

RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

Volume 8 Number 5

March 1993

COMPUTER NETWORKS COMPATABLE WITH AMERICAN RELIGION

Quietly but steadily computer networks are impacting American religious life, as age-old questions of religious faith are being discussed and new bonds of fellowship are being formed across the nation via electronic bulletin boards. While the increasing use of computer technology by religious denominations and organizations has become a well-documented trend [see October 90 RW], religious computer networks are now growing increasingly decentralized, encompassing small groups of like-minded individuals as well as larger organizations. How will such technology impact American religious life? Although no statistics are yet available on how many networks and Americans are going on-line for spiritual or religious purposes, a survey of several religious networks suggest that they are already serving some functions traditionally carried out by denominations, associations, and congregations-- from creating new open forums and becoming outlets for information and activism, to forming computer-generated "virtual communities."

The Washington Post (September 19) reports that through computer modems and appropriate software, congregations and individual believers are "providing a forum for religious debate that remains as spirited today as it was in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on a church door..." Hooked up to local bulletin boards or such national networks as Compuserve, laity and clergy are able to respond to various issues at their own pace, freed from face-to-face pressures for immediate response. One leader in this field is St. Alban's Episcopal Church in Washington, which runs the Church Without Walls bulletin board to foster discussion of religious issues; one such forum included an in-depth conversation on the meaning of the Christians sacraments. The bulletin boards are also serving a specialized clientele. The anti-cultist Truth Seekers of Rockville, Md., puts out its bulletin board to make instantly available information on groups they are researching. Computer networks can also provide fellowship and community, according to the Friends Journal (February). The magazine reports on the growth of the the Quaker Electronic Project and other networks for Quakers and fellow travelers which serves, at once, as a "library, a meetinghouse, a social center, and a bulletin board." The networks link Quakers around the world and yet function much as a Quaker meeting: participants type in messages on social and spiritual issues and respond to each other as they feel led, and then the messages are stored on hard disk and shared with other Quaker and non-Quaker networks.

These Quaker computer "communities," which are accessed on the national church and social activist network PeaceNet, welcome Friends and non-

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 \$19.95 per year. \$25 for libraries. Write for foreign rates. Mailing address: P.O. Box 652, North Bellmore, NY 11710 (ISSN 0886 2141)

Friends alike, as it makes the Quaker experience more accessible to seekers and brings its work on peace issues to other church activists. The article concludes that the networks are for "the activist who wants to reach beyond her or his local meeting. It is for the shy Friend who finds it easier to interact through the computer than face to face. It is for the Friend who lives where there are no Friends near." For conservative Christians a recently established small network called the Rose Hill Forum performs a similar function as that of Quaker networks. The forum, through its scriptural meditations and discussions of spirituality and theology, provides "real spiritual direction results," as well as a "community" for conservative Christians who feel isolated and shut out of their liberal congregations and denominations, says director Owen Jones. He told RELIGION WATCH that the forum (and other conservative Christian networks) can be used for "bypassing institutions that have a monopoly of power" in the churches. Jones' views are similar to those of political conservative thinker George Gilder, who is a promoter and member of the Rose Hill Forum (which is found on the politically conservative Town Hall computer network.) In his recent book, Life After Television (W.W. Norton & Co.), Gilder claims that the new computer technologies will strengthen traditional values as they "break the monopoly of liberal power in the communications industry," and give individuals greater freedom in selecting their news media and entertainment.

Both Jones and Gilder view the new computer networks as anything but a unifying force in religion and society. They believe the emerging networks will mirror the religious and social divisions in American society; Jones says that the computer may aid the "realignment" taking place as conservative Christians from the various denominations unite against the liberals in these same church bodies. One example of such an on-line "culture war" took place in 1989 when Prodigy Services network elected to discontinue one bulletin board because of caustic exchanges between homosexuals and fundamentalists. In another way, however, computer network specialists see the technology as also serving a unifying function. Glenn Easton, director of the Washington, D.C.-based National Computer Users Group for the Religious Community, told RW that the networks attract an ecumenical following, as they downplay denominational labels and differences and encourage dialogue, debate and cooperation. Easton cites the example of the Gesher Network, a Jewish computer network, that links Jews in America with those in Israel. On the network "Reform Jews speak with the Orthodox and they don't know it; they can't see how black each others' hats are," Easton says, referring to the Orthodox custom of wearing black hats. (*Friends Journal*, 1501 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102-1497) -- RW contributing editor Erling Jorstad contributed to this article.

