

RELIGION WATCH

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CATHOLICISM INCREASINGLY AT ODDS WITH AMERICAN CULTURE?

American Catholic opinion makers appear to be increasingly making the observation that Catholicism moving from a mainstream to a more countercultural stance in U.S. culture, especially during the Clinton administration. A cover story headlined "We Are The Counterculture" in the conservative Catholic magazine Crisis (December) provides a noteworthy illustration of the shift in attitudes about Catholicism's place in American society. Whereas the magazine was in the forefront of encouraging Catholicism's public role during the Reagan and Bush administrations, the mood today is more somber. In an article sharply criticizing the liberal effects of Vatican II on American Catholicism, neoconservative Catholic leader Michael Novak states that "We live in a very rotten intellectual culture, at a very rotten time in history. At such a time, to be a Catholic in America is to be at odds with it, and perhaps even to begin to doubt the legitimacy of the regime."

Novak emphasizes returning to classical Catholic theology, papal authority, and rebuilding a sense of community among warring factions in the church, rather than providing a social ethic or public role for Catholicism. Such a view of growing conflict between church and society is not too surprising for conservative Catholics, who have lost a good deal of political clout with the Clinton presidency, and have often viewed themselves as a subculture in liberal American Catholicism. But an editorial in the liberal National Catholic Reporter (January 8) carries similar sentiments. The newspaper notes that Catholic leadership "during the last half century has been in step with successive U.S. government administrations. Until now." Such links between political leadership and church leadership have ranged from the liberals John F. Kennedy and Pope John XXIII to conservatives Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and current Pope John Paul II.

The editorial continues, "Only now, in January 1993, for the first time in nearly five decades, does a Rome/Washington leadership divergence appear imminent. Rome remains on its rightist course while Washington appears ready to move to the left-- how far and for how long remains to be seen...the psychic/spiritual strain many Catholics have felt in recent years is only likely to increase as they feel torn between their U.S. and Roman Catholic impulses. Church drift may be further exacerbated...many U.S. Catholics will find themselves in an increasingly greater bind, caught between their democratic instincts and fidelity to their Catholic roots." [The renewed conflict between Catholic and American identities appears to be part of a trend toward more concern

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with building internal community life rather than belonging to and changing mainstream society. American Jews have also recently been questioning whether assimilation is the best model to take in American society, since this process has weakened group identity; see November RW.] (Crisis, P.O. Box 1006, Notre Dame, IN 46556; National Catholic Reporter, P.O. Box 419281)

RIGHT-WING PURGE ANOTHER STEP TO MAINSTREAM MORMONISM?

In December there was reported to be a major purge in the Mormon church of members who have engaged in activities associated with the right and far right. In some respects, the action caught Mormon-watchers by surprise; in recent years it has been liberal Mormons who have felt the most heat from church officials. But observers appear to agree that the purge shows the growing concern of church leaders that Mormonism is seen as a mainstream religion rather than a marginal sect.

The purge involving hundreds of Mormons is said to be the largest in Mormon history since the 1850s, when thousands were excommunicated. A news report cited in Christian News (December 21) notes that the recently excommunicated Mormons (as well as many who have been threatened with excommunication) are from the Mormon heartland made up of Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and Idaho. Church officials will not give any figures on how many were excommunicated, but one spokesman acknowledged that the church has become increasingly worried and have warned against the actions of "super patriots" and survivalists, some of whom have resigned from their jobs and taken their families to mountain retreats. Also at issue is that ultraconservatives have claimed that they are following the teachings of 93-year-old church president Ezra Taft Benson, who was involved in such right-wing groups as the John Birch Society [Taft is an invalid who is rumored to be senile]. But church officials say Benson's teachings are being cited out of context. Other activities targeted in the purge were clearly aimed at a right-wing subculture active in the region-- home schooling, the John Birch Society, and the presidential candidacy of Bo Gritz, a populist leader who has been making doomsday predictions, receiving more than 28,000 votes in Utah during the November elections.

