

RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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THE MEN'S MOVEMENT GOES TO CHURCH

By now the jargon and ideas of the men's movement have become a fixture in American culture. Such concepts as finding one's masculinity and "true" identity through a return to nature, the use of (usually pre-Christian pagan) myths and rituals to guide and celebrate men's "journeys," and various insights from Jungian psychology all fit into the diffuse spirituality and worldview of the New Age movement. More recently, however, Christians--from Roman Catholic to evangelical--have been attempting to tailor the teachings of the men's movement to their own projects for a male spirituality. The results of these efforts may not be what such gurus as Robert Bly and Sam Keen had in mind when they pioneered the movement, but they do show the contours of a new theological movement that is already filtering into the churches.

Starting with the academic world and now spreading into lay circles, Catholic men are now exploring the issue of male spirituality through seminars and printed media and are asking whether their church has not let them down in their often confused search to understand what it means to be a man, writes William O'Malley in the Jesuit magazine America (May 9). Catholic men are criticizing the church for being highly "left brain"-oriented in approach, meaning masculine and analytical. Yet, at the same time, the church tells its members, both females and males, to respond in a "right brain," submissive, more feminine manner. For some, this clash makes a life of deepening spiritual growth increasingly hard to maintain. Following Keen and Bly, some Catholics are trying reconcile their maleness--the heroic, the hunter, the achiever-- with what they find in the church, which they claim is bland, boring and homogenized, according to O'Malley. Male spirituality proponents say such male qualities as activism, achievement and assertiveness can be, and in fact, must be, reformulated in new ways to meet the demands of this new era. In an issue devoted to male spirituality, the Catholic World magazine (May/June) also attempts to bring several aspects of the men's movement into the church. The movement's espousal of male and father-son bonding, for instance, is carried over to include the concepts that men should look to biblical figures and saints as father figures and establish an intimate friendship with Christ.

In another article, James Healy writes that much of the apparatus for forming a male spirituality already exists in Catholicism. "Most or all parishes are already about the business of supporting and facilitating men's interactions through men's Scripture study, Cursillo, men's retreats, small communities for men, as well as cluster grouping and support groups for priests." Meanwhile, an evangelical men's movement is

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"slowly growing," although it is in an "embryonic" stage, according to Faith Today (May/June), a Canadian evangelical magazine. While many churches have had men's groups, the new movement is "more about being than doing," one pastor says. The churches involved in the movement, bring men together to discuss fathering, men's roles in the church and biblical prototypes for masculinity and masculine intimacy. Most of these church groups in North America are linked together by the Christian Men's Network (CMN). More than its secular counterpart, the Christian men's movement emphasizes the leadership of men in the family. A Pentecostal minister involved in the movement says, "Man is to initiate the role as priest, the representative of Christ in the family, as head of the home, leading the flock in the ways of God." The movement has established such practices as older men and fathers praying blessings on the younger men, saying "I bless you with manhood. You are a man."

Even before Bly and Keen came on the scene, some black churches have had their own kind of men's movement to stem the tide of family breakdown in the inner cities. For the last five years, for example, St. Paul Community Baptist Church, Brooklyn, N.Y., has held special services for men, combining worship and "consciousness-raising designed to get men back into church," according to the New York Times (May 7). These weekly sessions are just part of Pastor Johnny Ray Youngblood's focus on men. Every Sunday morning, he asks the men present to rise, and he has created an all-male board of elders in the predominantly female congregation. (America, 106 W. 56th St., New York, NY 10019; Catholic World, 997 MacArthur Blvd., Mahwah, NJ 07430; Faith Today, Box 8800, Stn. B, Willowdale, ON, M2K 2R6) --This article was written with RW contributing editor Erling Jorstad

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION MINISTRY BROADENING, FUSING WITH PSYCHOTHERAPY

Spiritual direction, once largely a ministry of the Catholic Church, is increasingly drawing "Catholic laypeople outside the control of the institutional church and an increasing number of Protestants and secular therapists," according to Common Boundary (May/June), a magazine exploring the interaction between religion and psychotherapy. Whereas spiritual direction was once seen as a kind of vocation counseling for the Catholic Church, after Vatican II this practice broadened to include individual religious guidance, sometimes blending with Jungian (or depth) and other forms of "transpersonal" psychology, and draw non-Catholics [see February '89 RW for report on Protestant spiritual directors]. "As psychotherapy becomes more holistic, the overlaps with spiritual direction get stronger and closer," says psychiatrist Gerald May. Since its founding two years ago, the Spiritual Directors International organization has grown to more than 1,000 members in 50 countries. Many of those seeking out the new spiritual directors are coming out of 12-step recovery programs and want to deepen their initial encounter with the "Higher Power" these groups espouse, according to writer Don Lattin.