SOCIAL SERVICE, EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS TAKING ON NEW AGE SLANT

Concepts and techniques associated with the New Age movement are increasingly finding their way from the human potential seminars and growth centers to U.S. inner cities and schools, according to the New Age Journal (January/February). The magazine reports that social service workers, educators, criminal justice experts, and grassroots activists and volunteers are attempting to address such problems as inner city violence and drug addiction using preventative measures that have introduced such New Age and human potential concepts and buzzwords as empowerment, holism, mentoring, nurturing, self-esteem, and wellness. The

article cites the now widespread acceptance of self-esteem programs in public schools as an example of the popularity of New Age/human potential concepts. The self-esteem emphasis was introduced into the public schools by California state assemblyman John Vasconcellos in the mid 1980s, and the concept has "since gained powerful currency as a social vaccine: a new organizing principle for reframing the way America solves problems. Today, three-fourths of California schools have some self-esteem component; most social legislation includes it as a crucial goal; and fifty-eight California counties and many states have self-esteem forces of their own." Vasconcellos says, "At first I worked to keep [self-esteem] from being ridiculed. Now it's so common I try to keep it from being trivialized."

Such concepts as self-esteem can be viewed as carry-overs from the New Age movement that have left most of their religious baggage behind. But the article gives other examples of this new kind of social service that are far from secular. The Alianza Dominicana, a social service center for immigrants from the Dominican Republic in the Washington Heights section of New York City, calls itself "holistic," as it joins together self-esteem programs and Dominican folk versions of aromatherapy and acupuncture to heal addiction. A community center for street youths in the resort town of Saratoga Springs, N.Y., has offered such activities as Sufi dancing, shamanic drumming, Vipassana meditation, Reiki therapy, and theater games. One of the center's leaders, Eva Nagel, says, "Underneath their resistance, they're really hungry for forms [of meaning] they can accept. The Native American and pagan traditions meet that need; church doesn't. If you try Robert's Rules of Order, they run out of the room. If you pass the talking stick, they'll take it." [While the New Age movement was largely viewed as an individualistic quasi-religion in the 1980s, this article suggests that the New Age can also be adapted in the directions of social concern and community-- values that are reportedly carrying more appeal in the 1990s.] (New Age Journal, 342 Western Ave., Brighton, MA 02135)

SOUTHERN BAPTIST SCHOOLS SECULARIZING DUE TO CONFLICT?

The continuing conflict between conservatives and moderates in the Southern Baptist Convention "is changing the face of higher education as universities and seminaries once firmly tied to the [Southern Baptist Convention] undergo traumatic upheaval and, in some cases, purges, or sever ties with fundamentalists and become essentially secular institutions," reports the Washington Post (February 13). Aiming at the alleged liberal tendencies of university faculties, "conservatives are changing the memberships of boards of trustees, which in turn are hiring and firing school presidents, who in turn hire and fire faculty members," writes William Booth. Already such schools as Baylor in Waco, Tex., Furman in Greenville, S.C., and Wake Forest in Winston-Salem, N.C., have distanced themselves from the fundamentalist leadership in their states, while smaller schools have moved more to the conservative agenda. Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama is one of the few universities where conservatives and moderates are co-existing (although conservative activists are targeting the school for allowing non-evangelical influences, such as speakers favoring pro-choice on abortion.) The conflict has forced the schools to rethink their Christian identity and its boundaries: "What everyone is trying to figure out is, what do we mean when we say we're a Christian university in the 1990s?" says one conservative leader.

CHRISTIAN RIGHT REENERGIZES WITH ANTI-HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVISM

In a swift reversal of momentum, the Christian Right has found new life and funding in opposition to President Bill Clinton's social agenda. Christian Right activists are finding strong support for their prolife, anti-homosexual agenda after being written off since the Republican Party convention as being too negative. The New York Times (February 1) reports that the public uproar over Clinton's plans to lift the ban on homosexuals in the military has, in the judgement of several specialists on the Christian Right, been transformed into planned political resistance embracing a wider following than those supporting the Pat Robertson or Pat Buchanan presidential campaigns. With leadership and donor mailing lists being furnished by the Traditional Values Coalition, Robertson's Christian Coalition and other religiously connected activist groups, Christian Rightists are appealing to the general public for denunciation of Clinton's proposal.