A widespread explanation for the purge is that Mormon officials are trying to make Mormonism a mainstream religion. Mormon sociologist O. Kendall White of Washington and Lee University told RELIGION WATCH: "It reflects Mormonism's preoccupation with respectability. They are trying to define Mormonism in the middle between right and left... Church officials are reacting at the same point to curb both the right and the left." White says that the church has been worried that the activities of the right-wing segment of the church might lead to Mormon fundamentalism, a movement that also has been excommunicated from the church. White says that it is mainly an "Inter-Mountain-West phenomenon," and that the high number of votes that Bo Gritz drew in November may have been an important factor in moving the hierarchy to make such a crackdown. There may also be growing concern about the apocalyptic beliefs and teachings of Mormons with the coming of the year 2000. White adds that Mormon officials are now defining themselves against an earlier version of the church, which, as shown by Benson's activities in the 60s, tied it closely to the right-wing. Ed Firmage, a professor at the University of Utah Law School and long-time observer of Mormonism, says in an interview that the purge may represent one more step in the expansion of Mormonism beyond its cultural

roots in the American West and the universalizing of a religion that is already growing the fastest in the Third World. (Christian News, Rt. 1, Box 309A, New Haven, MO 63068)

CURRENT RESEARCH: RECENT FINDINGS ON RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

* The gap between mainline Protestant church members and church leaders on social issues has not generally been in evidence in the evangelical community, but that may be changing, according to a recent study. The study suggests "that some significant differences are emerging between the leaders of evangelical relief and development agencies and their donor constituencies," reports Amy Sherman in First Things magazine (February). The survey of evangelicals, conducted by the Center for Survey Research at the University of Virginia, found that a considerable segment (40 percent) of evangelical relief and development leaders believe that the reason Third World countries are poor is largely because of exploitation by rich First World countries (which is known as the dependency theory), and they often believe that the "materialistic, selfish lifestyles of American Christians contribute" to such conditions. In contrast, donor respondents overwhelmingly rejected the notion that the poor countries were poor because the rich countries were rich; rather, they said that the less developed countries were poor because of internal corrupt political, economic and cultural systems. There was also a significant difference in attitudes about the objectives of relief and development work between the two groups of respondents: 88 percent of donors agreed that the ultimate goal of such work ought to be spreading the Gospel, while only about 60 percent of evangelicals leaders agreed with this statement. (*First Things*, 156 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010)

* The Gallup-based Princeton Religion Research Center occasionally runs a poll asking teenagers about their beliefs in the supernatural and paranormal, and it appears that there has been some changes in what is being believed and disbelieved. The center's newsletter Emerging Trends (December) reports that a recent poll found that 76 percent of teens believe in angels [following a similar interest in angels among adults], increasing by 12 percentage points since 1978. The belief in ghosts has grown from 20 percent in 1978 to 31 percent in 1992. But teen belief in ESP has declined from 67 percent in 1978 to 43 percent today (although belief in clairvoyance--the ability to see into the future-- has remained steady at about 21 percent). Belief in the headlines from supermarket tabloids such as Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster has decreased from 40 percent in 1978 to 12 percent today in the case of the former, and 31 percent to 11 percent in the case of the latter. Belief in astrology has shown sporadic growth over the years (down 4 percent since 1988), and the highest level of such belief is found among Hispanics (71 percent). Only one teen in 20 (5 percent) does not believe in any of the supernatural experiences found on the survey. The highest level of skepticism is found among black teens. (*Emerging Trends*, 47 Hulfish St., Suite 215, Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542)

* While Quebec continues to grow independent politically, recent research shows that the province's religious character is showing some affinities with the rest of North America, especially when it comes to the impact of baby boomers and the growth of the New Age movement. The recent book, Les Croyances Des Québécois ("The Beliefs of the Quebec People"; Volume 11, 1992; edited by Raymond Lemieux and Micheline Milot; Cité Universitaire,

Université Laval, Quebec G1K 7P4) presents statistical evidence to show that among the better educated, urban church members, the older Catholic language of piety and devotion is being replaced by newer, more sophisticated terminology. This focuses especially around the "Dieu" question. The older, more rural-oriented Quebecians hold to the traditional teachings about God, while the Quebecian equivalent of the baby boomers are opting slowly but steadily for more inclusive interpretations of the deity. However, neither traditional nor contemporary Catholics are showing an openness to Anglo-Saxon or Germanic teachings on doctrine. In this respect the nationalist sentiment shows clearly.

