

RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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1991 RELIGION-- A YEAR OF ESCALATING CONFLICTS

The religious developments that unfolded last year promise to make 1992 markedly different from earlier years. From growing discontent among the Eastern Orthodox in the ecumenical movement to denominational battles over issues of sexuality, the theme that defines much of 1991 religion is conflict. These conflicts and "cultural wars" (see the supplement for more about that term) cropped up within denominations, between religious bodies, and between believers and the wider society. Below are some of these contentious developments that became noticeable last year, as well as other significant trends. The issues of RELIGION WATCH where these issues are reported on are cited after each entry.

1) Within the Episcopal Church last year a traditionalist group known as the Episcopal Synod of America sought to become a separate diocese. This has caused sharp opposition from the church's leadership, and the action may mean that the staunchly orthodox are intent on going their own way, even if it results in schism in the near future. (See December RW)

2) Issues of sexuality, especially concerning the ordination and acceptance of practicing homosexuals, moved on to center stage in mainline denominations last year. No clear resolution seems imminent, and such issues are likely to gain visibility in the next few years. Recent medical studies claiming that homosexuality is an inborn trait will probably be interpreted by gay activists and sympathizers as buttressing their demand for acceptance in the churches. (September)

3) The Eastern Orthodox churches seem to have packed a decade's worth of frustration and discontent with the ecumenical establishments into their actions of last year. It started with the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, Australia, last February, when Orthodox participants threatened to pull out of the organization over charges that theological syncretism was being promoted. Then the American Eastern Orthodox denominations suspended their membership in the National Council of Churches--further handicapping an already weakened ecumenical organization--stating that it tolerated such liberalizations as the ordination of women and homosexuals. More recently, several key Orthodox leaders turned down invitations to attend a Vatican Synod on re-evangelizing Europe, claiming that the Catholic Church was invading traditionally Orthodox territory in the former Soviet Union. Eastern Orthodoxy may be entering a period of isolation from other religious

traditions. (April, September)

4) Euthanasia emerged as an issue that may become as divisive between conservatives and liberals in religious bodies, and between religious groups and the wider culture, as abortion. The configurations of opposition and support for voluntary euthanasia are similar to that of other "life" issues: Catholics and evangelicals--who are forming an increasingly close alliance-- along with some conservative-to-moderate mainline support, are lining up against euthanasia, while the more liberal wing of the mainline (including the Unitarian-Universalists) are often actively supportive of such measures. (See this issue of RW for more on euthanasia)

5) The upcoming 500th anniversary celebrations of the Columbus discovery will help fan the flames of controversy over the issue of multiculturalism. Religious bodies have recently started addressing this issue, with the religious left criticizing the influence of "Eurocentrism" and the Western tradition in society and arguing for an acceptance of diverse world cultures and views in churches and other institutions. The Catholic Church and other groups appear to be taking a more centrist position on the issue, emphasizing American unity and identity, while accepting cultural diversity on the local level (such as in the liturgy and in their schools). Those further on the right are responding to multiculturalism by reasserting the claim of supremacy of European and Western culture, and condemning pluralism, often finding a religious base for such positions, as can be seen by the next entry...(November)

6) The emergence of conservative nationalism last year through such organizations as the U.S. Taxpayer's Alliance was seen as a marginal trend on the political and religious landscape. That was until Pat Buchanan signed on as a Republican candidate for the U.S. presidency. Buchanan calls for a new nationalism that puts the concerns of America first and emphasizes Judeo-Christian and traditional American values. For several years, Buchanan, a traditionalist Catholic, has been linked with conservatives who (like the U.S. Taxpayer's Alliance) have called for an America based on Christian culture and a rejection of cultural pluralism and the "new world order." A segment of the Christian Right is likely to throw its weight behind Buchanan--especially those favorable to Reconstructionism and critical of globalism-- not because it expects him to win, but because of its dissatisfaction with George Bush, and a desire to build a Christian-based political movement for the future. (July-August)

7) Pope John Paul II's 1991 social and economic encyclical, Centesimus Annus, was hailed by political conservatives and libertarians as being an unmistakable sign that Catholicism had finally accepted the free-market. While others contended that the document meant no such thing, most observers did note that the encyclical may signal a change in Catholic social teaching as it de-emphasized the role of the welfare state in providing social needs. (June)