Citing the strong opposition by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and their own deeply felt convictions that the Bible condemns such sexual expression, sizeable numbers of Americans are now reenergized to carry on a fight they had seemingly lost after the fallout of opposition to the negative tone of much of the Republican convention. Meanwhile, Randall Terry of the anti-abortion effort Operation Rescue has been increasingly focusing on gay rights issues in the wake of Clinton's proposals. The National & International Religion Report (February 8) reports that Terry is leading part of the pro-life movement to join with the anti-gay activists as they present a united front against various Clinton measures, from gay rights to fetal tissue research. (National & International Religion Report, P.O. Box 21433, Roanoke, VA 24018) --By Erling Jorstad.

CURRENT RESEARCH: RECENT FINDINGS ON RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

* Partake of enough popular media and one might suspect that the term "spirituality" is gradually replacing the more traditional designations of "religion" and "religious." But a recent survey suggests that the phenomenon of describing oneself as "spiritual," a term often used by those influenced by New Age currents and other forms of non-institutional religion, is not replacing older self-descriptions, according to News From The Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture (January). The survey, conducted by the Indiana University-Purdue University Public Opinion Laboratory, found that 81.4 percent of the respondents described themselves as religious, while 82.2 percent described themselves as spiritual. Those aged 25-34 and 45-54 were slightly over 4.5 percent more likely to call themselves spiritual, and those aged 55-64 were 6.4 percent more likely to do so. But those aged 18-24 and 35-44 were about as likely to describe themselves one way as the other. People living on the West Coast were 5.9 percent more likely to describe themselves as spiritual rather than religious, with 6.2 percent of those in the Mountain region and 7.8 of those in the South Central region more likely to do so.

Editor Charles Allen concludes that the preference among Americans to describe themselves as spiritual instead of religious "may not be as pronounced on a national level as might have been expected. While the term does seem more popular in certain age groups and regions, the

results again seem to run counter to what one might have expected. 'Spirituality' does not become uniformly more popular with a decrease in age, nor does its popularity uniformly increase as one moves west." (Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, IUPUI, 425 Univ. Blvd., Rm. 344, Indianapolis, IN 46202-5140)

* The Religion & Society Report (February) cites a survey by Moscow social scientists Ludmila Vorontsova and Sergei Filatov where it was found that Russians are very religious but not very Christian, although they remain attached to the Russian Orthodox Church as a cultural institution. Only 29 percent of the population hold the Christian faith, but interest in reincarnation, the devil, telepathy, extraterrestrial beings, astrology, and other supernatural forces is widespread. Strangely, large numbers of those identifying themselves as non-Christians attend Russian Orthodox services. Twenty four percent of self-identified atheists, 30 percent of those belonging to non-Christian folk religions, and 25 percent of "doubtters" say they attend Orthodox services because of the beauty and solemnity of the liturgy. (Religion & Society Report, 934 Main St., Rockford, IL 61103)

* A majority of German Catholic women believe the church to be a male-dominated and oppressive institution with not much sensitivity for women's concerns, according to a recent poll. The poll, conducted by Germany's Allensbach Institute, also finds that most women reject Catholic teachings on contraception, divorce and celibacy, according to the National Catholic Register (February 21). While on the personal and parish level and in participation in Catholic organizations, many women feel comfortable with church life, even among this group most reject the Catholic positions on birth control, divorce and celibacy. Of this group, a clear majority also rejects abortion. But among all the respondents, two-thirds do not support the church's prolife stance; a similar percentage believes that the church is a public institution where equality for women is hardest to come by. Only 11 percent say they believe that men and women have the same opportunities in the church. (National Catholic Register, 12700 Ventura Blvd., Suite 200, Studio City, CA 91604)

MORE INCLUSIVE ECUMENISM DEVELOPING IN COUNCILS OF CHURCHES

Although many have sounded the death knell on organized ecumenism in recent years, local ecumenical efforts, such as national councils of churches, are being "repackaged" and may be getting a new lease on life, according to the evangelical World magazine (February 13). "Sometimes they appear to be starting 'from scratch' with new names and governing documents, but more often than not they're the old ecumenical types bringing in new support. The major source of fresh blood and money is usually the Roman Catholic Church." This trend has not made an appearance in the U.S. yet (the National Council of Churches in the U.S. does not have the Catholic Church as a member, although Catholics have joined regional ecumenical councils), but in other countries the bishop's conferences or other national representatives of the Catholic hierarchy have joined the formerly Protestant (or Protestant and Orthodox) councils.