In specific case studies, the book's scholars give considerable attention to the emergence of New Age religious infiltration into Quebecian religious understanding. This phenomenon closely parallels a similar New Age penetration which occurred in the U.S. in the late 1980s. Evidence shows the more educated are showing a wider curiosity than the rural citizenry about such issues as reincarnation, crystal healing, and channelling. At issue, is the matter of whether Quebec's Catholicism can or should make any adjustment to the more spiritualistic, secular thrust of New Age teaching. The contributors conclude that this may well be the most controversial issue to face Gallo-Quebecian Catholicism in the immediate future.-- Translated and written by Erling Jorstad, an RW contributing editor, author, and professor of History at St. Olaf College.

SPIRITUAL REVIVALS SPROUTING UP EVERYWHERE BUT NORTH AMERICA

In reading through a 35-page special report on the expansion of Christianity throughout the world in Charisma magazine (January), a reader would think a dramatic spiritual revival is sweeping the globe-- everywhere, that is, except North America. World missions strategist George Otis Jr. and a research team known as the Sentinel Group conducted a large number of interviews with mostly evangelical and charismatic missions workers around the world on the growth and accessibility of Christianity on their continents. The exhaustive, if unscientific, survey confirms the observation that the gulf war has created new openings for Christian missions in the Islamic world of the Middle East and North Africa. One of the most notable developments stemming from the gulf war has been the availability of Christian scriptures in this region, even in strongly Islamic Saudi Arabia. Along with underground churches being established in this country, there is now a network of clandestine Christian bookstores in Saudi cities. The greatest response rate to Christian outreach in the Middle East is coming from the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq; it is estimated that 90 percent of relief operations in Iraqi Kurdistan today are sponsored by Christian groups. Kurds are now inquiring about Christianity, as many say, including one Kurd leader, that Islam is bankrupt and that a new religion is necessary. Other countries reporting a new openness to Christianity are Iran (with a 12 percent church growth rate, even though Christians are being persecuted), Morocco and Egypt.

While South Asia, including Pakistan, and India, has been called a "heart of darkness" by missionaries, there is new growth in this region, along with conflict with native faiths and ideologies. Even with the emergence of Hindu militance in India, it is estimated that 15,000 baptisms take

place each week in the country. As in Islamic countries, the occurrences of alleged supernatural events, such as visions and healings, are said to be significant factors in such conversions. The film medium has been among the most effective tool in Christian missionary work in India, especially a motion picture on the life of Christ, "Oceans of Mercy," which has been dubbed into six Indian languages and is said to have generated 3 million conversions. Turning to Asia, Otis and company report "revival fires" burning in China "all across the vast contry at an unprecedented rate...2,000 new churches have been planted over the last two to three years despite fierce government resistance." For decades, Mongolia has "pulled up the rear in every statistical category related to church growth in Asia." But with the demise of communism, foreign missionaries are pouring into the country, creating a reported 3,000 percent increase in the size of the Mongol church over the past two years. Christian expansion has reached such a point in the South Seas or Oceania that these Christians are now becoming missionaries to other parts of the world. The small island nation of Tonga, with its born-again prime minister, is being viewed as a key center for the evangelization for the pacific region and beyond.

In Africa, the high rate of conversion to Christianity appears to be continuing, even in areas where Christians are competing with a resurgent Islam for souls, such as Sudan. [Somalians are also reported to be expressing an interest in Christianity; a trend that may become stronger with the current U.S. involvement in the country]. It appears that indigenous Christian evangelization is also becoming more diversified throughout Africa. A new movement known as the Pan-African Christian Women's Alliance has given women a more active role in evangelization where previously they were passive bystanders. Even in secular Europe there are signs of new Christian vigor and unity in evangelization efforts, especially with the opening up of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. From Chile to, more recently, Cuba, the missionaries and church leaders interviewed report continued growth in Latin America, despite a backlash among Catholics and such native religious groups as the spiritualists in Brazil. It is only in North America where the upbeat tone of Otis' survey takes a sudden dip: "Today, mounting evidence forces us to acknowledge that North America has been largely bypassed by the great spiritual harvests occurring in ohter parts of the world...we are not witnessing the kinds of mass movements toward Christ that are occurring in Asia, Africa or Latin America." The most notable stirrings the survey finds in North America are among ethnic groups, inner cities, and other "neglected" groups. (Charisma, 600 Rinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746)

