



RELIGION WATCH

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AFTER THE APPARITIONS: HOW MARIANISM IS CHANGING CATHOLICISM

The number of alleged apparitions of the Virgin Mary continues to grow around the world; even the Vatican is said to have lost track in following the cases of such phenomena. But there is a lot more to these claims of apparitions than the crowds and sensationalism seen on the nightly news. The hundreds of apparitions have spawned new organizations, prayer groups, activism, and unique theological viewpoints-- making it a challenge for Catholicism to assimilate such currents. While the apparitions are often presented as the main act of the Marian movement by the media, the prayer groups and "peace centers" generated by such occurrences may be their most long-lasting byproducts.

There are well over 1,200 Marian prayer groups and 300 centers for peace in the U.S., according to Dr. Thomas Petrisko, director of the Pittsburgh Center for Peace, which publishes the Marian newspaper "Our Lady Queen of Peace." Petrisko told RELIGION WATCH that these prayer groups have emerged from several different apparitions-- from the well-known Medjugorje apparitions in the former Yugoslavia, to less familiar sites such as Scottsdale, Arizona and Conyers, Georgia. The prayer groups, which meet in participants' homes, often are based on saying the rosary (a practice which is often called for to avert judgment and catastrophes in the apparitions' messages) and studying the messages from various apparitions. There is a growing charismatic element to the prayer groups, as for the last three years charismatic and Marian Catholics have increasingly prayed together, Petrisko says. The strong charismatic involvement in the Marian movement may be resulting in a cross-pollination of beliefs between the two groups. Father Gerald Fitzsimmons, a priest who works with Marian groups in the New York City area, says that under the influence of the charismatics there is more of an emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in Marian teachings and devotions; some even speak of Mary as the "spouse of the Holy Spirit" (a term that has been used in Catholic history, but is now rarely mentioned by the church officials for fear of misinterpretation).

Petrisko says that the messages of apparitions often refer to an imminent "period of tribulation" and judgment which will lead to the reign of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In studying various Marian groups and their participants, Fordham University sociologist Michael W. Cuneo found a common view of the end times and the return of Christ that is similar to that of pre-millennial evangelicals. "It's a distinctively Catholic version of Protestant millenarianism," says Cuneo, author of a

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forthcoming book on traditional Catholicism and Marianism entitled, "Smoke of Satan." Another facet of the new Marianism is its activism. Cuneo found that the apparitions (which often carry strong anti-abortion messages), particularly Medjugorje, often serve as a point of entry into pro-life activism for many participants. The centers for peace, besides being resource centers on Marian apparitions and helping to start prayer groups, also seek to implement many of the apparitions' calls for peace. The centers, as their name implies, emphasize the role of Mary as the "Queen of Peace," organizing masses and prayer meetings for peace, as well as taking more practical measures; the centers have petitioned the United Nations and U.S. senators on peace concerns in Bosnia and Somalia and have shipped medical supplies to Bosnia. The recent Marian resurgence is different because of its more ecumenical nature. "Protestants are realizing more and more that Mary is not a threat to them," says Petrisko. Protestants--from Episcopalians to fundamentalists--often participate in activities surrounding Medjugorje, with some eventually converting to Catholicism, while others remain in their own denominations, he adds.

The growth of the prayer groups and other related Marian activity has not been ignored by church officials, as there is currently an attempt to bring the movement into more contact with church authority. The Long Island Catholic newspaper (July 28) reports that there is an effort in the Rockville Centre Diocese to "coordinate" the prayer groups in cooperation with the dioceses' office of charismatic renewal. Like in the early years of the charismatic movement, there is the concern that the prayer groups may become too independent of parishes, and that some people's understanding of the nature of the apparitions may not be in line with church teachings. Fitzsimmons says that there are similar attempts among dioceses across the country to work closer with Marian prayer groups; the Trenton (N.J.) diocese has already established a Marian office. But it may be difficult to unite the Marian movement under church auspices. In his research, Cuneo found that there is "tremendous competition between devotees" of the various Marian apparitions as each tries to put forth their own message. Far from unifying the church, Cuneo told RW that the current unruly Marian upsurge is "accentuating the cultural differences and tendencies toward fission already under way in Catholicism." (Our Lady Queen of Peace, 611 Steubenville Pike, McKees Rocks, PA 15136; Long Island Catholic, P.O. Box 90009, Rockville Centre, NY 11571-9009)