In Canada, the conference of Catholic bishops is an associate member of the council of churches. "Overseas the trend has gone much further,"

reports the magazine. Norway and Sweden both have new 'Christian councils' this year. The dominant state Lutheran Church is represented in each, as is the minority Roman Catholic Church, and such denominations as the Baptists, Eastern Orthodox, and the Salvation Army. A recent annual meeting of the Councils of Churches in Europe included a representative of the Council of European (Catholic) Bishops' Conferences, the main reason being the "increasing full membership of the Roman Catholic church in national council of churches." (World, Box 2330, Asheville, NC 28802)

ENGLISH CHRISTIANITY CHANGING BECAUSE OF THE CATHOLIC OPTION?

Since the Church of England's decision to ordain women last November, various observers have noted that changes in the landscape of English Christianity may be in the works. While there have been forecasts of a schism by traditionalists and proposals where they would stay in the church without being obliged to accept women priests [see January RW], a wild card has recently been introduced into these deliberations by the Roman Catholics. British Catholic Cardinal Basil Hume recently announced that he is discussing with traditionalist Anglicans an arrangement where they would come under the authority of the pope but would be allowed to keep much of their Anglican identity--such as their liturgy and their practice of a married priesthood. Under such an arrangement, whole parishes could switch over to the authority of a local Catholic bishop. The proposal is not far-fetched, since there have been ex-Episcopal parishes in the U.S. that have kept a part of their Anglican heritage while transferring to Rome.

If the arrangement works out and many traditionalist priests--said to number about 3,000--take Rome's cue, Britain's The Economist (February 20) forecasts that there could be "big consequences" for Christians in England. "It would change the character of Catholicism in England, making it more English (and less Irish) and bringing in a batch of married clergymen. As for the Church of England, its troubled finances would suffer a bad blow. And talk of disestablishment, already rife in the wake of the Queen's annus horribilis, would intensify: the church she heads would be seen to be no longer the largest in the land. No wonder senior Anglicans are eager to avoid a split." Early on, veteran Anglican observer William Oddie predicted a "realignment of English Christianity" resulting from such a split within the Church of England in the London-based magazine The Spectator (December 19-26). Oddie writes that "Without its most resolute Anglo-Catholics, the Church of England could, paradoxically, be more united than at any time in its history. Anglican reunion, first with the Methodist Church, then with the United Reformed and other liberal Protestant churches, could soon follow the departure of most of those who in the past have opposed such schemes." (The Economist, 10 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY 10020)

ETHNIC CONFLICT INTENSIFYING AMONG EASTERN ORTHODOX IN ISRAEL

A different kind of Middle East crisis has been intensifying in recent months between the mostly Arab laity of the Greek Orthodox Church in Israel and their Greek leaders. The National Catholic Register (February 7) reports that a schism may be looming in the 66,000 member church, as members are increasingly protesting mistreatment by the church hierarchy and accusing leaders of profiting from sales of valuable church property in the Holy Land territory. Arab church activists are planning legal

actions, boycotts, and a media campaign against the hierarchy over such issues. The conflict is the result of more than a century of Greek domination in what is essentially an Arab church. Members of the ruling Church Synod are all Greek nationals, and the church is politically backed by the Greek government. Arab priests usually don't attain leadership positions because most of the hierarchy is drawn from the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulcher, a church order which only admits Greek monks.

Uri Mor, head of the Christian office in the Israeli Religious Ministry admits that "The Greeks don't seem to care much about the welfare of their community." A good deal of conflict also touches on the Palestinian-Israeli situation. Church members have criticized how presiding Patriarch Diodorus continues to lease their land and patrimony to Israeli developers, and allegedly sends the money back to Greece to support the Greek church and the families of priests. The Israeli government also tends to protect the Greek leaders by supporting a 19th century law which favors the hierarchy's administration of the Holy places. A small schism has already taken place, which is known as the Arab Orthodox Church. The church has passed resolutions calling for Arab bishops, Arab as the official language (most Greek Orthodox leaders don't speak Arab), the recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and for Jerusalem to be crowned the capital of Palestine. But even moderates are saying that schism may be the only solution to the conflict. Meanwhile, the Christian Touchstone magazine (Fall 1992) reports that thousands of dissatisfied Greek Orthodox members in Israel have left the church in recent years to join Protestant and Catholic denominations. (Touchstone, 3300 West Cullom Ave., Chicago, IL 60618-1218)

