



RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

Volume 7 Number 11

October 1992

SOCIAL WORK TAKING NOTICE OF THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR

After decades of emphasizing secular forms of social assistance, American social work is undergoing something of a spiritual awakening. While social workers are not necessarily more religious or interested in spirituality today, the profession is starting to recognize the religious dimensions and needs of its clientele. "Instead of putting a negative light on religious beliefs and practices, now we're trying to see what the resources are in a client's religion and build on those. We try to form a link with whatever belief system the client is holding," says Ed Canda, associate professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Kansas at Lawrence, in an interview with RELIGION WATCH.

Canda is also founder and director of the Spirituality and Social Work Network, an organization of social workers and academics who emphasize the role of spirituality in their work [See the July-August supplement for a brief profile of this group]. The two-year-old network is only one sign of a "small but growing movement" among social workers to meet their clients spiritual as well as material and social needs, Canda adds. The new concern with religion is evident in a growing number of conferences and workshops held around the country on the issue. In the near future there will also be a new statement in the credential standards for social workers that calls for more attention to the role of religion in helping clients. Such a statement was dropped in the early 1970s. Social work schools are also paying new attention to the spiritual and religious dimensions of the profession. One sign of this trend, observers point out, is that the Smith College School of Social Work, long the bellwether institution for social work training, has recently introduced a course on spirituality and social work.

Canda says that the recent concern with religion and spirituality is a "returning to historical roots, since social work in the U.S. was initially inspired by Christian and Jewish principles for charity and social justice" in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But as the profession developed, it gravitated to more secular and even anti-religious approaches. Such influences as Sigmund Freud and his theories of psychoanalysis contributed to the tendency of social workers to view religious belief and practices as part of the clients' problems. But today the Freudian view is losing its hold in social work. "I have seen many students turn away from the strict psychoanalytic view and emphasize spirituality rather than unconscious drives and conflicts," says Max Siporin, of the State University of New York at Albany. Canda notes that another reason for the shift among social workers is that the "1980s and 90s have shown an upsurge of interest in traditional and non-traditional

Religion Watch is published monthly except once during July and August. Richard P. Cimino; Editor/Publisher. Erling Jorstad; Contributing Editor. A subscription in the U.S. is \$17.50 per year. \$19 for libraries and Canadian subscribers. Write for foreign rates. Second Class Postage pending at Hicksville, NY. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: P.O. Box 652, North Bellmore, NY 11710. (ISSN 0886 2141)

religion both in the general culture and in the media." This movement of social workers interested in spiritual needs represents a wide diversity of religious traditions-- from traditional Christian to Zen Buddhist and New Age. Siporin says that many social work students would eschew traditional religious labels, preferring to describe themselves as "being interested in spirituality...The whole business is a bit unclear as to what this spirituality is...A lot of it is a kind of New Age spirituality stressing experience [over doctrine]." These social workers, however, do not seek to proselytize or evangelize their clients, but rather take into account the influence of religion in their lives. For instance, Anita Titone, a clinical social worker in Dallas and member of the Spirituality and Social Work Network, says that she was counseling a man who had a mid-life crisis and often would pray when he was not able to sleep at nights. "Many social workers and psychotherapists would not pay attention to the fact that this man prayed...But I found that listening to this man talk about his spirituality created a bond between us and it speeded up therapy," Titone adds. But Canda knows of special cases where the religious factor has led to negative effects, such as child abuse. In cases where a parent may defend child abuse from a religious perspective, a social worker might "explore the [scriptural] passages about what a biblically based approach to child-raising is, and also to work with the clergy about how to find a more healing relationship with children."

ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY SEEKING INSTITUTIONAL ANCHOR

The esoteric-occult magazine Gnosis (Fall) asked several leaders and observers of alternative religious movements where they see "spirituality" heading in the future, and their answers suggest that there may be a turning away from the exotic toward more Western-based or familiar religious concerns. Philosopher Jacob Needleman sees spirituality paying renewed attention to the individual in the midst of a growing emphasis on globalization and the "interrelatedness of things"-- such as with the environmental movement. "We're increasingly connected with nature, other cultures, other countries. Yet this is not reducing the sense of loneliness, quite the contrary...Western religion has tended to stress the individual, whereas Eastern religion in its more popular forms has tended to blur the edges of individuals. We may see a little bit less turning to the East as we realize the esoteric meaning of individualism in Judaism and Christianity...I foresee a deepening of Western ideas, and I don't see Judaism or Christianity disappearing." But Needleman also sees "some assimilation of Eastern ideas by the church."

