. There is a re-training problem to get over. As that takes place [such draft counseling] will be springing out of the ground. Quakers will be in the forefront of this.

**RW:** You have written about the division in the U.S. peace movement. Could you explain this and tell us how it may relate to religious involvement in the movement?

**FAGER:** One of the two major peace groups, the Coalition to Stop U.S. Intervention in the Middle East, are made up of true blue revolutionaries, including such groups as the Communist Workers World

Parties, who see the U.S. as the center of imperialism. But they refuse to criticize Iraq. That didn't wash with most peace groups [which are associated with the other coalition, the National Campaign for Peace in the Middle East]. There was a lot of confusion going on about this in religious groups, but it's being sorted out...

RW: How do you view the immediate future of the religious peace movement if the war continues for the next few months?

FAGER: It will be growing; it's definitely on the upswing. The longer the war goes on, and the more soldiers are killed, the more support the anti-war movement will draw, both in and out of the churches. There will also be more divisions over the war. But I would say the peace movement is well positioned to seem more and more credible, especially if it keeps waving the flag and supporting the troops.

## NEW-STYLE HINDU MISSIONARIES COMING TO THE WEST

Hindu missionary activity is emerging in a variety of forms, but it is likely to take a more low-key approach than that of Christianity and other religions, according to the newspaper, Hinduism Today (January). An evangelical missionary leader had asked the paper to comment on the "growing missionary spirit in Hinduism," and the editor obliges with several observations on the present and future of such activity. An editorial agrees that Hinduism's "missionary sense" is growing and locates such an upsurge in such flourishing movements as the Radhasoami and Sai Baba, which have "made vigorous efforts to move onto the global stage. There is the Brahma Jumari sect, strong in education and the peace movement, working effectively at the United Nations. Their millennial concepts (unusual in the Hindu world), feminist emphasis, disciplined ways and ecumenical meditations make them a force to contend with." But the editor sees the "real action" not in the big movements but in a "million villages from Georgetown to Montreal, from Durban to Chicago. Hindus everywhere are becoming stronger and more assertive."

Some of the factors in this new assertiveness would include the "unprecedented influx of talent and money from the West in the past 30 years, giving these groups the ability to reach out," especially through new forms of technology; the New Age, Green and animal rights movements have given Hindu concerns access to the West's mainstream; the failure of communism and rejection of "one-way-only" religions that emphasize sin and judgement by a large part of the world; the increasingly accepted position that cultures and ethnic groups, including Hinduism, should be preserved; the militant Hindu backlash against Western missionaries and "violent and un-Hindu" grasps for political power. The editor forecasts that Hinduism will have a "surprisingly sophisticated network around the globe in 20 years. You will see the first Hindu encyclopedia and far more publications from Hindus...There will be no TV evangelism...It will be small, intimate, grass roots. You will see the unusual missionary style of the [Transcendental Meditation] movement proliferate-- a button-down quasi-scientific validation of the ancient Vedic tradition. You will see alliances form among Hindus and Christians (probably the Episcopalians at first, not the Assemblies of God)...A small army of yoga missionaries--hatha, raja, siddha and kundalini-- beautifully trained in the last 10 years, is about to set upon the Western world. They may not call themselves Hindu, but Hindus know where yoga comes from and where it goes." (*Hinduism Today*, P.O. Box 157, Hanamaulu, HI 96715)

## MANIFESTO SIGNALING NEW TURN IN LIBERAL CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ACTIVISM?

The rethinking on social issues that is going on among some liberal Protestants and Catholics in the wake of such world changes as the collapse of communist and socialist governments can be seen in a front page "Post-Communist Manifesto," appearing in the flagship magazine of mainline Protestantism, the Christian Century (January 16). The manifesto, issued by two social ethicists, Max Stackhouse, a Congregationalist, and Dennis McCann, a Catholic, calls for a "public theology after the collapse of socialism." Stackhouse and McCann write that the "failure of the socialist vision" is unlike other world developments as it "demands repentance" from religious leaders, who "still cling to the belief that capitalism is greedy, individualistic, exploitative and failing; that socialism is generous, community-affirming, equitable and coming; and that the transition from one to the other is what God is doing in the world." The writers call for a "reformed capitalism-- one that uses law, politics, education and especially theology and ethics to constrain the temptations to exploitation and greed everywhere."