EVANGELICAL YOUTH MOVEMENT TAKES ON NEW ESTABLISHMENT

A new assertive youth movement appears to be emerging out of American evangelical churches. The new outspokenness is evident in a movement of "tens of thousands of young men and women across the country who have signed covenants vowing to remain chaste until marriage," reports the newspaper Newsday (September 24). The teens are part of the "True Love Waits" campaign, which began last April as part of the Southern Baptist sex education program. Youths were asked to enter into a pact with God before their parents and then in a public setting of the church, vowing to be "sexually pure until the day I enter a covenant marriage relationship." The campaign quickly spread to other denominations and parachurch groups, such as the Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Church of God, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Campus Crusade for Christ. By the campaign's closing celebration next July in Washington,

D.C., organizers hope to be able to display 500,000 pledge cards. Youths say the campaign is partly to protest what they see as the portrayal of teens in television, movies and music videos as sex-obsessed, and partly to "protest the distrust of an adult society where the surgeon general advises girls to take condoms on dates," according to the article. The campaign is part of a larger Christian youth movement that is seeking to make its presence known in society, especially the public schools.

Signs of such a movement include the growing number of evangelical youth gathering for prayer meetings at their school flagpoles, and the student protests over a recent Supreme Court decision that was interpreted as prohibiting prayers at graduations. But at the heart of the movement are Bible clubs being established in public schools across the country, according to Charisma magazine. (September). Bible clubs emerged in public schools after a 1990 Supreme Court decision ruled that school officials could not prohibit religious meetings if they are held apart from class hours. Today there are an estimated 9,000 Bible clubs, which are student-led and are viewed as "beachheads for evangelism" of other students (with a recent focus on minority groups). When students run into conflict with officials they seek legal help from evangelical attorney Jay Sekulow and from Oklahoma City-based Youth America, which provides students with Bible study material and legal assistance. Bible club organizer Blaine Bartel sees the whole youth movement as the beginnings of a new Jesus movement. "We're going to see a new counterculture. Kids in the 1960s rebelled against the Establishment, and their counterculture changed America. But now, I see kids staging a righteous rebellion against the Establishment-- because the general population is going the wrong way." (Charisma, 600 Rhinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746)

MAINLINE CHURCHES TURN FROM INNER-TURMOIL TO ADDRESS SOCIAL ISSUES

During their national conventions this summer, mainline Protestant churches took a decided turn away from their tendency to deal with internal denominational problems and controversies, and instead focused on such national social and moral issues as national health insurance, racism, multi-cultural ministries, sexual identity, and ecumenism. This trend showed up in the conventions of the Presbyterian Church, (PCUSA, 3.8 million members), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA, 5.3 million members), the American Baptist Churches (1.5 million members), the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ, 1.3 million members) and the National Baptist Convention (3 million). The American Baptists, meeting in San Jose, California in late July, gave special attention to the rise of organized gambling across the country. The Baptists stated that gambling's growing popularity is an insidious force promising wealth but in fact subverting its participants, according to the Christian Century magazine (July 28-August 4). Denominational delegates also renewed pledges to work for national health insurance, stand with the oppressed and poor, and minister directly to those involved in sexual misconduct.

At the Presbyterians' June convention in New York, most of the delegates' time was spent debating whether or not to ordain homosexuals. And as in recent years, the proposal to adopt such a course of action was defeated (though sent back to specialists for further study). The Christian Century (June 16) reports that the PCUSA chose to minimize a proposed major reform of its denominational offices and instead focused on the

homosexual ordination and related sexual abuse matters. The denomination acknowledged the controversial, divisive nature of its liberal social agenda, but the majority of delegates pledged to continue efforts in this direction. At the ELCA gathering in late August in Orlando, Florida, the delegates focused mainly on enlarging their national ministry. Major pronouncements, the result of several years of committee study, were approved, including issues such as protection of the natural environment, ending personal and institutional racism, enlarging multicultural ministries, and increasing ecumenical efforts with other Protestant groups, according to reports in the Minneapolis Star Tribune (August 27) and the Los Angeles Times (September 4). During their July convention, the Christian Church broke with tradition by electing a new president, the Rev. Richard L. Hamm, who had already approved an earlier proposal to ordain candidates of homosexual orientation, according to the Washington Post (July 31). The church also pledged renewed energy and resources to combatting such issues as racial injustice and domestic violence.