Margot Adler, a Neo-Pagan writer, observes "parts of Wicca and Neopaganism becoming integrated into the liberal mainstream: in the Unitarian-Universalist Church, the United Church of Christ, liberal Judaism. Goddess theology has clearly taken hold. I still would say that most of the Neo-Pagan and [Wicca] communities are small, and I see it staying that way. Some groups are creating churches and institutions, but Wicca's strength is as a minority religion." John and Caitlin Matthews, teachers and writers on mysticism, see the period of New Age spiritual searching "replaced by a more settled period of real consolidation...There will doubtless always be spiritual nomads who drift from water hole to water hole, but we do not think this is a general desire, judging from the increasing number of requests we receive for lengthy, supervised training programs." (Gnosis, P.O. Box 14217, San Francisco, CA 94114)

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES GOING INTO ECLIPSE

The enormous popularity of discipleship communities of believers both Protestant and Catholic, which started in the 1960s has gone into serious decline by this decade. A recent survey of several religious communities by Christianity Today magazine (September 14) finds that a handful of such communal groups, such as Jesus People USA in Chicago, have maintained a stable membership. But such pioneer trendsetters in communal living as the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer (Houston), the Sojourners (Washington, D.C.), Reba Place Fellowship (several locations), and the Word of God (Ann Arbor, Mich.) have not been able to replace the large number of dropouts occurring over the last few years. [Although specific factors enter into each of these communities' histories, it seems clear the vision of the first founders for communal witnessing and justice ministries have come on hard days in the 1990s, especially among the hoped-for large numbers of young adults. The latter seem to be moving more towards participation in the largely individualistic pentecostal megachurch programs now proliferating across the country.] (Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60187)-- By Erling Jorstad, RW Contributing Editor and Professor of History at St. Olaf College.

SCIENTISTS WORKING ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DO SOME SOUL SEARCHING

While the idea of scientists creating artificial intelligence or life may sound like science fiction, such a development is a going concern in many quarters of the scientific community. Some claim that this kind of research (which can range from chemical to computer-generated "organisms") is a few years away from becoming a reality. Scientists involved in this emerging field of research are already reflecting on the ethical and religious implications of their work, according to the New Age-oriented magazine Whole Earth Review (Fall). Steven Levy, author of the recent book on the subject, "Artificial Life," (Pantheon), interviewed several of the scientists involved in this controversial field and came away with the observation that these researchers believe that "the creations of human beings will compete with human beings and potentially supplant them." Danny Hillis, co-founder of the artificial intelligence company Thinking Machines, says that the concept of a "soul" can be applied to forms of artificial life with the help of human interaction. He says that there will be a reaction against such a notion, "just like it's hard for people to believe that the Earth wasn't at the center of the universe. Because they felt somehow they were cheapened if they were just one more planet out there in the cosmos. And I think in the same sense people feel cheapened if they think they are just machines."

On creating artificial intelligence Hillis adds, "I've made it possible for it to exist, and I've nurtured it, but I didn't make up the rules that made it possible for such a thing to exist. I mean that's the sense in which it's mystic, I mean that's what God did. God made it possible to do that." Norman Packard, a University of Illinois physicist, agrees that there is "something sacred" about life, but adds that "you can have a living process in a completely computational realm." He adds that

artificial intelligence is part of a broader evolutionary process and

humanity may just be one rung on the ladder to the creation of higher forms of life. Packard finds creation of artificial intelligence "exciting" because it allows him to participate in the "harmony" of the evolutionary process. Probably the most unusual statement from Levy's interviews comes from Danish Physicist Steen Rasmussen, who says of his work in artificial intelligence, "I feel in some way that I am committing sin by the things I am doing." (*Whole Earth Review*, 27 Gate Road, Sausalito, CA 94965)