Stackhouse and McCann add that a new public theology--which is defined as a way of speaking of God and "God's will for the world that is intellectually valid in the marketplace of ideas..."-- "must develop a social ethic for the emerging world in which democracy, human rights and a mixed economy are acknowledged as universal necessities." The manifesto stresses a technological future and the role of corporations in the creation of wealth. Corporations are compared to a secular form of a Christian "covenantal community...the business corporation has, as much as any other institution, leaped cultural and social boundaries and broken down the walls that divide people." The manifesto concludes in a similar manner to the Communist Manifesto: "Christians of the world awake! Now that the specter of communism has vanished, cast off the spell of economic dogmatism! There is nothing to lose but ideology and irrelevance." (*Christian Century*, 407 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60625)

## JEWISH ACADEMICS INCREASINGLY ASSERTING FAITH IN UNIVERSITIES

American Jewish professors are increasingly finding their religious roots and are openly affirming their faith in the university context, according to Sh'ma, (January 11) a bi-weekly Jewish journal. "These changes are quite visible in the increasing numbers of faculty who attend High Holiday services, and those who regularly participate in Shabbat morning service on campus. Today, a Jewish President of a University will hold the Torah...at Hillel High Holiday services-- a picture altogether unthinkable just a short while ago," writes Edward Feld. The new Jewish vibrancy can be seen by in the many Jewish faculty members whose primary fields are not Judaica but who are integrating Jewish themes into their courses; one well-known example of this is Yale's Harold Bloom (author of the recent controversial, "The Book of J"), who has used the Jewish mystical kabbalah to inform critical theory. The loss of faith in the "great isms of the twentieth century-- communism, socialism, liberalism, scientism--has opened the way for a reexamination of the possibility of religion," among Jewish faculty, who

number as high as 50-60,000 on American campuses.

But the renewal of Judaism among faculty members does not necessarily translate into greater involvement in the Jewish community. Feld notes that only 10 percent of the Jewish faculty at Princeton University are members of the only local synagogue and that most are drawn to such university Jewish organizations as Hillel. Such a disaffection may be the result of a clash in values between professors and organized Judaism over such issues as gender roles, allegiance to Israel and the "importance of theological inquiry." In another article, Joseph Kohane notes a revival of Judaism among professors at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and adds that while many of these professionals are uncomfortable with Jewish observances they may be changing synagogues. "The significant increase in Jewish self-consciousness, the heartfelt efforts by an ever greater number of Jews to connect to some form of Jewish lifestyle has broadened the tolerance for diversity within Jewish institutional life. Jewish faculty's unprecedented high level of comfort with its Jewish identity may be an indicator of a shift that has occurred within the American Jewish community. It may reflect the readiness of individual Jews to stand up to their tradition to make it over in their own image even as they strive to make themselves over to fulfill the minimal expectations imposed by affiliation." (Sh'ma, Box 567, Port Washington, NY 11050)

## CURRENT RESEARCH: RECENT FINDINGS ON RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES

\* A recent Gallup Poll adds further evidence to the claim that the Western region of the U.S. is not so much non-religious--as has been generally assumed in the past--as unconventionally religious. Emerging Trends (December), the Gallup newsletter on religion, reports that about one American adult in five in 1990 claimed involvement in Bible study (21 percent), prayer or meditation groups (21 percent), and religious education classes (20 percent). When such religious activity was divided along regional lines, it was found that Southerners rated the highest in Bible study and religious education classes. But while residents of the West rated among the lowest in these two activities, they ranked a close second to Southerners in their involvement in prayer and meditation groups (24 compared to 25 percent). The newsletter notes that in "certain parts of California the term 'meditation' may take on different meanings" as compared with the practice in other regions. (Emerging Trends, 100 Palmer Square, Suite 213, P.O. Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542)

\* Nearly 70 percent of Americans believe that religious leaders have a right to express their views against abortion to elected officials, according to a recent survey reported in the Long Island Catholic newspaper (January 23). The poll, conducted by the Wirthlin Group for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, found that 69 percent of the 1,000 people surveyed agreed with the statement: "A Church that believes it is morally wrong to have an abortion has the right to advocate its position to the public, including elected officials." The findings may conflict with pro-choice sentiment that most Americans see abortion as one of private choice and that religious leaders should have little political say on the matter. (Long Island Catholic, P.O. Box 700, Hempstead, NY 11551)

\* Mennonites in North America are becoming more conservative and more politically active, reports the Canadian evangelical magazine Faith

Today (January/February). The magazine cites the results of the 1989 Church Membership Profile II, which surveyed 3,100 people in five major Mennonite denominations on theological, moral and political views, and compares them with 1972 findings on lifestyles and attitudes in the churches. The results showed that the political views of Mennonites have shifted toward the right during the 15-year period. In Canada [which has a large Mennonite population], support for the Progressive Conservative Party increased by 16 percent to a total of 47 percent while support for the Social Credit and Liberal parties decreased. Seventy percent of the respondents disagree with the statement, "It is not the business of the church to try to influence the actions of government," compared with 56 percent who disagreed in 1972. There is also more agreement that Mennonites should vote in elections and hold public office, and that the church should engage in political action. All of the surveyed denominations have histories of "guarded views of the Christian's role in government." The study found Mennonites to be more urban and educated. While there were few shifts on doctrine, Mennonites today are now more opposed to extramarital affairs, smoking marijuana and tobacco, and homosexual acts but more liberal on such issues as divorce and remarriage, social dancing and drinking alcohol. (Faith Today, Box 8800, Stn. B, Willowdale, Ont. M2K 2R6 Canada)