At the annual gathering of the National Baptist Convention in early September, there was a similar emphasis on addressing national social issues. The New York convention demonstrated how far the mainly black denomination has been moving in the direction of greater social activism from its socially conservative past. "Virtually no session or sermon at the meeting...passed without pleas for action on the ills troubling black America: inner-city crime, drugs, AIDS, teen-age pregnancies and unemployment...the convocation preached a message that should have suited the Clinton presidency-- a blend of traditional moral discipline with support for government programs," reports the New York Times (September 12). There were also signs that the denomination is moving toward a nationally coordinated program and higher media visibility. [The well-known fears expressed during the 1980s that mainline bodies would soon become extinct are no longer major concerns among these groups. Nor are they preoccupied as in earlier years in maintaining their denominational identity in a society not interested in such older debates. Rather, these bodies are seeking opportunities for renewal by extending their efforts in social ministry.]--By Erling Jorstad, RW contributing editor and professor of History at St. Olaf College.

EVANGELICALS INCREASINGLY DIVIDED OVER EXCLUSIVITY OF GOSPEL

American evangelicals are facing a potentially divisive doctrinal issue over the purpose of overseas mission ministry and the value of world religions. According to an extended review of new books on missions in the Christian Century (September 8-15), evangelicals both at home and overseas are facing a crisis over inclusiveness-- in other words, the question of who besides Bible-centered Christians can gain salvation. At issue is how the traditional view that only Christians are saved can stand up under the claims of many non-Christians who say they understand and follow the basic precepts of a creator who is revealed in a variety of ways. The new emphasis, represented by such evangelical theologians as Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, insists God is at work among all peoples in all cultures-- a view which flies in the face of much evangelical teaching. Writer John Stackhouse predicts that that the issue will increasingly divide evangelicals into separate camps of "inclusivists," represented by such theologians as Carl Braaten, Jurgen Moltmann and many Roman Catholic thinkers, and "exclusivists," who uphold the traditional theological position. (Christian Century, 407 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60605)-- By Erling Jorstad

CURRENT RESEARCH: NEW FINDINGS ON RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES

* While the 1992 U.S. presidential election of Bill Clinton was billed as being largely about economic concerns, the election results show a continuing pattern of realignment among voters based on the degree of their religious commitment, resulting in a "new kind of cultural division," according to a recent study. The study, conducted by political scientists Lyman Kellstedt, John C. Green, James L. Guth, and Corwin E. Schmidt, examines pre-election and election results among evangelical, mainline, Catholic and "secular" (those with no religious affiliation) voters and found that the 1992 election had several results: "those with high levels of religious commitment, mainly evangelicals, "solidified their support for the Republican Party," mainline Protestants loosened their attachment to the GOP, secular voters moved strongly into the Democratic coalition, and Catholics returned to the Democratic Party.

The researchers write that such a pattern suggests a "new divide based on the extent rather than the type of religious belief...one side of this new division would include people who believe in God and organize their lives around religion, while the other side would include those who do not and organize their lives without reference to religion. Such a cleavage would be unique in American history, but has been quite common in European democracies." They add that for such a "divide to become dominant, it must reach beyond cultural questions to include economic matters as well...Evangelicals are the logical place to watch for the expansion of the 'culture war' to other fronts." [The researchers write that such an expansion is already a concern of some evangelical activists; see last month's issue for an account of the Christian Coalition's support of such measures.] (Digested from an unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in September)

* A recent comprehensive study of church attendance statistics in American churches has raised serious doubts about earlier studies. The new study by Kirk Hadaway, research specialist for the United Church of Christ, and other associates, says that the traditional figure of some 40 percent to 50 percent of American adults attending weekly services is seriously exaggerated. Basing its results on denominational figures and in-depth case studies, the study [which will be published in toto in the December American Sociological Review] challenges such widely accepted findings as that of the Gallup Poll and the Barna Report, according to an article in the Christian Century (September 8-15). The statistics are potentially explosive because specialists have for decades considered regular church attendance the best single index to religious vitality. The new report challenges most surveys' claim that nearly half the population attends either a Protestant or Catholic church regularly, asserting instead that the figure is much closer to 25 percent. -- By Erling Jorstad