GROWING PRAYER MOVEMENT GATHERS AT SCHOOL FLAGPOLES

A student-led movement of prayer on the grounds of public schools is skirting around church and state laws while attracting a nationwide following, according to the Washington Times (September 15). The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that graduation prayers at public schools are an unconstitutional establishment of religion by the government. But this prayer movement that gathers around school flagpoles is different because it takes place during a non-instructional period. The movement, known as the "See You at the Pole" campaign, has spread nationwide since last year and is being promoted by some of the nation's largest evangelical youth ministries and churches. Said to number up to two or three million participants, these gatherings usually start before school starts and last from 15 to 30 minutes. Says Doug Clark, director of the National Network of Youth Ministries in San Diego, "We are interested in more than just a one-day impact. We're encouraging students to pray regularly for the moral and spiritual direction of our country."

CURRENT RESEARCH RECENT FINDINGS IN RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES

* While political operatives have thought that American voters were primarily concerned with economic issues, a new study shows that explicit religious issues and preferences are in fact what compels many of the electorate to vote as they do. The study, conducted by John Green of the University of Akron and cited in the National Christian Reporter (September 11), shows that many voters do explicitly place their religious and moral convictions ahead of economic interests in deciding how they will vote. Green concludes from his data that religious preference is also influential in the voters' choices. The traditional pattern of white Protestants staying Republican while African-Americans and Jews vote Democratic holds up, while the Roman Catholic vote is "up for grabs." Clearly, the once highly Democratic preference of evangelicals, Green shows, has gone over to the Republican camp. He shows that in 1960, only 32 percent of white evangelicals called themselves Republicans, while 60 percent were Democrats, and 8 percent were independent or third party. Now, however, 47 percent of evangelicals now consider themselves Republicans, 34 percent identify with the Democrats, and 18 percent consider themselves either independent or third party. (*National Christian Reporter*, P.O. Box 222198, Dallas, TX 75222)--By Erling Jorstad

* The role and identity of religious orders in American Catholicism has been considerably weakened along with a long-term decline in membership, according to a recent study. In the first in-depth study of religious orders, involving 9,999 members, psychologists Fr. David Nygren and Sr.

Miriam Ukertis found that 55 percent of nuns compared with 65 percent of brothers and 67 percent of priests experience "high role clarity." The lowest levels of clarity about their roles in religious orders occurred among the youngest religious women, according to a report on the study in the National Catholic Reporter (September 25). Nygren says that another finding was that "normative standards of conduct and belief" among religious are weak, resulting in a degree of "anomie or indifference about mission and ministry and a certain disillusionment with their role in the church and about the church itself." In fact, about 25 percent of religious claim their respect for the magisterial authority of the church has decreased.

Much of the liberalization in the religious orders has revolved around commitment to social activism, but the data suggests that "while many people support the preferential option for the poor, a fair percentage of individuals don't feel personally committed to that and don't intend to act in that direction...Our study indicates that the impulse to selfless generosity remains strong but that the form of religious life has become too ambiguous for young people to consider it a worthy sacrifice. The hope for the future lies in the ability of religious orders to tap this impulse," Nygren says. (National Catholic Reporter, P.O. Box 419281, Kansas City, MO 64141)

* The common wisdom that congregations aligned with conservative denominations are reluctant to engage in social ministries, while liberal congregations are more involved in such activities is challenged by a recent study by the Center for the Church and Community Ministries in Chicago. The study, appearing in the recently released Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 1992, examined the social ministry programs of 100 Midwest congregations and found that the churches liberal or conservative orientations did not necessarily indicate whether they supported social activism in their communities. More accurate indicators of a congregation's attitudes on social concern are a congregation's location--such as in urban areas-- and self-image. Congregations that view their history as activist tend to follow an activist course, while those that regard their history as less activist will follow that path. The study also challenges the view that people in the pews are resistant to the social ministry programs of their more liberal pastors. The researchers found that pastors "frequently overestimate the distance between themselves and their members and underestimate member support for social ministries." This lack of knowledge of members' attitudes may be a barrier to developing social ministries, the study contends.

