



RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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SCIENTIFIC BREAKTHROUGHS PLAYING A NEW ROLE IN THEOLOGY

It wasn't too long ago that the fields of science and theology were indifferent, if not hostile, to each other. It was unheard of that scientists would be in the forefront of a new theological movement. Yet that seems to be the case in the recent development of "creation theology," a school of thought holding to the view that God's creation of the universe is an ongoing process and that humans are "co-creators" in this work. This theology's influence can be seen in the World Council of Churches' environmental and social action programs, and, in a more mystical variation, in Matthew Fox's creation spirituality. RELIGION WATCH recently attended the annual conference of New York's Trinity Institute--which is usually focused around current theological trends--entitled, "Creation: The New Story," to learn more about this new interaction between theology and science.

Conference participants were told by speakers that recent developments in biology and physics will have a long-range impact on theology. In focusing on physics, John Polkinghorne, a British physicist and Anglican priest, says that traditional--or "mechanical"-- views of the universe which see the creation as a finished work that operates according to predictable laws are being discarded. A new "revolution in the physical sciences has taken place," known as the chaos theory, which holds that the systems of the universe are unpredictable and are open to rapid changes. Polkinghorne illustrates the theory by describing how the motions of a butterfly in flight in Beijing, China can affect the weather in New York a month later. The theory holds that the various parts of the universe are interrelated and always in the process of evolving. Such a new framework in physics supports the concept that God's work of creation continues today, he added. Moving to the field of biology, Arthur Peacocke, another British Anglican priest and a biochemist, says that new findings in evolution point to an "ever increasing diversity of new life forms." In a way similar to the changes in physics, the new biological findings on the diversity of life suggest an "open-ended universe," where things happen that cannot be predicted.

The biochemist-priest says that such theories may mean that God created the world using chance, but in such a way that he "loaded the dice in favor of life." Such a view will also stress God's immanence (that he operates from within creation) more than his transcendence, or apartness from the world. The new developments in biology will impact theology and the churches in more concrete ways, according to Peacocke. Because

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creation is still taking place, humans are called to "cooperate with God's intentions," and serve as "co-creators." An emphasis on being co-creators will help Christians make a more "positive assessment of civilization and technology," have greater ecological concern, and "give a stronger role to the laity" in churches as bishops and priests are no longer seen as the only ones with a divine calling, he adds. It should be noted that Peacocke and Polkinghorne are not just importing New Age and Eastern religious theories into a Christian context. Polkinghorne criticized recent books claiming a convergence between developments in physics and Eastern religious concepts for ignoring the transcendence of God and having an "insubstantial" understanding of the science. Both priest-scientists claim they are part of a larger movement of scientists working on religious issues who in recent years have moved from a concern with "natural theology," that is, describing God's attributes through examining nature, to focusing on how God interacts with the world.

Most scientists involved in religion would be sympathetic to Polkinghorne's and Peacocke's views, according to Kevin Sharpe, editor of the *Science & Religion News*. Sharpe told RW that the new theories in biology and physics have had a "very powerful effect in theology and in breaking down the determinism in science which has opposed religion." It is particularly the chaos theory which has recently been "helping to develop a religious awareness among many scientists." At the same time, these theories "soften the ground so that all religions--New Age, Eastern religions and Christians-- are benefiting" from a new interaction with science, as they provide their own theological interpretations to such concepts. Walter Hearn, editor of the newsletter of the American Scientific Affiliation, an association of 2,500 evangelicals involved in science, agrees with Sharpe that there is a new interest in the religion-science convergence, as seen in a recent growth of activity and new organizations on this front. But he adds that many Christian scientists, while respectful of the work of Peacocke and Polkinghorne, would tend to be skeptical of developing a theology from their scientific work, and would try to "keep science metaphysically barren" of doctrinal concerns.