WORLD NOTES

* As Western religions are being translated for use in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, some unusual culture gaps are appearing. In the independent Mormon magazine Sunstone (September), a letter writer recently working in a mission in Hungary reports that "Sunday school lessons were a strange combination of politics, religion and science fiction. Like early members of the Church in other countries, these Saints tend to bring in their own traditions from the past." The term Hungarian Mormons used for faith was "telepathy," while the term for fasting was a "great synergy." (Sunstone, 331 South Rio Grande St., Suite 206, Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1136)

* Religion on Italian television is undergoing a revival, according to The Tablet, (January 23) a British Catholic magazine. While in the past the Italian secular media have given little attention to religious issues or treated religion in a sanctimonious style, today state television channel RAI-2 (the Socialist Party channel) is featuring five-minute slots of Pope John Paul II between soap operas. The Communist, or now ex-Communist, channel's management has distributed to all its journalists Milan's Cardinal Carlo Martini's recent booklet on the mass media. Italian television has recently featured a music program called "Rock Cafe," hosted by a priest, as well as priest-hosted series on ethics and on the Ten Commandments. The religious presence on TV mirrors a growing attention to religion throughout Italian society, evidenced in the swift sales of the new Catholic catechism, and the increased space allotted to Catholic spokesmen in the daily newspapers. Some have criticized what

they see as a clerical invasion of the public sphere, but others say the phenomenon is occurring because many politicians have been discredited by recent financial scandals, and due to disorientation caused by the recession and the fall of communism. Despite the media's new attention to religion, there has been no decrease of television programming that is deemed morally offensive; one observer says "Italian television is becoming as superficial as American television." (*The Tablet*, 48 Great Peter St., London, SW1P 2HB ENGLAND)

* China has tightened restrictions on Buddhist monasteries in Tibet during the last year, according to the Washington Post (February 6). Samdong Rinpoche, leader of Tibet's parliament which is in exile in India, recently said that the Chinese have severely restricted the ability of young Buddhist monks to receive religious education in the largest monasteries and have reduced ration cards issued to monks and nuns. Another leader says that religious education has deteriorated to the point that many young monks know little about Buddha's teachings. The Chinese government is now permitting some outward manifestations of religious activities and recently gave financial assistance for the rebuilding of several monasteries destroyed during the cultural revolution. But Tibetan Buddhist leaders claim it is a show aimed at convincing foreigners that religious freedom is permitted in Tibet.

* There is a resurgence of rituals and beliefs in saints or "holy men" among Moroccan Jews in Israel, which is bringing a cultural "boost" to this minority group, according to the New York Times (February 14). In recent years the grave of Rabbi Yisrael Abuhatzera in the desert town of Netivot has become the center of a "rapidly growing cult." The tomb of the rabbi is said to possess divine power that heals the sick and grants prosperity. The annual pilgrimages and celebrations that draw thousands to the tomb have become a commercial growth industry for the Moroccan Jews. "Some scholars say the surging popularity of such pilgrimages signals a new assertiveness by Moroccan Jews" in Israeli society, where the official "melting pot" policy has often frowned on their distinctive traditions.

CORRECTION: The first sentence of last month's cover story was garbled during the final copy editing of the newsletter. The opening sentence should have read: "American Catholic opinion-makers appear to be increasingly making the observation that Catholicism is moving from a mainstream to a more countercultural stance in U.S. culture, especially during the Clinton administration."

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FINDINGS & FOOTNOTES

— A Bi-Monthly Supplement of Religion Watch —

PRESS NOTES

March/April 1993

* The Spring issue of the Buddhist magazine Tricycle features a special section on Buddhism and social action. In the past few years Buddhist leaders and practitioners have challenged the view (not justified by Buddhist history or doctrine, according to some specialists) that Buddhism promotes only personal transformation at the expense of social concern. The section carries articles on the recent origins of Buddhist social action, starting with Zen leader Thich Nhat Hanh and his nonpartisan Buddhist movement protesting the Vietnam War; an account of recent Buddhist protest against nuclear weapons; and an interview with activist Joanna Macy. The approach to social action seems to be eclectic, with one activist writing: "The challenge is to take the Western social justice tradition, as embodied in the Declaration of Independence, anarchist traditions, Marxist philosophy, and other social critiques, and combine it with the profound understanding of personal liberation offered by Buddhism." The issue costs \$6 and is available from: Tricycle, 163 W. 22nd St., New York, NY 10011.