-- Erling Jorstad, a writer and professor of History at St. Olaf College contributed to this review

EUTHANASIA BECOMING DIVIDING FACTOR FOR AMERICAN RELIGIOUS BODIES

Even with the defeat of a controversial pro-euthanasia initiative in Washington state in November, euthanasia and the wider issue of medical ethics are likely to increasingly occupy the attention of the American religious community in the years ahead, according to several observers. The Washington state initiative may have served to force religious groups and leaders formerly hesitant to make public pronouncements on euthanasia to take up such questions, according to Christian News (November 11). While one church leader said that most of the religious advocacy for the Washington initiative came from individuals rather than from denominations, that soon changed as several religious bodies staked out formal positions. Issuing statements against the measure were evangelical groups, the Catholic bishops of Washington and Oregon, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and three bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The bulk of religious support for the initiative came from liberal Protestant quarters-- Unitarian, United Methodist and United Church of Christ leaders, congregations and members. Noticeably absent from the controversy were any statements from the National Council of Churches, "which frequently plunge into matters of political controversy," according to the Religious News Service-based article.

The fight against the Washington initiative has convinced euthanasia proponents "that the Catholic Church is perhaps the greatest enemy of their movement," according to the Catholic newspaper Our Sunday Visitor (December 15). In covering the recent national conference on voluntary euthanasia, the paper reports that Unitarian minister and activist for the initiative Ralph Mero detailed the "bitter opposition" waged by the Catholic Church through an "expensive professionally done advertising campaign of deception and half-truths." It is also reported that euthanasia activist also plan to step up their work in the months ahead, and attempt to build relations with the hospice movement. A similar bill on euthanasia will be voted on in California this year. Meanwhile, the evangelical Christianity Today magazine (December 16) reports that the euthanasia debate even in evangelical circles is "seldom as simple as a yes or no vote." At a recent conference of evangelical physicians, there was a clear statement passed opposing euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. However one evangelical physician leading a seminar "acknowledges that there is a debate within the Christian medical community over some of the "grayer" issues, such as the removal of food and water tubes, withdrawal of medical treatment, and the administration of pain killers that a physician knows will shorten a patient's life."

The euthanasia debate reflects a wider trend involving the "secularization of the bioethics movement," writes Dr. Mark Siegler in Update (June), the newsletter of the Center for Christian Bioethics. Siegler, a University of Chicago ethicist, says the American bioethics movement, developed in the 1960s, was strongly nurtured by religious concerns and most of its leaders were theologians, such as Paul Ramsey, Joseph Fletcher and James Gustafson. That first generation of bioethicists has "gradually been supplanted or, at the least, heavily complemented by a second wave of academics whose primary disciplines have been philosophy, law, and more recently, economics and health policy." Theological understandings of medical ethics "emphasized a sense of community and the obligations and responsibilities of physicians to individuals and the community." Today's bioethicists are more likely to stress a "legalistic and efficiency model of medical ethics which holds

that moral conduct is a matter of following rules." Siegler sees secularization unfolding from such recent moves as the establishment of "living wills," where patients' subjective values are emphasized in treatment, to placing more decision-making authority in the hands of third parties-- not only families and doctors but also payers, regulators and the government. (Christian News, RR 1, Box 309A, New Haven, MO 63068; Our Sunday Visitor, 200 Noll Pl., Huntington, IN 46750; Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60187; Update, Center for Christian Bioethics, Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, CA 92350)

DISCIPLES' GROWING LIBERAL-CONSERVATIVE GAP

The division between liberals and conservatives in the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) is widening, judging by the recent controversy over the rejection of a popular nomination for president of the denomination, according to The Christian Century (December 11). The Disciples have traditionally been located on the liberal end of the religious spectrum (see Nov./Dec. issue for book review on Disciples), but at their October General Assembly in Tulsa, Oklahoma, delegates turned down the nomination of Michael Kinnamon for president, largely due to his liberal views that included an acceptance of practicing homosexuals. Since the denomination only nominates one candidate (naming an interim president until the next election in two years), the rejection has sent the denomination and its leaders soul searching as to its identity. Ronald Allen writes that while "conservatives played a significant role in Kinnamon's defeat, the vote represented a more complicated set of tensions: tensions between liberals and conservative, clergy and laity, establishment and antiestablishment, rural and urban, well-educated upper-middle class and less-well-educated lower middle class."