INDIAN EVANGELICALS MAKE NEW SOCIAL, ECONOMIC INROADS

While liberal and radical Christian theologians in India have pressed the hardest for an indigenous and socially active faith, it appears that the more individualistic, evangelical Christians are having the greatest impact on Indian society as it undergoes modernization, writes Max Stackhouse in the Christian Century magazine (January 20). "Christianity in India seems to be following the pattern found in Latin America, Korea and Taiwan: a new indigenous piety emerges, prompted in part by Western missionaries but quickly developing its own leadership and theology. This contextualization of Christianity was completely unanticipated and frequently opposed by the older churches and ecumenical leaders. These

groups show little direct interest in the social questions that have concerned the contextual [or liberation theology-oriented] theologians of the last generation. Nevertheless, these groups are having a major social and economic impact in several respects. They seem to be caste-inclusive-- a posture that all Christian churches officially aspire to but seldom attain. They also provide friendships for those who have left the womb of their extended family or village for education or work. This community is also a safe setting for meeting potential partners in 'love marriages' (in contrast to arranged marriages)-- a pattern that both gives greater freedom of choice to women and forces men to act in ways that commend them to more independent women."

Stackhouse writes that these congregations "offer informal but effective networks for those seeking jobs...And these churches help members develop leadership skills in a nontraditional and nonhierarchical setting, teaching them how to build and maintain voluntary groups. These skills, incidentally, transfer into the business realm, especially for the hundreds who are starting the small firms that are appearing at every level of Indian society." Stackhouse also reports that there has been an "explosion" of independent Bible study and prayer groups that coexist in tension with the traditional churches. While Indian theologians have forged a "Dalit Theology," which uses liberation theology themes centered around the Indian Dalits or untouchables, even these Christians are basically non-radical and apolitical. During a recent Dalit Christian gathering, Stackhouse found most Dalits uninterested in liberation thought and interfaith dialogue, especially because of growing Hindu and Muslim militance. Ironically, the liberal Christians who are the most concerned with interfaith relations and pressing for human rights and social justice "are precisely those most under attack by non-Christian militants at local levels, and many activists want to bring judgement against these religions." (*Christian Century*, 407 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60605)

HOW DETRIMENTAL IS WESTERN TV TO INDIAN RELIGION AND CULTURE?

Is newly imported satellite television programming harmful to traditional Indian culture and religion? The answer may depend on which generation you ask, according to recent articles in the newspaper Hinduism Today (January and February issues). In the January issue, an article attacked the new Western-based satellite programming for introducing subjects "alien in content-- especially for the rural villager-- and flaunt a worldliness that even for the most cosmopolitan urbanite stridently contrast [with] values nurtured for centuries as Hindu culture." Satellite television was permitted in India after the gulf war, and since that time such Western networks as CNN, Star-TV, Star Plus, and MTV have made heavy inroads into the country (along with fast-growing cable television). "Today when Hindu school girls socialize, they allude not to Sita of Valmiki's Ramayana [a Hindu epic that has been televised], but to Gina of Star Plus's Santa Barbara." Politicians, religious leaders and psychiatrists have attacked satellite programming, and there have been calls for new regulation of the media. The prestigious Times of India recently reported that MTV was responsible for inciting a new sex craze among Indian school kids. The article adds that India's most secular voices champion the foreign TV invasion for "shaking India out of certain religious patterns it deems have immobilized rather than enlightened its masses."

But all of the Hindu young people interviewed in the February issue of

the newspaper contradict the views of their elders, saying they are largely unaffected by the programming and are more discerning than the older generation claims they are. "Though I am not a religious fanatic, as a practicing Hindu, TV programs have not in any way affected my beliefs or my devotion to my religion. I think it is in the mind of the individual as to how TV programs affect their behavior," says one 23-year-old. A 25-year-old says "I get many ideas from the TV about fashion, food habits, music and ways of life in foreign places...One should be able to differentiate between what is good and what is bad." One 19-year-old who calls MTV a "teenager's paradise," adds, "I am a Hindu, and believe in our culture and practices and feel we Indians can improve our lifestyles by watching Star TV. It paves a way to compare our culture with those of other countries, but it does not affect or cause long-standing damage to us personally." (*Hinduism Today*, 1819 Second St., Concord, CA 94519)