* A high number of women rabbis report that they have been sexually harassed by male colleagues or laymen, according to a recent survey. Moment magazine (October) cites a survey by the American Jewish Congress showing that 70 percent of the 140 women rabbis studied report sexual harassment, with 60 percent saying it was by laymen and 25 percent saying it was by other rabbis. Half the women rabbis report unsolicited touching or closeness and one in six have received unsolicited calls or letters of

a sexual nature. Despite such findings, the women rabbis expressed a very high level of satisfaction with their work and frequently mentioned the advantages of being a female rabbi, such as being allowed to combine emotions and intellect in ways male rabbis are not. (Moment, 3000 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 300, Washington, DC 20008-2509)

* A black Protestant living in the South who attends church regularly, considers himself or herself "born again," has no college education and earns less than \$20,000. That is the profile of an American most likely to share his or her faith, according to a recent nationwide poll by the Barna Research Group. SBC Today newspaper (September 9) reports that the poll discovered 46 percent of American adults believe they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs with others. But among the religiously devout (those attending worship services more than twice a month), only 59 percent feel a responsibility to share their faith. Among blacks, 62 percent feel a need to share their faith, compared to 44 percent of whites and 32 percent of Hispanics; 56 percent of the Southern respondents were "evangelizers" compared to Northerners (38 percent); non-college educated (54 percent) compared to graduates (37 percent); Protestants (57 percent) compared to Catholics (31 percent); those earning less than \$20,000 (54 percent) compared to those earning more than 60,000 (34 percent). (SBC Today, 222 East Lake Dr., Decatur, GA 30030)

ORTHODOXY INCREASINGLY COZYING UP TO RUSSIAN RIGHT?

As the Russian government undergoes increasing turmoil, the right wing of the Russian Orthodox Church is increasingly taking a role in politics, according to several reports. Within the last year, the radical right in Russia, which promotes nationalistic, xenophobic and anti-semitic themes, has sought to mobilize the Orthodox church, and has met with some success, according to the Washington Post (August 25). Surveys have repeatedly found that the Russian Orthodox Church is an institution that has high public confidence, thereby making it an attractive target for rightist influence. This year the pro-communist daily Sovietskaya Rossiya has published numerous articles underscoring the similar views of the church's right wing and Russia's secular nationalists and Communists. The conservative TV program "600 Seconds" has given regular air time to the main spokesman for the church's right wing, St. Petersburg Metropolitan (or archbishop) Ioann. The archbishop has warned in apocalyptic terms of plots against Russia from the West, Roman Catholicism, Judaism and the Masonic movement, although he publicly denies he is anti-Western and anti-semitic. Several priests in Moscow say that Ioann appears to have a substantial following in the church, while liberal intellectuals in the church have no clear leader and are playing no political role at all.

In his recent book, Black Hundred: The Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia (Harper Collins, \$27.50), Russia specialist Walter Laqueur writes that while the temptation for the Orthodox of allying with the far right is strong, the Orthodox church may resist being coopted politically for its own institutional health. Laqueur writes that the church's anguished experience of collaboration with Communism may have taught its leaders to take a more inactive or "quietist" position on politics. Such involvement in nationalist and patriotic causes might cause more splits and successions from Russian Orthodoxy-- such as in the recent successions of Ukrainian and Georgian Orthodox churches from the Moscow Patriarchate--

reducing "the Russian Orthodox church from the status of a world religion to that of a provincial creed." Laqueur notes that there is a good deal of variety to the Russian right-- there are rightists inspired by neo-paganism, occultism and other anti-Christian currents. There are also divisions between moderate nationalists (or "Russophiles"), such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who argue for a society shaped by Christian values, but not a state-sponsored church, and more extreme elements calling for a full-blown Russian Orthodox theocracy.