NEW ENGLAND CLAIMING SIGNS OF NEW RELIGIOUS AWAKENING

New England is experiencing an evangelical resurgence, evidenced in a growing prayer movement, "revived mainline churches," new unity among church leaders and a surge in conversions and church planting ventures, according to a special report in the National & International Religion Report (March 25). While New England has been called the seedbed of Christianity in America, the region has not had a strong evangelical presence (a recent poll by the Barna Research Group found that 24 percent of New Englanders say they have made a "Christian commitment" compared with the national average of 34 percent). But that seems to be changing, as an identifiable "prayer movement," is spreading throughout the six-state area, reports J. Lee Grady. The prayer movement is similar to the "solemn assemblies" increasingly being held throughout the country [see November '90 RW], as church leaders from a wide range of denominations (including Catholic charismatics) have been meeting together to pray for spiritual revival. The new unity is also being expressed in bridge-building between inner-city black churches and white suburban congregations and the inclusion of pentecostal and charismatic groups in the establishment evangelical New England Evangelistic Association. Interestingly enough, it is the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) which is starting more churches than many groups native to the area, according

to Grady. "In 1983, there were 17 SBC churches in the greater Boston area. Now there are 52, and 18 new ones are in the process of being planted. In just five months the [SBC] started three churches in Cambridge. They are all non-English-speaking congregations: Korean, Brazilian and Hispanic....Grace Baptist in Malborough, Mass., is one of the fastest growing churches in the denomination."

Mainline churches are also feeling the strong impact of the evangelical upswing, with "hundreds of...churches [being] turned around," from a liberal orientation to a more evangelical, "Bible-based" approach, one evangelical leader says. At the root of this trend, many say, is the work of Gordon-Conwell Seminary, Hamilton, Mass., which has been training pastors to move into mainline churches and encourage evangelical renewal from within. The evangelical influence on the mainline in New England may be behind a report in the April 8 issue of the same newsletter citing an "unexplained growth" in the United Church of Christ (UCC) in the region. The growth of the UCC (the body most Congregational churches belong to) in New England has "baffled church officials," since the denomination has been declining nationally. A church report adds that the New England growth may be a "small but important reversal of the fortunes of this denomination." (*National & International Religion Report*, P.O. Box 21433, Roanoke, VA 24018)

ASSOCIATION MOVEMENT COMING TO RESCUE OF SMALL CHURCHES

Small, financially struggling churches are finding a renewal as they pool their resources, sharing clergy and programs, according to the Hartford Courant (March 31). Churches sharing clergy has been a feature of American religion since frontier days when circuit-riding preachers made their rounds baptizing and marrying people in isolated communities. "But the new clusters [or 'associations'] that have been springing up all over the country--particularly in the Episcopal Church-- are different. An association enables small churches to have members of the clergy conduct worship services regularly and, because they are not constantly struggling to survive, to expand their ministries," such as running Sunday schools and outreach programs, writes Gerald Renner. Rev. David Brown, the godfather of the association movement in the Episcopal Church, adds, "All of a sudden the survival orientation is gone. These places grow. The dollars and the body count show it." Churches involved in associations agree to share several full-time and part-time clergy and other joint ministries. Each church continues to have its own budget and parish council, but a regional council sets the budget and makes policies for joint activities. One pastor says that aside from financial considerations, the associations help small churches overcome the isolation they often experience.

REFORM JUDAISM MEETS SUCCESS BUT ALSO POSSIBLE ISOLATION

While Reform Judaism has flourished in recent years, the denomination may be growing increasingly alienated from the rest of the Jewish community as the 21st century approaches, according to Reform Judaism magazine. The official denominational magazine devotes most of its spring issue to reviewing trends in the Reform movement. There is an emphasis on the positive in most of the articles on the liberal Jewish body: membership in Reform synagogues is growing [at a time when its

liberal Protestant counterparts are declining]; an increasing use of traditional observances and new worship forms, where in the past there was little interest in such matters; spirituality is high on the agenda of most Reform synagogues. But sociologist Steven Cohen strikes a more critical note in his article, writing that "In the next decade, Reform may become increasingly detached from the rest of organized Jewry, with fewer Reform rabbis and temple lay leaders choosing to work actively on behalf of their local Jewish federations (the central fund raisers for domestic and overseas Jewish needs) or for pro-Israel and Jewish defense agencies."