ISLAMIC UPDATE

* There is a reemergence of Islamic Sufism in its birthplace of Central Asia, possibly setting the stage for conflict as more militant Muslim movements attempt to quell this tolerant offshoot of the faith, according to the Far Eastern Economic Review (December 17). While traditional Muslim institutions and practices were virtually wiped out under communist persecution in Central Asia, the mystical school of Sufism kept the faith alive. Sufism, a tolerant branch of the faith incorporating Christian and even Buddhist elements, "is a deeply personal, deeply silent expression of faith that does not need the trappings of mosques, formal prayers and mullahs to retain its essential spirit," writes Ahmed Rashid. Currently such Sufi movements as the Dervishes in Turkey, the Nashbandis of Afghanistan and the Yassaveyas of Chinese and former Soviet Central Asia are thriving after the fall of communism. Rashid adds, "However, Sufism now faces a direct threat from the sectarianism that is being imported at breathtaking speed from the divided Muslim world to the south. Iran is playing a major role in spreading its message of Islamic revolution in Tajikistan...The Muslim Brotherhood based in Egypt, Pakistan and Afganistan is sending mullahs, money and guns to back the Islamic Renaissance Party-- a powerful opposition force across Central Asia."

Most of these imports are new to Central Asia, where the majority of people are Sunnis of the Hannafi sect, which has always been tolerant and nonpolitical, "with no belief in a messianic mission..." The new sectarian groups are attacking each other in the quest for adherents, as well as the Sufis for being overly tolerant of non-Islamic influences. There is as yet no organized Sunni response to the sectarian threat, partly because these new groups are not well understood by a people isolated from the rest of the Muslim world since 1917. Another reason for the lack of response is that Sufis may be too busy trying to revive traditional arts and healing practices, often through modern marketing methods. Already, prominent Sufi businessman Safarbai Kushkarov has started a company to promote such traditional medicine practices as acupuncture and herbal healing in Central Asia and abroad, as well as reviving traditional martial arts and crafts. Kushkarov says Central Asian people may at first be lured by the message of revolution and by the funding of the new sectarian groups. "But the beauty of Islam in Central Asia is that it is rooted in culture and philosophy and above all tolerance. This cannot be wiped out in a hurry." (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 181-185 Gloucester Rd., Centre Point, Hong Kong)

* While the creationist movement has been largely a Christian phenomenon, it appears that there is growing interest in these teachings among Muslims, resulting in a new bond of cooperation between these conservative believers. In Acts & Facts (December), the newsletter of the Institute for Creation Research, it is reported that a "historic" conference was recently held in Turkey where Christian and Muslim scientists presented papers arguing for evidence of creationism against evolutionism. The invitation to the American Christian creationists came from the Turkish government, which has recently been attempting to include creationist views into the secular "evolution-only" approach of the public schools. The conference was received enthusiastically and well-attended, with an audience of 2,500 teachers and students. The newsletter adds, "Interestingly enough, within Turkey, there is an uncanny similarity in responses to creation as in America. There are the true 'believers,' although within that group are recent [or new earth] creationists [holding to a literal biblical interpretation that creation took place several thousand years ago], old earth creationists, and theistic evolutionists. Then there are the nominalists, those who call themselves Muslims; but live a separate life apart from the teachings of the Koran. Next, there is a small minority of humanists, agnostics, and atheists. Unfortunately, these have substantial control of education, politics and the media." (Acts & Facts, P.O. Box 2667, El Cajon, CA 92021)

* As with North and East Africa, Islam is growing in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the evangelical missionary newsletter Pulse (November 20). The plan among Muslims to "Islamize" Africa is extending beyond traditional Muslim countries to those nations where they are in the minority. "The growing continent-wide popularity of Arabic on religious grounds and as the only vehicle through which religious expertise can be acquired fully is evidence of this," according to the newsletter. One Christian leader reports that in most African countries schools and universities have become centers for the "most militant Muslim activism in Africa." While such sub-Saharan countries as Kenya, Tanzania, and Nigeria all have secular constitutions, their governments use public funds to assist Muslims to visit Mecca and other Muslim holy sites. Kenya, a traditional stronghold of African Christianity, is "increasingly the target of Muslim political ambitions." In the coastal areas of Kenya, there has been unprecedented rioting and protests because of Muslim preaching against President Daniel arap Moi. In Tanzania, "there is a clear increase in Muslim zeal, as shown in mosque-building projects, mission programs, and debates against Christianity," sometimes leading to inter-religious conflict. (Pulse, Box 794, Wheaton, IL 60184)

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