Yet recent legislation restricting religious activity and evangelism in Russia suggests that Russian Orthodoxy is being widely viewed-- both inside and outside church walls--as the emerging national or state church. The newsletter Religion & Democracy (September) reports that while it is unclear how the new laws will be implemented--especially in the current uncertain political climate-- the legislation will most likely serve to restrict foreign religious groups operating in the country (which could mean "Vatican-based" Catholicism and "Israel-based" Judaism), as well as all groups which "contradict social morality" "offend" and "insult" others, and fall outside the "traditional confessions" of Russia. The head of the Orthodox church, Patriarch Aleski II, has encouraged legislators to vote for the bill. The newsletter adds that "By tirelessly arguing that only Orthodoxy is fit for Russian people, the legislative result may be to make the Moscow Patriarchate the sole administration of the Church in Russia." (Religion & Democracy, 1331 H Street, Suite 900, Washington, D.C. 20005-4706)

SINGAPORE'S CONFUCIAN CHRISTIANITY

Singapore, along with other Southeast Asian countries such as South Korea and Taiwan, has long been cited as a powerhouse of evangelical growth, a portend of the future where the strength of Christianity has shifted away from the West toward the East and South. But it appears that Christianity has had little impact on Singaporean society, as Christians have adopted many of the nation's Confucian values, according to the Australian evangelical magazine On Being (September). John Carpenter, a former editor of a Christian magazine in Singapore, writes that while there is talk of building a "Christian nation," in Singapore, such a Christianity "would probably lapse into a Confucianism with Christian lingo; filial piety would be replaced by 'honor your father and mother' and everything else would be relatively the same; materialism would be only a 'sanctified' craving for expensive cars and large bank accounts; ethics would continue to be questionable; civil rights would still be scarce and Christians oblivious to the very idea of freedom and justice for all..." Carpenter writes that "Singaporean churches seem to work with the philosophy that if a Christian is successful in business he should be made a leader in the church."

He adds that "There is but one emperor in each church and church leaders do not seem to know how to lead except in authoritarian ways." On social issues, evangelicals in Singapore "have not begun to apply their faith to the political situation that surrounds them. They say very little about abortion, presumably because it is a social issue with direct political consequences. And after all, Singapore has a pro-choice position on abortion...When the right to worship is taken away from the Jehovah's Witnesses who, though they are not orthodox Christians, are human beings with an inalienable right to faith, Christians say nothing or perhaps even thank the government." In fact, any criticism of Singaporean society

is off-limits for evangelicals. When evangelical social critic Os Guinness lectured at a Christian college in Singapore and criticized the lack of freedom in the country, the school destroyed the tape of the lecture. In his work as editor, Carpenter found that the Christian press will not criticize the Christian community if it implies criticism of any leader-- "no matter how outrageous he may be." Carpenter concludes that the "Singaporean church is not very different from the society as a whole. Perhaps it should be called 'Evangelical Confucianity.'" (On Being, 2 Denham St., Hawthorn, 3122, Australia)

NAMING AND TARGETING THE RADICAL MUSLIMS IN THE U.S.

Since the bombing of the World Trade Center last March, experts on terrorist movements have increasingly viewed radical Islam as replacing government-sponsored nationalism as the main motivator of such violent actions [see April RW]. The U.S. News & World Report (September 20) notes that within the "ranks of the burgeoning Muslim communities...a small and increasingly violent faction seems to have found a home." Who are these groups? "The number and diversity of the radical Islamic and Palestinian organizations operating here is dizzying," says the magazine. The Tampa, Fla.-based Islamic Committee for Palestine has featured representatives of the radical Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization, although the group denies such ties.

Hezbollah, the radical Party of God, which was responsible for most of the Americans taken hostage in Lebanon, has representatives and sympathizers active in the U.S. In Detroit, "where large portraits of the Ayatollah Khomeini decorate the walls of the Islamic Center of America, activists sell calendars to raise money for Hezbollah's military wing, known as the Islamic Resistance." Hamas, the militant Islamic Palestinian group, is now said to be in the U.S. and is being investigated by the FBI. In fact, "radical Muslim groups" are now the "principal focus of the FBI." [A central concern in the American Islamic press and among mainstream Islamic organizations is anti-Islamic bias, especially after the World Trade Center bombing. This concern is likely to become a highly contentious issue of religious freedom as the government intensifies investigation of Muslims. The refusal of some radical Islamic groups to approve the recent moves toward peace between Palestinians and Israel suggests that the issue will not fade away anytime soon.]

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Inside This Issue:

- *Beyond The Apparitions-- Marianism's Impact On Catholicism*
- *A New Youth Counterculture? Denominational Trends*