Cohen adds that "we may be witnessing the paradox of more Reform Jews joining temples but fewer Reform leaders participating in the arena of Jewish communal life." The growth of intermarriage and the tendency for mixed marriage couples to affiliate with Reform may be a major factor in increasing denominational isolation, he adds. Findings from local Jewish population studies suggest that converts tend to score higher on Judaic practices associated with the congregation and home than on measures related to communal Jewish concerns, such as Israel and Jewish philanthropic causes [see September '90 RW for more on interfaith marriages and Judaism]. He also sees the new emphasis on "Reform spirituality [as] beginning to replace social action as the central motif of the movement. Congregants are learning how to be Jewish at home and in the temple, but not how to be Jewish in the community." Another factor in the possibility of Reform isolation may be the changing nature of Jewish federations. Such organizations are devoting more time and money to Jewish education and schooling-- an emphasis that is most allied with Conservative and Orthodox Jews, and which will make federation activity less attractive to Reform leaders. (Reform Judaism, 838 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10021)

PROTESTANT DIVISIONS IN MILITARY CHAPLAINCY GROWING OVER EVANGELISM?

Divisions appear to be growing between mainline and more evangelical and fundamentalist military chaplains, especially over the issue of evangelizing the troops, according to Church & State magazine (March). While the tensions of the Gulf war diverted attention from such conflicts, the magazine says that they may reassume prominence in the military chaplaincy with the ending of the war. At issue is the growing number of Protestant groups in the chaplaincy "known for their aggressive recruitment of members," writes Rob Boston. He recounts that as the U.S. adapted to the new all-volunteer military prior to the Gulf war, the chaplaincy corps "was marked by expanding pluralism. Although four decades ago only about 40 denominations were represented under the general heading of 'Protestant,' today 260 groups are authorized by the Department of Defense to provide chaplains." The traditional avoidance of proselytism and the encouragement of inter-faith relations in the chaplaincy stems from the frequent calls for ministry among those of different faiths and the need to make referrals to other chaplains.

United Methodist military chaplain officials have been in the forefront of those criticizing groups evangelizing in the military. In January, the denomination issued a paper criticizing those who threaten the traditional nature of the chaplaincy by proselytizing. "I increasingly hear stories of chaplains trying to impose their understanding of ministry on members of other faith communities or on persons of other

theological positions," the paper states. There is also concern being expressed by Catholic officials, especially with the number of Catholic chaplains decreasing. A spokesman for the U.S. Catholic chaplaincy adds that "From the sources that we have, we do have a grave concern about proselytizing, especially among Hispanics." Still, other mainline officials contacted by Boston played down or denied such a conflict. The chaplains' own professional agency, the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces, has been studying the "Protestant problem," and its director, the Rev. Cliff Weathers says he doesn't "think there is a concern [about proselytism]." But conference president Ralph Monsen recently told a newspaper that there are "turf, theological, methodological and practical disputes that are causing one heck of a row...I don't see any end in sight." Boston notes that evangelism and church recruitment has been carried out by groups such as the Southern Baptist Convention during the Gulf operation. (Church & State, 8120 Fenton St., Silver Springs, MD 20910-4781)

CURRENT RESEARCH: NEW FINDINGS ON RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES

* A recent survey of Unitarian-Universalist churches presented in the secular humanist magazine Free Inquiry (Spring), shows that Unitarians are increasingly emphasizing spiritual values and are moving away from the atheism and agnosticism associated with the secular humanist movement. The Unitarian-Universalist movement was instrumental in the development of American humanist organizations, with a large part of its membership once eschewing belief in a supernatural deity. But in a questionnaire survey involving 344 Unitarian churches, their ministers and church boards, conducted by Free Inquiry editors Paul Kurtz and Vern Bullough, an unexpected diversity of beliefs were found. When asked to categorize their ministers' beliefs, 29 said they were Christian; 70 said theist; four said atheist; 11 agnostic; and 82 said humanist. In categorizing their congregations, 19.81 percent said they were Christian; 33.07 said humanist; 12.76 said agnostic; 4.95 percent said atheist; 21.38 percent said theist. In responding to the question of whether a Unitarian can also be a Christian, theist or believer in a spiritual reality, 326 answered "yes," while 2 answered "no." The editors found that the term "humanistic," was used by respondents broadly to describe views from naturalistic humanist and pagan to spiritualist, pantheist, New Age, mystic and Buddhist. They conclude that "although humanism is a strong strand of the UUA, there are many other strands, and humanism seems to be diminishing in influence as a spiritualistic concern begins to be felt more strongly." (Free Inquiry, P.O. Box 5, Buffalo, NY 14215-0005)