* Efforts to remove or restrict literature, textbooks, and other materials in public schools increased dramatically last year, often over religious concerns, according to a study by the liberal research organization People for the American Way. The study catalogued 348 "censorship attempts" in 44 states during the 1991-1992 school year. Leading the states in such activity is Florida, with 34 incidents, followed by Texas and California with 27 each. Popular books most often targeted included John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men," J.D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye," and Alice Walker's "The Color Purple." The most frequent reasons cited for the objection to books included anti-Christian, New Age, or Satanic themes. Even evangelical author Madeleine L'Engle's book "A Wrinkle in Time" was frequently questioned for alleged New Age content. In citing this survey, the evangelical newspaper Twin Cities Christian (September 17) reports that conservative Christian critics say that the PAW study engages in "religious bigotry" and false

charges of censorship to describe what are actually parental rights in deciding children's reading material. (Twin Cities Christian, 1619 Portland Ave. So., Minneapolis, MN 55404)

* College students affiliated with religious groups are happier and healthier than their peers who are not affiliated with such organizations, according to a recent Canadian study by University of Western Ontario sociologists Gail Frankel and Ted Hewitt. The National & International Religion Report (September 21) cites the study as finding: students involved in Christian clubs or faith groups on campus were three times more likely to be involved in volunteer work than the unaffiliated (41 versus 14 percent); the affiliated group reported "significantly" better health than the unaffiliated, making less use of a wide range of health-care services; the affiliated appeared more satisfied with their lives and expressed more positive psychological states, and they experienced less stress. Furthermore, the study found that the more religiously committed a student was (as measured by church attendance and spiritual devotions), the better off he or she was. (National & International Religion Report)

* Canadian youth are less attracted to organized religion than they were in the 1980s, although they still have a strong interest in spiritual issues, according to a recent study by researchers Reginald Bibby and Donald Posterski. The survey (of about 3,500 Canadian teenagers), cited in the Canadian evangelical magazine Faith Today (July/August), finds that only 18 percent of respondents aged 15-19 currently attend weekly religious services. That rate, down from 23 percent in 1984, is expected to drop to less than 15 percent by the year 2000. Only 26 percent of teens say they are committed to a religion, down from 39 percent in 1984. Yet, eight of every 10 teens say they believe in the existence of God and the divinity of Jesus, and six in 10 admit having spiritual needs. While most of these teens (eight in 10) eventually plan to return to church for ceremonies related to marriages, births and deaths, they are now increasingly turning to the media, movies and popular music for their moral and spiritual education. (Faith Today, Box 8800, Stn. B, Willowdale, ON M2K 2R6)

NEW HEAD OF WORLD COUNCIL INTRODUCING A DIFFERENT ECUMENICAL PARADIGM?

The recent election of Konrad Raiser as general secretary of the World Council of Churches is likely to keep the international ecumenical organization on its liberal social course, while also challenging more traditional views of ecumenism, according to recent reports. The Christian Century magazine (September 9) reports that Raiser, a German professor of theology, is clearly identified with the strand of the WCC emphasizing common social action, rather than the section focusing on common theology faith. Raiser's liberal political credentials were in evidence during the gulf war when he introduced a resolution (later rejected) in the WCC which called upon the churches to give up any moral or theological justification for the use of military power, and to become "public advocates of a just peace." Raiser will also introduce a "new paradigm" on ecumenism into the WCC, writes Betty Thompson. In his writings, he emphasizes the ecumenical task as embracing the "whole life of the world" rather than the "household of faith," thereby reversing the WCC position that the unity of Christians precedes and should serve as a model for the unity of the world.

Critics also charge that Raiser's approach moves away from the

Christocentric emphasis of the WCC. The conservative evangelical magazine World (September 5) notes that Raiser defends the WCC's controversial program to combat racism (which has been charged with giving funds to revolutionary groups). The new general secretary did not receive a unanimous welcome among his German colleagues, since he is a critic of the large state church in Germany (the state-supported Protestant church contributions make up about 40 percent of the WCC's revenues), as well as a sympathizer with some aspects of liberation theology and its "base communities. (*Christian Century*, 407 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60605; *World*, Box 2330, Asheville, NC 28805)