* The February 15 issue of Context is devoted to religious trends that will unfold during the next five years. The newsletter, written by Martin Marty, a noted interpreter of American religion, captures a wide variety of religious currents (many covered in the pages of RW over the years) And offers some provocative forecasts, including: congregations increasingly using consumer models to attract the faithful; the continuation of religious tribalism and fundamentalism; among evangelicals, the "high risking," "probing," and "envying" once surrounding televangelism will be moving to the megachurches; "crisscross ecumenism," where spontaneous and local ecumenism replaces older bureaucratic models of church unity; the merging of New Age currents with more established religions. For more information, write: Context, 205 W. Monroe St., Chicago, IL 60606.

* As evidence of the ferment running through contemporary Christian doctrine, both Catholic and Protestant, one only needs to page through A New Handbook of Christian Theology (Abington, 1993). The book, edited by Donald Musser and Joseph Price, attempts to summarize in 153 short essays those teachings and issues which dominate the religious scene today. Avowedly a rewrite of the long standing Handbook of Christian Theology published in 1958, the book's contributors include a large variety of new themes and issues for this edition: 45 items from the old edition were dropped, while 97 more were added. At the forefront are a variety of essays on feminist and environmental matters, suggesting the editors believe these to be the cutting edge subjects for the future of theology. The volume also adds new summaries of theological disputes over sexuality, civil rights, health, and several on the implications of the Holocaust for religious faith. The book espouses no one or two brands of theology, such as neo-orthodoxy or liberalism. The editors state that this eclecticism does justice to the current theological scene, very much in ferment over both its topical agenda and its forms of analysis. --By Erling Jorstad.

ON/FILE: A Survey of Groups, Movements and People Impacting Religion

- 1) AWARE is a new organization that sees itself as an alternative to anti-cult groups and their critical attitude toward "cults" or new religious movements. AWARE, which stands for the Association of World AcAdemics for Religious Education, seeks to disseminate accurate information on alternative and non-traditional religions with no attempt to judge such movements as dangerous or unsound. The Santa Barbara, Calif.-based group plans to offer "mediation services" to reunite families divided by membership in new religious movements rather than deprogramming. AWARE, directed by James Lewis of the Institute for the Study of American Religion, is part of an effort by mainly academics over the past decade to discredit the anti-cult groups, often citing studies that dismiss the claim that so-called cults engage in "brainwashing." For more information, send to: AWARE, 160 N. Fairview Ave., Suite D282, Goleta, CA 93117. (Source: Press Release)
- 2) The Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding is probably the most extensive effort to date to provide theological dialogue between the major branches of Christianity and Judaism. Funded by individual donors and based at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Conn., the center offers specialists from Christian and Jewish traditions the opportunity for probing common and divergent beliefs. Under the leadership of Rabbi Jack Bemporad, the center has held several interfaith conferences with the mandate of spreading their findings to the grass roots congregations across the U.S. More than any other academically based think tank, the center has the support of the leadership of the various faith traditions its participants represent. According to Bemporad, the center's task has been eased greatly in recent years by more moderate stands among Christians on how their faith relates to Judaism, and by relaxation of Orthodox Jewish prohibitions against including theology in inter-religious talks. (Source: Los Angeles Times, February 13).-- By Erling Jorstad
- 3) The recent formation of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists (SCSS) represents an attempt by conservative Catholics to bring a Catholic approach to such fields as sociology, psychology and political science. The society, which is based at the Franciscan University, Steubenville, Ohio, will also seek to apply Catholic social teachings to contemporary social issues. Organizers of the group say that since Vatican II there has been the loss and secularization of Catholic professional organizations in the social sciences. Also influential in the SCSS's formation is the view that recent research on American Catholicism done by liberal Catholics has been biased against Catholic orthodoxy. SCSS founder sociologist Joseph Varacalli says, "We feel that bishops are in trouble" often having to rely on research by Catholic scholars or universities that is "a reflection, for better or worse, of mainstream secular research, with all the biases that entails...We're hoping that bishops can come to us and we can produce" research from a Catholic perspective. Such influential church leaders as Cardinal John O'Connor have given their support to the society. Among the projects the society is working on is a detailed three part analysis of Catholic participation in American political life. (Source: Long Island Catholic, January 27)

NEXT ISSUE: A REVIEW OF THE FEMINIST RELIGIOUS PRESS