The coming together of spiritual direction, the recovery movement and depth psychology, has sparked a new debate about how spiritual directors should be trained; whether they should be certified; and the differences between spiritual direction and psychotherapy. Some in the spiritual direction movement feel that charging a fee for such a service would be crossing the line into a business relationship. One nun counters that such payments would be a just form of compensation for the many underpaid women religious who have led in this field. In interviews with a dozen

leading spiritual directors, Lattin did not find one who favored certification for spiritual direction. He adds that the kinds of training for spiritual direction can vary according to region. On the East Coast, where the institutional Catholic Church is stronger, most training programs are run by seminaries, colleges or religious orders. "On the West Coast, transpersonal psychology and various forms of new-age spirituality have made more of an impact." Some leaders worry that spiritual direction will merely become another kind of therapy. Says San Francisco Anglican priest Alan Jones: "Psychotherapy is about ego forming and ego coping. Spiritual direction is about ego surrendering." (*Common Boundary*, 4304 East-West Hwy., Bethesda, MD 20814)

ENVIRONMENTALISM ATTRACTS DIVERSE SUPPORT IN DENOMINATIONS, CONGREGATIONS

Environmental activism is finding a growing appeal among a wide range of denominations, while also gaining support among local congregations and church members, according to recent reports. The Washington Post (May 23) reports that a unique coalition of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish leaders, as well as leading scientists, has formed to address issues involving environmentalism, science and religion. The Joint Appeal by Religion and Science for the Environment recently drew together such disparate groups as the conservative Southern Baptist's Christian Life Commission, the National Council of Churches, and the black National Baptist Convention, USA (the first of the black denominations to go on record on environmental issues). The group is chaired by Harvard geologist Stephen Jay Gould and the dean of religious environmental activists, James Park Morton of New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The coalition agreed to the idea of establishing an environmental consortium made up of the U.S. Catholic Conference, the NCC, the Evangelical Environmental Network and the Consultation on Jewish Life and the Environment.

The article says that the "array of religious leaders [at a recent meeting of the organization] demonstrated the speed with which environmental activism is taking hold in religious bodies. That commitment will also surface...in Rio de Janeiro as more than a dozen religious representatives join other nongovernmental leaders at meetings running in tandem with the UN Conference on Environment and Development." Churches and synagogues across the U.S. are also becoming increasingly involved in environmental issues at the local level, according to the New York Times (May 25). "Congregations that once took the lead on issues of poverty, homelessness, civil rights and peace are now composting, testing the pH of local waterways, serving meatless church suppers, conducting energy conservation surveys and praying for endangered species as well as people," reports Ari Goldman. Paul Gorman, head of the Joint Appeal mentioned above and a leader at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, says, "This is not just religious people finding yet another social issue, but rather religious people experiencing a very profound challenge to faith and to what it means to be religious." Exploiting the earth's resources are now seen as a "violation of God's creation," by some churches, although others remain critical of the new emphasis. Gorman's group opened a toll-free number so other congregations could share news of their environmental activities, and received more than 4,000 responses. The group also recently issued a directory of environmental projects by over 200 congregations.