\* Church attendance continues to drop sharply in Canada, although most Canadians still believe in a creator, according to the National Catholic Register (January 20). In a report first carried by Canada's Globe and Mail newspaper, sociologist Reginald Bibby is cited as finding that Canadians possess a "strange, ignorant" spirituality and have a "definite reluctance to endorse religion." In his recent book, "Mosaic Madness," Bibby cites Gallup Poll figures which show that in 1946, 67 percent of the population attended a church or synagogue on an average weekly basis. Fifteen years ago, the percentage stood at 41. By 1990, the figure had dropped to 27 percent. But Bibby reports that 84 percent of young Canadians 15 to 24 years of age say they believe in God. Eighty three percent of adults hold similar beliefs. The same percentage of young people and 74 percent of adults admit to praying "occasionally." (National Catholic Register, 12700 Ventura Blvd., Studio City, CA 91604)

\* A number of "yogis" or mystics in India have recently been subjecting themselves to scientific scrutiny and have been documented to produce uninterrupted "alpha" brain waves and other unexplainable feats, according to Hinduism Today newspaper (January). One study carried out by the Yoga and Consciousness Project at India's National Institute of Mental Health and Neuroscience in Bangalore, found that a number of mystics were able to produce the alpha brain waves, a sign of complete concentration and relaxation, while being subject to bright flashing lights, loud noises such as firecrackers and horns, and having their skin pierced with sharp objects. Other yogis were reported to have been able to stop their heartbeat or bring their breathing to a stop for short periods. The institute, which will be issuing a report on its research this year, prompted a yogi known for "burying himself for weeks at a time in holes which he digs himself," to undergo three ten hour tests and found that he "amazingly cut his oxygen intake to about half its normal rate, unprecedented in the archives of medical history," according to the newspaper.

## PERESTROIKA ENDING FOR SOVIET BELIEVERS?

With hints of repression returning to the Soviet Union, religious believers are bracing themselves for a new wave of crackdowns on their

freedoms, according to the National Catholic Register (January 20). With much of the world's attention on the Gulf war, an authoritarian backlash in the Soviet Union has been taking place, with many Christians fearing that recent religious reforms will be rolled back. Aleksander Ogorodnikov, a prominent Russian Orthodox dissident, says, "In effect, we're witnessing a quiet coup d'etat bringing perestroika to an end." Reporter Jonathan Luxmoore writes that while a new law was passed last October officially curbing state interference in church activities, the legislation's "implementation has been patchy so far. Parishes have been refused legal registration, religious broadcasts are still being resisted; and though church groups have offered to help distribute desperately needed Western food aid, their work is hampered by deliberate bureaucratic obstacles."

Luxmoore adds that "More troubling still, intimidation is growing." Last September, the popular Orthodox priest Alexander Men was murdered, and other cases have followed. In late December, a Christian poet of Jewish origin (Men was also of Jewish background) died in a suspicious road accident, and on Jan. 2, a church investigator looking into the case was murdered at his home. Ogorodnikov says that "Attempts are being made to stir up conflict as a pretext for blocking concessions. We can't call it persecution. But it is the beginning of a reaction." Luxmoore adds that although dissidents may require Western help "if outside contacts are to be developed, even moral sympathy is unlikely while Western governments are preoccupied with events in the Gulf. Perseverance and self-reliance will be the only trusty weapons."

## IRAN RETURNING TO RELIGIOUS REPRESSION

After a period of relaxation on government restrictions of religious freedom in Iran, there is evidence of a "new, harsher round of systematic repression against Christians, especially those who are former Muslims," reports the Swiss-based Ecumenical Press Service (January 16-31). While the death of Ayatollah Khomeini was said to have eased religious persecution [see October '89 RW], the new wave of repression was evidenced last July when authorities closed the Iranian Bible Society and confiscated its files. More recently, a former Muslim, Pentecostal pastor was executed after being tortured during two months of imprisonment on charges of spying, according to a report by Southern Baptist missionaries. While Christianity is officially legal, there has also been Christian congregations and bookstores closed recently. Christian conferences are now banned and government approval is required for weddings or church outings. (Ecumenical Press Service, Box 2100, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland)

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**TIME-DATED MATERIAL — PLEASE RUSH**