Although Kinnamon is said to be sympathetic to the social issues of the black and hispanic Disciples, many members of these two minority groups were the ones who opposed him, especially on the issue of homosexuality. Other issues that Allen sees as fueling greater division in the church body is the proposal of unity with the United Church of Christ-- a denomination further to the left than the Disciples. Conservative members fear that a merger with the UCC might mean the loss of such Disciple traditions as baptism by immersion. Regional tensions may also play a part in the new polarity. Some of the most stringent opposition to Kinnamon came from Texas, "where Disciples are of such independent spirit that they are sometimes known as the Texas mafia." Some are now fearing that the conservatives will begin to take aggressive actions in the denomination, following the example of fundamentalists in the Southern Baptist Convention. Others, however, note that the structure of the Disciples denomination does not lend itself to a "SBC-style takeover." Allen concludes that if the denomination does not find a way to reconcile its diversity of views, the "next generation of Disciples is likely to experience either a repetition of the events at Tulsa...or a denominational split." (Christian Century, 207 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60605)

CURRENT RESEARCH RECENT FINDINGS ON RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES

* While few Christians hold that "New Age" beliefs are beneficial to organized religion or compatible with Judeo-Christian beliefs, a

"surprisingly high number say they believe in many of the practices of the New Age movement," according to Emerging Trends (November), the Gallup newsletter on religion. Because of the many conflicting definitions of the New Age movement, Gallup asked respondents their own views of the term "New Age," as well as polling them on practices often identified with the movement, such as channeling, ESP, clairvoyance, reincarnation and psychic healing. The survey finds that about half of adult American Protestants (46 percent) and Catholics (52 percent) believe in extrasensory perception (ESP). Clairvoyance (the ability to see events taking place in the future or at another place) is thought possible by 22 percent of Protestants and 30 percent of Catholics. One Protestant (25 percent) and Catholic (27 percent) in four believe in astrology. One Christian in 10 believe in channeling.

Catholics tend to be far more tolerant of New Age beliefs than are Protestants. Over half of the Catholics aware of the New Age (59 percent) say it is not incompatible with their religion, compared to 23 percent of Protestants holding similar views. One adult in four (24 percent) now say they have heard of the New Age movement. Among those aware of the movement, only 18 percent say they have a favorable opinion of it. Younger adults under 30 (25 percent) are most likely to have a favorable impression of the movement, with positive opinion dropping from 19 percent among those aged 30 to 49, to just nine percent among those 50 and older. [While this is among the few surveys measuring the diffuse New Age movement, it should be noted that many New Agers may not choose the above criteria in identifying themselves. Rather than strictly supernatural-related beliefs, many involved in the movement might describe their values in more "psycho-spiritual" terms such as: the inter-relatedness and unity of all things; the sacredness of the earth and related environmental concerns; the relation of the mind (or "consciousness") to the body, which would include holistic health matters; and visualization and meditation techniques]. (*Emerging Trends*, 47 Hulfish St., Suite 213, P.O. Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542)

* Transcendental Meditation and other popular meditation techniques to measure and improve human performance and well-being, are no more effective at reducing stress or hypertension than "resting quietly," according to a recent study by the National Research Council. Cited in the anti-cultist magazine Cult Observer (Vol. 8 No. 10), the finding was in 291-page report of a research panel chaired by UCLA psychologist Robert Bjork. This finding comes in the midst of increasing reports claiming that meditation is found to be an important factor in fostering general health. But TM, which has been in the forefront of publicizing its health benefits often through its own research, is coming under increasing criticism. The magazine cites a recent series of articles on TM in the Journal of the American Medical Association, where it is alleged that the movement often uses deception to promote the teachings of its leader Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and make it appear that the medical establishment has accepted such techniques. The articles cite such examples of deception as including not mentioning that some publicized studies were done by TM-sponsored researchers, and that supposedly unbiased presenters of the movement's medical techniques (known as Ayur-Veda) to academic conferences were also involved in marketing questionable TM medical products. (*Cult Observer*, P.O. Box 2265, Bonita Springs, FL 33959)