But how much does such congregational activism reflect the concerns of

the "average" mainline church member? If Presbyterians are taken as representative of other mainline Protestants, such members are supportive of their denominations' recent emphasis on environmentalism, although the differences between laity and clergy on other social concerns also makes an appearance on this issue, according to a recent study. Presbyterian Panel Report, a denominational survey of members of the Presbyterian Church (USA), found that almost all of the respondents expressed some concern for natural environmental issues that, if enacted, would require some personal sacrifice, such as a willingness to pay higher taxes to clean up the environment, or to lead a more simplified lifestyle. In comparing other recent surveys on environmental issues, it was found that Americans in general are more likely than the Presbyterian respondents to view environmental concerns as serious issues, while the Presbyterians are more likely to be involved in such efforts to clean up the environment as recycling. Most members are not aware of their denomination's statements on the environment, as compared to the high awareness among clergy and specialized clergy (such as denominational executives). The divide between laity and church leaders can also be seen in the answers as to whether the respondents viewed themselves as a "strong environmentalist:" 21 percent of the laity identified themselves by this description, as compared with 36 percent of specialized clergy.

A RETURN OF ANGELS IN AMERICAN RELIGION AND CULTURE

Devotion to and interest in angels are making a comeback, "linking groups as disparate as Catholics and New Agers, the devout and the unchurched," according to the Wall Street Journal (May 12). After a long period of disinterest in angels, books on these celestial beings are selling well...Angel seminars are packed. and, for perhaps the first time since the Middle Ages, the ranks of angelologists are swelling," report Gustav Niebuhr. One of the best known of these angelologists is Sophy Burnham, whose "Book of Angels," which has gone into its 18th printing since it was published two years ago, describes how various cultures regard angels, as well as providing accounts of how such beings allegedly helped people in tight situations. Burnham says that "All around us, we are besieged by the words of despair-- alcoholism, drug addiction, presidential candidates tearing into each other." Angels, on the other hand, are full of comfort and joy, "and they always say the same thing-- 'Don't be afraid.'" Burnham's publisher, Ballantine, is at the forefront of the angel revival, publishing an "angel-a-week" diary and a book on how to talk to angels.

The belief in angels can go in the direction of the New Age or orthodox Christianity. The controversial Church Universal and Triumphant is cited in promoting "angelism", as well as Silver Spring, Md., Catholic priest Karl Chimiak, who says his ministry has prospered from the well-attended seminars he holds on angels and how they relate to Catholicism. In the Long Island and New York newspaper Newsday (April 7), M.G. Lord writes that angels are also making their way into American popular culture. She cites Lawrence Kasdan's "Grand Canyon," a movie based on themes of luck, fate and miracles which features angels in the form of characters who unaccountably come along and rescue others. Lord writes that when a reporter recently asked officials of George Bush's re-election campaign about their themes for the future, they told him, "Go see 'Grand Canyon.'" Lord wonders whether "America is experiencing some sort of collective fantasy of supernatural rescue." She quotes Yale theologian Jaroslav Pelikan, who holds that the rash of angel devotees emerged from

the "shadowy line between superstition and religion" and from "vague" forms of spirituality "that are directed toward the middle-rank supernatural. It's not an effort to puzzle out the properties of God, but of these sort of junior executives."

MEGACHURCH MODEL GAINING ACCEPTANCE AMONG MAINLINE CHURCHES

The megachurch phenomenon is increasingly finding an appeal outside of the evangelical/charismatic orbit from which it originated. The mainline Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is planning to start several regional megachurches over the next several years. Already work is under way in Yorba Linda, California to open a new megachurch, according to the National Christian Reporter (May 1). Such accepted megachurch themes as drawing a maximum number of people with contemporary music, extended attention to personal issues, such as divorce and drug use, as well as communion-free and non-liturgical worship services on Sunday mornings will be implemented. Defenders say that baby boomers see the older Lutheran priorities, such as its liturgy, as presenting a "closed process" that is unable to embrace the best of the new accents in contemporary evangelical worship style and are difficult to understand for those on the outside. Acknowledging it is an experiment, the official in charge of this project, the Rev. Robert Hoyt, says it should provide "something for everyone." Other urban Lutheran churches wondering how to stem the tide of membership and program decline may be carefully watching the megachurch project. [Plans to establish baby boomer-oriented megachurches from scratch are also in the discussion stage at the national headquarters of at least one other mainline denomination, the United Church of Christ.]