* A recent survey asking 113,000 Americans to identify their religion presents some surprises, and challenges assumptions about America's minority religions. The survey, headed by City University of New York researchers Barry Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, was unique for the large number of people studied and its focus on religious self-identification, which tends to produce results different from church-generated membership statistics in denominational yearbooks. The survey found that 86.5 percent of respondents claimed to be Christian (60.3 percent Protestant and 26.2 percent Catholic), while only 7.5 percent said they had no religion at all, reports the New York Times (April 10). In projecting the survey results on the U.S. population, one unexpected finding was that Muslims only numbered 0.5 percent-- one-fourth of what many experts have

been claiming. Half of the 1.5 million Arab-Americans are Christian. The study found that most Asian Americans are not Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim, but Christian, mainly Catholic and Baptist. "Adherents" of the New Age movement were found to number an insignificant 28,000 [a figure already in dispute, since many "New Agers" do not use that name to describe themselves]. Other findings include: Hindus and Jewish people have the highest percentage of college graduates; twice as many people in the Western states reported no religion; Greek Orthodox have the lowest rate of divorce, Unitarians the highest.

DIVORCE BETWEEN UNIFICATIONISM AND AMERICAN CONSERVATISM?

A recent shift in priorities of the Unification Church away from the U.S. and toward the Soviet Union and the Far East, as well as a greater emphasis on Unificationist theology, will likely end the long-term relationship between the church and the American political right, according to the conservative National Review magazine (April 15). In recent years, observers have been noting a change in emphasis of Sun Myung Moon and Unificationism as the church has paid greater attention to Asia in its outreach [See December '89 RW]. More recently, Moon has forsaken his hardline anti-communism, making a rapprochement with the Soviet Union, writes Sol W. Sanders. During a Unificationist-sponsored conference in Moscow last spring, Moon honored Gorbachev and stated that the Soviet Union would experience a "moral renaissance" and replace America as the hope for the future. This change of direction will "obviously affect Moon's relations with his American arm's-length associates," Sanders adds.

There are reports that the Unificationist-supported Washington Times is making cutbacks--although its editor denies such rumors-- and that the paper may come under new ownership. Insight, a companion news weekly to the Times, has swung "dramatically," toward a more accommodating line on the Soviets, while the anti-communist Unificationist-owned New York City Tribune recently stopped publication. The American Leadership Conference, once the bridge between Unificationists and American conservatives, is now bringing over Soviet exchange fellows to its seminars. Meanwhile, comments made by Moon at a conference last summer suggest that the church may be growing more forthright in its theology. He is said to have announced himself as the messiah-- a role he has long hinted at often in church literature but never stated publicly, writes Sanders. "That will pose difficulties for some of the more religious among those Christians who are still working with Moon's think-tank and exchange programs." [During the past few years there have been rumors in conservative political circles that a major article critical of Unificationist-political right ties would make an appearance. While the alliance now seems to be breaking apart due to internal Unificationist changes, Sanders' article in the conservative flagship National Review may be the official "excommunication" of Unificationism from the American right.] (National Review, 150 E. 35th St., New York, NY 10016)

PENTECOSTALISM GROWING, INFLUENCING RELIGIOUS GLASNOST IN CUBA

The Pentecostal movement has grown rapidly in Cuba during the past four years, leading Fidel Castro to seek a more conciliatory stance toward Protestants, according to Charisma & Christian Life magazine (April). In late 1987, the Pentecostal churches in Cuba started receiving a new wave

of inquirers and then members. In learning of the new spiritual interest, the Cuban media attacked the phenomenon, which just brought the revival to the attention of more Cubans, writes Chris Woehr. Since last year the "widespread interest in spiritual matters began to subside. Church attendance, however, has reportedly grown from a previous record of 250,000 to perhaps as high as one million in a population of 10.5 million, according to unofficial church estimates. Many are now worshipping in house churches-- a relatively new phenomenon in Cuba. One Cuban church expert estimates that by the end of 1991, these may number as high as 6,000. Although house-church activity is illegal, pastors say local party cadres are 'looking the other way,'" Woehr reports.