* American Protestant churches are fairly sensitive to the needs of the elderly, children, teenagers, families and the poor, but are less

sensitive to the needs of minorities, non-Christians, young adults, and singles, according to an opinion poll by the Barna Research Group. The poll, cited in the Twin Cities Christian newspaper (December 12), asked respondents how sensitive Protestant churches were to 15 different types of people. Not even half of the 1,060 respondents rated Protestant churches as "very sensitive" to any of these groups. The group to which churches had the greatest sensitivity were families (46 percent), followed by the elderly (39 percent), and the poor (28 percent). The area of lowest perceived sensitivity was to minorities (only 14 percent said the churches were very sensitive to the needs of blacks, 12 percent for hispanics, and 10 percent for asians), non-Christians (16 percent), women under 35 (17 percent), and men under 35 (12 percent). Interestingly blacks and hispanics were often twice as likely to see the churches as sensitive to their own ethnic groups compared to whites viewing such minorities. Researcher George Barna concludes that those who are supposed to need church ministry the most in American society are the ones Americans say the churches are least sensitive. (Twin Cities Christian, 1619 Portland Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55404)

CANADIAN BABY BOOMER CONGREGATIONS APPEARING

While some observers of the Canadian religious scene have disputed whether the religious phenomenon associated with the baby boom generation in the U.S., applies to their country, it does appear that "boomer" churches are now emerging in Canada. As in the U.S. (see May 89 RW), there is a growing movement among Canadian evangelical churches to modify traditional services in favor of a more low-key informal approach targeted to the unchurched baby boomers, according to Canada's evangelical magazine Faith Today (November/December). The theory behind the boomer churches is that the post-World War II era is largely unchurched and does not feel comfortable with traditional services. "Rock bands, dramatic sketches and a fast-paced, entertaining hour characterize this new breed of Sunday service," writes Debra Fieguth. The church space is often rented and bears little resemblance to traditional congregations, and the sermons can address business as well as spiritual issues. Many of the growing Canadian boomer churches surveyed by the magazine follow the approach modeled by Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago. A good share of these boomer churches are located near universities or business communities. One of the most prominent of the Canadian boomer churches is Heartland, a Vancouver-based congregation that started in a bar. (Faith Today, Box 8800, Stn. B, Willowdale, ON, M2K 2R6)

UPDATE ON GLOBAL HINDU TRENDS

Hinduism Today newspaper (December), a publication unique for its attention to long-range trends rather than official religious news, offers several trends that the editors think will impact global Hinduism in the coming years; see Jan. 90 RW for a summary of other Hindu "magatrends." 1) There is growing academic acceptance of Hinduism and other non-Christian traditions. Such scholars as Harvard's Diane Eck and the University of Virginia's Seshagiri Rao "are but two examples of Hindu studies coming of age beyond India." 2) Rituals are finding a new following. It used to be that the philosophical side of Hinduism was stressed when the religion moved West and the ceremonial more or less ignored. Today, small groups "immerse themselves in all the colorful

rites and rituals...This devotional side of Hinduism has become a major theme in Hindu groups and yoga instructions." 3) Hinduism is "doing well in the marketplace" and a new kind of competition is taking place. Various groups are increasingly claiming exclusive use of Hindu terms and titles, such as "Self-Realization," even taking legal actions in some cases against other organizations using the same names.