But already the megachurch movement in the ELCA is running into strong opposition among those pressing for a more sacramental and liturgical Lutheranism. When the ELCA attempted to plant a megachurch in the Fort Worth, Texas last summer, the effort was met with protests and hostility from area Lutherans, according to the Forum Letter (January 25), a conservative Lutheran newsletter. Area pastors complained that the denomination took the initiative without an invitation from their churches and they feared the more evangelical-oriented "mega-parish" might steal their members. Regional ELCA leaders eventually blocked the formation of the megachurch. Editor Leonard Klein says that mainline churches that have adopted the evangelical megachurch models end up delivering a diluted, "upbeat middle-class religion-in-general...The medium is the message." He adds that the Assemblies of God have used similar church growth strategies, but "they never abandon their fundamentalism and pentecostalism on the way and they emphasize the development of a deeper commitment in their Wednesday night meetings. What I've seen from mainline church growth models is that the same light music, the total abandonment of liturgical substance, and the avoidance of the depth of the darkness and the brilliance of the light define these congregations through and through." (National Christian Reporter, P.O. Box 222198, Dallas, TX 75222; Forum Letter, P.O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753) -- Erling Jorstad contributed to this report.

AMERICAN BLACK CATHOLICS WRESTLING WITH SEPARATISM

While American black Catholics have increasingly gained ground in the church, they "have also felt increasingly fragmented and isolated,"

writes Paul Elie in an article in the New Republic (May 11). Although there are an estimated two million black Catholics, "so acute is their sense of apartness in the church that black Catholic leaders have called for a new canonical rite-- a separate church for black Catholics in communion with Rome but independent from it." Elie writes that tensions are arising over the small number of black priests and bishops for the high number of black parishes, and the closing of Catholic schools in the inner-city. The key issue, however, is whether defacto or real separation is the answer for black Catholic identity. For instance, The African American Catholic Congregation (AACC), a denomination founded by former Catholic priest George Stallings three years ago, has formed itself as an "Afro-Catholic analogue to Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam," and has been viewed as a model for developing a distinctly black Catholic religion.

But so far, the future of the AACC does not look too bright: the growth of the movement has "ground to a halt," with only some 3,800 members; of the nine temples opened in six cities, three have already closed; AACC priests have departed from the organization; and Stallings revealed the political dimension of his religious agenda through his support of former Washington, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry during his drug trial. And while the demand for a separate rite with its own liturgy and priests is growing among black Catholics, there is also a concern that such separatism may share in the problems of the AACC. "The separate rite will be 'studied' for years, not adopted impulsively, a plan favored by most black Catholics, not just the hierarchy. There are worries that 'resegregating' the church would be economically foolish for parishes and would tax the energies of black Catholic priests, already too few...The current strains do not approximate the agony of slavery or segregation, and a new separatism is widely perceived as a betrayal of the black Catholic tradition rather than its culmination," writes Elie. Supporters of the rite, however, claim that if all African-American Catholics were part of the new group, it would be the second largest black church in the U.S. (after the Baptists.). "And they point out that black Catholics might be better off moving freely in the margins than intransigently staying in the Roman Catholic center."

EVANGELICAL-STYLED EASTERN ORTHODOXY KEEPING ITS IDENTITY

A new strain of Eastern Orthodoxy that draws inspiration from Protestant evangelicalism and actively seeks converts appears to be gaining strength, especially in areas outside of the influence of traditional Orthodox churches, according to Christianity Today (May 18). Five years ago when a movement of two thousand evangelicals in 17 congregations made the unprecedented journey to Eastern Orthodoxy, some observers predicted that the new converts would eventually be assimilated into the Orthodox churches and would lose momentum and have little impact on this tradition. But these former evangelicals, headed by former Campus Crusade for Christ leader Peter Gillquist, have since brought 15 more congregations into the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America--a largely Middle Eastern church--and "are now proselytizing their evangelical friends, with notable success." Gillquist reports a growing number of inquiries about Eastern Orthodoxy from evangelicals who hunger for the church's ancient tradition of worship. He adds that the largest group of inquirers are Episcopalians fleeing the liberal leanings

of that denomination.