With Protestant churches being the fastest-growing segment of society today, the Castro regime has recently opened a dialogue with the Protestant community, allowing members to join the Communist Party (there was no immediate response from church leaders) and granting them limited broadcasting rights. The First Freedom (January/February), the newsletter of the Puebla Institute, a conservative human rights group, says that the Catholic Church in Cuba is also experiencing something of a revival. The newsletter adds that "...in some areas, there are more Catholic baptisms than births, indicating that adults are coming back to the church. Weekly Mass attendance, though still amounting to only two percent according to the latest available figures, nonetheless is double what it was in the late 1970s, while infant baptisms currently are running as high as 40 percent. The beginning signs of a trend are there." (*Charisma & Christian Life*, , 600 Rinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746; *The First Freedom*, 1030 15th St., NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20005)

NORTHERN IRELAND'S ECUMENISM MOVING INTO EVANGELICAL HANDS?

While official ecumenism is losing ground in fostering Catholic-Protestant reconciliation in Northern Ireland, new sources of unity are coming from unexpected directions, writes Ronald Wells in Perspectives (March), a journal of Reformed thought. In interviewing Northern Ireland's "mainline" Protestant church leaders, Wells found them lamenting that the leadership of the ecumenical movement in Northern Ireland now largely consists of middle-aged and older persons. Church leaders charge that the younger clergy, especially the growing number in mainline churches who call themselves evangelical, are not interested in ecumenical dialogue anymore, and that any such enthusiasm has "remained largely clerical and had not filtered down to the laity..." But Wells found a dramatic shift in alliance and perceptions among, and about, evangelicals. There seems to be a fairly large number of so-called 'young evangelicals' who are coming to see the need for ecumenical reconciliatory activities among the churches."

Several people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland pointed out to Wells that "these new ecumenical evangelicals are coming to their views not from the inspiration of Geneva [the headquarters of the World Council of Churches] in our time but from the Geneva in Calvin's time; in short, they are not so much inspired by council and position papers as they are by a whole and full orb'd reading of the Bible and of historic Reformed confessions and actions. They are coming to understand that the doing of the whole gospel requires rethinking about collaboration with co-religionists in other faith communities. The key word among these newer evangelicals is 'mission,' a more comprehensive word than 'evangelism.' Roman Catholics for their part told me that they appreciate their contact with evangelical Protestants because of common biblical and

doctrinal orthodoxy not always found among the more liberal members of the ecumenical party." The new evangelicals are not fully accepted by liberal ecumenists, who still think they're the "only game in town," and fellow evangelicals accuse them of compromising with Catholicism. But Wells says that the new situation is hopeful for Catholic-Protestant reconciliation, since "the essential power players in divided situations such as Ireland are actually coming in contact with each other." (Perspectives, 6157-28th St., Grand Rapids, MI 49546-6999)

ISLAMIC UPDATE

* The Gulf crisis has dealt a "spiritual blow" to Islamic practice and politics in Jordan, reports Britain's The Economist magazine (April 13). All of Jordan's political groups and its Islamic movement, including the militant Muslim Brotherhood, backed Saddam Hussein in the conflict, believing that God was on the side of Iraq. But in the aftermath of the Iraqi defeat, attendance at mosques in Jordan "has dropped sharply (so, incidentally, has worship in churches). Usually tens of thousands of Jordanians used to perform "umrah" [considered a secondary or lesser pilgrimage to Mecca, different from the the obligatory "Great Pilgrimage," or "Hajj."]. . . during the particularly propitious month of Ramadan; few have gone to Mecca this year," according to the magazine. Although the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies have been gaining seats in parliament and influential positions in the cabinet (heading such departments as education and social development), these Muslims have found their plans stalled by a post-war shortage of funds and inexperience in dealing with bureaucracy. "For the foreseeable future the democratic process will prevent the Islamists from proving that Islam has the solution to secular problems...[but] as long as [the brotherhood] controls the ministry of education it will continue tugging hearts and minds toward the Islamic society it fervently believes in." (The Economist, 10 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY 10020)

* Pakistan and Bangladesh have recently moved closer to Islam, at least on an official basis, reports the evangelical newsletter Pulse (April 12). The new president of Bangladesh, Khaleda Zia, won office after she advocated self-reliance, a market economy, and an Islamic character for the state. Meanwhile, the government under Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif recently introduced legislation that would make the Koran the supreme law of Pakistan and subject most aspects of life, from social behavior to civil liberties to Islamic tenets. Such legislation would fulfill Sharif's election promises to small but powerful religious parties crucial to the new coalition government, the Associated Press (April 11) reports. (Pulse, Box 794, Wheaton, IL 60184)

Religion Watch

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TIME-DATED MATERIAL — PLEASE RUSH