CAMBODIA UNDERGOING LIBERALIZATION ON RELIGION

Religion is finding new favor in Cambodia after nearly 20 years of repression, according to the Hong Kong-based magazine Areopagus (Trinity). Last spring, over a thousand Cambodians entered Phnom Penh on Vesak Day (the day of the full moon) to celebrate Buddha's birth. One spectator says the people were "marching for peace and the rebirth of Buddhism..." The new tolerance could also be seen in Cambodian politics. The Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party is the first opposition party to be inaugurated since the mid-1970s, when the Khmer Rouge took power. Cambodia is also making a rapprochement with the Catholic Church. A Vatican diplomat has recently discussed with Supreme National Council chairman Prince Norodom Sihanouk the possibilities of returning church property and granting permission for foreign priests to visit Cambodia's estranged Catholics. During the 1970s, Cambodia's churches and Buddhist temples--some of which were national landmarks--were taken over and used for secular purposes. Maryknoll priest Thomas Dunlevy says "When I arrived in Cambodia in early 1989 we were not allowed to speak to Khmer people...Someone shadowed you wherever you went. Khmer people were afraid to speak to you. People then did not have the hope they have now." These developments in Cambodia are coming at a time when neighboring Vietnam has also been permitting more religious freedom. (*Areopagus*, P.O. Box 33, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong)

ISLAMIC UPDATE

* While Islam in former Yugoslavia (as in the rest of the Balkans) was long considered a moderate and tolerant strand of the faith, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is serving to militarize these Muslims, according to the New York Times (September 17). "Previously apolitical Muslims in the area talk of turning to the Muslim Democratic Action Party of President Izetbegovic as their only defense. While the party says it wants a unitary state of multi-ethnic tolerance, it is a religiously-based Muslim party which, according to Western analysts, contains some fundamentalist strains." The fact that Bosnian Muslims have accepted ammunition from Iran only further fans the fears of an Islamic takeover by Serbian opponents. One of Izetbegovic's earlier writings on the organization of a modern Islamic state (which the leader says does not represent a blueprint for Bosnia and Herzegovina) has been seized on by Serbs as justifying their campaign of ethnic cleansing. "If we don't stop Islam now, fundamentalism will dominate Europe in 10 to 20 years," says one Serb soldier.

* Islamic fundamentalism, in the form of the Iranian-inspired Hizbollah movement (or "Party of God"), is making large strides in Lebanon,

according to Britain's The Economist (September 12). After the unraveling of the long civil war in Lebanon, there was the hope that Christians and Muslims would both participate politically in rebuilding that nation. But in recent elections Christians weakened themselves by boycotting the vote over the demand that Syria's troops withdraw from the Beirut area, while Hizbollah Muslims gained moderate yet surprising victories at the polls. "Abroad, Hizbollah is notorious for having masterminded the western hostage saga. At home it has built up popular support through its fierce raids against Israel's self-proclaimed 'security zone' in southern Lebanon and a vigorous program of Islamic-flavored welfare provision." Hizbollah has also been valued by occupying Syria because of its private army. Yet, the movement may become a "thorn in Syria's side" as it represents a "brand of Muslim fundamentalism that [Syrian President Hafez Assad] has persecuted ruthlessly at home." (The Economist, 10 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY 10020)

* Pakistan appears to be taking a further step toward becoming an Islamic state, according to The Economist (September 5). Muslims are increasingly pressing for a fully Islamic government, and already have enacted several Islamic laws without reference to parliament. In the past few months, the Islamic law (or sharia) court has banned interest on loans as unislamic and the government has also sided with Muslim leaders in their attack on the country's widely used quota system which seeks to redress regional and ethnic imbalances in government employment. A vague law against insulting Muhammad has also now been used against Christians, one of whom has recently died in prison in dubious circumstances. The main critic to such Islamic laws is opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, who has been attracting huge crowds at her rallies. Meanwhile, Pakistan's government and its prime minister, Nawaz Sharif are in trouble. "Privitization is stuck, inflation is a problem [and] some of his partners in the government coalition have deserted him.... So Mr. Sharif is trying to show that he is in command. His proposal to make Islamic law supreme is difficult to oppose. Not all politicians are as brave as Miss Bhutto."

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