The evangelical movement is also bringing some changes to the church itself. "More user-friendly liturgy has been put to use in the 32 self-described evangelical parishes that belong to the church's recently established subgroup: the Antiochian Evangelical Orthodox Mission. The biggest concentration of parishes is on the West Coast; the fewest are in the northeast, a stronghold of traditional Orthodoxy. They depart from Orthodox custom in small variances-- for instance, by the congregations singing Scripture choruses during Communion and by participating more in the music of the liturgy. In traditional Orthodox parishes, a choir chants all the responses," writes Julia Duin. Noting the connection between these converts' evangelical background with their adopted Orthodoxy, theologian Thomas Oden says that such a journey "requires a decisive choice. The language of crisis and decision still permeates the transaction." (Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60187)

INTERFAITH INVOLVEMENT AMONG MORMONS INCREASING

Although Mormons have traditionally distanced themselves from involvement with other religions, the church has more recently "become a key player in several interfaith committees, councils, and coalitions that promote faith and champion projects consistent with gospel principles," according to the current issue of Sunstone (December), the independent Mormon magazine. In citing a report from the Salt Lake Tribune newspaper, the article says that much of the current interfaith involvement can be traced to 1978 when the church's President Kimball urged Mormon (or LDS) leaders to work together with other religious groups toward mutual goals. In 1986, the LDS church participated in its first coalition, as it joined with Christian and Jewish traditions in forming the Religious Alliance Against Pornography. Two years later, the Mormons signed on with Vision Interfaith Satellite Network (VISN) to develop programming that meets the need of their fellow church members, as well as responds to the spiritual needs of the community at large.

The church also supports the National Interfaith Cable Coalition and has joined the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion, which is sponsoring a religious freedom bill before Congress. The church has also expanded into the interfaith scene in its headquarter city Salt Lake City. One official of the Interfaith Peacemaking Resource Center, which provides educational materials on peace and justice issues, says LDS officials have cooperated in finding a member to sit on its board with seven other denominations. While this development shows a greater Mormon openness to working with other religious groups, officials emphasize that such activities are not in any sense on a doctrinal level and are only to promote common and practical ends. (Sunstone, 331 South Rio Grande St., Suite 206, Salt Lake City, UT 84101)

CURRENT RESEARCH NEW FINDINGS ON RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES

* The spiritual experiences of psychotic and normal people are similar to each other, although upbringing and religious practices are crucial factors in determining whether these experiences have positive or negative effects, according to a recent study. The study, carried out by

M.C. Jackson of Britain's Alister Hardy Research Centre, finds that "normal" people with a predisposition toward psychosis--evidenced by such traits as a "weakened inhibition of the contents of consciousness" and thinking oriented more to the right side of the brain-- were more likely to report spiritual or "numinous" experiences (awareness of a guiding presence) than those with no such tendency. According to Numinis (March), the newsletter of the research center, the study found that 89 percent of schizophrenics (who represent the extreme point on the psychosis scale) reported spiritual experiences compared to 29 percent of the normal sample. The spiritual experiences of schizophrenics were found to be more "bizarre" and involve more negative feelings, while other subjects with schizophrenic tendencies but who are considered normal have more positive experiences. In determining why there is such a difference in spiritual experiences, Jackson found that the psychotics had experienced more emotional traumas as children, while the healthy group had more stable family backgrounds.

The healthy group had also "either found social contexts in which they could discuss their experiences with sympathetic others, or had not had to bring them into the social arena at all. In the psychotic group, periods of severe impairment were linked to the pathologizing of their experiences, and recovery was dependent on their finding a spiritual context which provided an accepting and constructively critical perspective on their experiences, and a repertoire of consciousness controlling spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and meditation." Jackson concludes that his study shows that the social context in which a healthy person with schizophrenic tendencies "has potentially spiritual experiences may influence the form, content, and consequences of their experiences; and that a purely psychiatric approach which explains them in terms of dysfunction may actually be instrumental in producing pathological syndromes." [Jackson's study, as well as much of the work of the Alister Hardy Centre, is part of a growing field of research seeking to explore spiritual and religious experiences through biological and genetic perspectives. This approach, holding that mystical and spiritual experiences are a natural phenomenon generated from brain responses, may be the focal point of the next confrontation between traditional religion and science.] (Numinis, Alister Hardy Centre, Westminster College, Oxford, OX2 9AT ENGLAND)

Religion Watch
P.O. Box 652
North Bellmore, N.Y. 11710



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