4) "There is a renewed cry among Hindus about injustice toward villagers, untouchables, widows, wives and children. In all these arenas Hindus are wrestling with ways to cope," according to the editor. 5) There is a "trend now to speak out...when things are not quite right. We are learning that there is a difference between cultural criticism, which can bring about insight and change, and personal criticism, which creates disharmony and antagonism." 6) "New friendships" are forming between Hindus and believers from smaller religious traditions, such as Neopagans, Wiccans, Gypsies, Polynesians and Aborigines. 7) There are less strict mores now. While swamis have traditionally been celibate in Hinduism, there is a "trend of late for Hindus to accept, or at least tolerate married swamis. A related microtrend is co-ed ashram life. The strict separation of single men and women engaged in yoga and spiritual pursuits is no longer an assumed protocol." 8) The recent upsurge of nationalist (often called "fundamentalist") Hinduism in India has created a conflict for both Indian and non-Indian Hindus. "In this awakening of Hindu consciousness, how do we define it in a proper, universal way rather than something merely nationalistic? The present revival of Hinduism in India still hasn't found the right balance," the editor says. (Hinduism Today, 1819 Second St., Concord, CA 94519)

NEW AGE MISSIONARIES INCREASINGLY FOCUS ON EASTERN EUROPE

Like many other sector of American religion, the lure of new spiritual frontiers in now accessible Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union also has become a major concern for the New Age movement, according to Common Boundaries (January/February), a magazine exploring spirituality and psychotherapy. "...more and more people working in the fields of transpersonal psychology and New Age spirituality are flocking to formerly communist block countries to lecture, lead workshops, or just experience the energy that is generated when a society undertakes to recreate itself," reports Susan C. Roberts. New Age practitioners visiting the region are finding their "message is received with a wholehearted openness they haven't experienced since the 1960s." An international coalition of holistic centers headed by such groups as Esalen, the Omega Institute, and the New York Open Center, held its annual meeting in Budapest last May, and members are now "scouring the hillsides of Western Hungary for a chateau that might become a more permanent home" for such East-West exchanges in the fields of psychology and spirituality. Leading the effort to bring the New Age to the East is the New York Open Center and its director Ralph White. He is encouraging other workshop leaders to bring their skills to Eastern Europe-- "to set up a sort of Peace Corps of the spirit," according to Roberts.

There are already signs that New Age thinkers and activists are having an impact: the medical faculty of Charles University in Prague recently sponsored lectures by holistic healers Stanislav and Christina Grof. Prague--a city that in the 17th century was a "hotbed of Rosicrucianism, Kabbala and alchemy"-- will also host the International Transpersonal Association's annual conference this June. New Age proponents have met with top officials of the Czech government. Czech president Vaclav

Havel's brother Ivan is heading up a group of high-level scientists interested in the "new paradigm" in physics [connecting mysticism with science]. There is also a coalition of Russians and Americans known as "Galubka", which is translating and "strategically seeding the culture" with New Age writings. In New Age workshops with Russian and Eastern Europeans, it is found they often stress the relation of the individual to society; visiting New Age teachers are more likely to emphasize "self-empowerment," which often sounds strange to those from former communist countries. A Polish journalist notes that the New Age may have a difficult time attracting a large following during the current time of crisis: "People say, 'I have to have food, and I have to have something to wear, and then I will think about new age.'" (Common Boundary, 4304 East-West Hwy., Bethesda, MD 20814)

WORLD NOTES

* A demand for Jewish studies is growing in Europe, mainly over a concern to reinsert ethical values in higher education, according to the newsletter Inside Israel (Vol. 11 No. 12). A recent Jerusalem conference for assisting university leaders in establishing Judaic studies programs, found many interested Western and Eastern European participants claiming that such programs would be beneficial in raising morale among students. Lajos Vekas, the rector of Eotvos University in Budapest says, "Studying Judaism is a way to preserve ethical integrity and higher universal values...among all the cruelties and suffering." Over 150 universities and theological schools in Europe already have Jewish study programs, and more students are requesting them. A statistic on students studying Hebrew presented at the conference is reported to have surprised many of the participants: Over 600 are enrolled in such courses in Madrid, 200 Berlin and 135 in Heidelberg. (Inside Israel, Box 22029, San Diego, CA 92192)

* "Christianity is winning greater influence in Sri Lanka because of the civil war between Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese," reports Hinduism Today (December). Sri Lankans are reported to be turning to Christianity because the situation seems to be hopeless after eight years of war and 17,000 deaths. Other religious groups are noticing the large number of new Christians and there has been a new phenomenon of sporadic assaults on these believers.

Religion Watch

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