



# RELIGION WATCH

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A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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## HOW MULTICULTURAL ARE THE CHURCHES? A CANADIAN CASE STUDY

A central question for all churches today is how to minister to people in the midst of the growing cultural diversity in North America. The question concerns a lot more than strategies of church growth; it touches on matters of religious identity and gets tangled up with hot button terms like "inclusiveness" and "multiculturalism" that are proving to be increasingly divisive in many Christian denominations. A recent issue of the United Church Observer, the magazine of the United Church of Canada, illustrates some of the tensions and problems emerging as denominations seek to attract diverse ethnic groups. The liberal United Church in the past was considered Canada's national church, especially since it reflected most of the nation's British background. In the last 10 years, immigration has changed the ethnic and religious complexion of Canada. The United Church has been in the vanguard of welcoming these changes, such as by including non-Western forms in worship services (for instance, displaying black portrayals of Christ) and forging links with Muslims and other new immigrant religious groups. But a cover story on multiculturalism in the September issue of the magazine suggests that the church has yet to find success in attracting ethnic diversity.

Most of the new immigrants who have moved into the United Church have tended to form their own congregations rather than join existing ones, reports Larry Krotz. "The 50 or so ethnic congregations in the United Church may well meet the needs of ethnic members, but don't necessarily encourage multiculturalism," he adds. The denomination is trying to bring the ethnic congregations into closer contact with the rest of the denomination, but it is not easy. The new immigrant churches are often much more conservative than the wider church, opposing such currents as feminist theology and approval of homosexual clergy. Says one Hawaiian-Japanese pastor, "The very fact that we're in the United Church makes it hard to be evangelical." The article also acknowledges that non-United Church evangelical congregations often do the most effective job at integrating Christians from other cultures. Reginald Bibby, a sociologist at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, says that the new ethnic pluralism poses serious challenges to mainline churches both in Canada and the U.S. Bibby told RELIGION WATCH that like such groups as German Mennonites and Baptists, the differences between the United Church ethnics and the rest of the denomination "will eventually break down due to secularization, even if there is some conflict" in the process.

But that doesn't mean that the children of the new immigrants will become pillars of the United Church; rather, they will likely join other Canadians in taking an noninstitutional or pick-and-choose approach to

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the faith. And what about the attempt by the United Church and other denominations to attract a more diverse membership by including more non-Western elements in their services? "Symbolically it may be fine, but if the church does not appeal to the religious memory of a cultural group, they will not attract them," replies Bibby, who is the author of the recent book on Canadian religion, "Unknown Gods," (Stoddart, Toronto). Many new immigrants are attracted to the evangelical churches, either because they appeal to their "religious memory" (since they come from a similar background) or they are drawn by the spiritual emphasis of such congregations; 14 percent of evangelical church members are from new ethnic groups compared to about 2 percent of United Church members (1 percent for Presbyterians). "We're finding it's extremely difficult for religious groups to reach out beyond their historical base...The churches that win out appeal to spiritual needs," says Bibby. But most U.S. mainline bodies have sought to encourage multicultural activity by a top-down approach-- usually through reserving leadership positions for minority groups. The United Church of Christ recently made a statement reaffirming its affirmative action program calling all congregations and church groups to elect "significant numbers of persons of all races, ethnicities and cultures to policy-making positions."

A multicultural program calling for similar quotas in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is sharply dividing the denomination. The Forum Letter (October 7), an independent Lutheran newsletter, says that multiculturalism was the dominant force at the recent ELCA convention, with one service holding an American Indian ceremony known as "smudging" (similar to the use of incense). "At least 80 percent of the hymns at the two festival services were in a language other than English. This when probably 99.999 percent of the delegates spoke English as their first, if not only, language." One church staff person said with mock seriousness, "The planners had two guidelines: 1) Do nothing that might be familiar to traditional Lutherans, and 2) thereby interfere as much as possible with whatever needs average Lutherans may have to sing, to praise and express themselves as Lutherans." Bibby says that attempts to set quotas in leadership positions and other top-down approaches to draw in minorities, or to link diversity with sexual orientation and other controversial social issues "might be noble, but they are also incredibly naive...There's a real danger that there's going to be erosion and alienation among the churches' traditional base in such attempts. The result may be that these churches will not recruit new members and not keep their old ones."

Bibby keeps his advice short and simple for congregations seeking to reach out to diverse communities: "There should be cultural sensitivity with a reemphasis of spirituality." Writing in the Christian Century (October 27), Carl Dudley of Hartford Seminary also finds congregations that are the most vocal about diversity often don't mirror such a quality. "Churches that unite people across cultural boundaries can name the deeper religious source of their unity. For St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church, it's the liturgy and the sacrament around which black and white Christians gather...For Millard United Church of Christ it's the pride of community ministry that brings together Anglo, Slovak and Mexican-American Christians. In the Rock of Our Salvation Church, it's typically 'just Jesus.' In each case the source of unity is the central expression of the deepest religious faith." (United Church Observer, 84 Pleasant Blvd., Toronto, Ont., M4T 2Z8 Canada; Forum Letter, P.O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753; Christian Century, 407 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60605)

## CONCERN FOR SPIRITUALITY WIDESPREAD AMONG EVANGELICALS

In the past two years, clear evidence of a "quiet revolution" focused on a deeper spiritual life has been growing among American evangelicals. Known largely for their zeal in winning converts and fostering personal conduct based on biblical morality, evangelicals now in large numbers are emphasizing such spiritual disciplines as prayer and meditation. The evangelical Christianity Today magazine (November 8) reports that many seekers are turning out for weekly congregational prayer meetings, attending silent or reflective weekend retreats, reading some of the nearly 2,000 titles on prayer and meditation that are now available in religious bookstores, and participating in denominational prayer programs on a national scale. The Southern Baptist Convention has signed up some 2,100 congregations to pray for an assigned hour every week for the denomination's evangelistic and missionary enterprises.

The United Methodist Church has launched a well received program of training in reflection on the major classic writings of Christian spirituality. Another instance of the new attention to prayer can be found in the popular Focus on the Family program that has sponsored a national day of prayer for its supporters and attracted "hundreds of thousands participating, a tripling of response from previous years," according to the magazine. Analysts are not quite sure what has triggered this response. It is not a traditional revival, but it appears to be a response to the 1990s emphasis on inward concerns rather than social justice issues. Furthermore, its non-denominational, parachurch emphasis attracts many not interested in issues unique to specific church bodies. Without a recognized national leader or single geographical center, the new movement may remain hard to define, but observers are convinced it is on the cutting edge of where American religious life is headed in this decade. (Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60187)-- By Erling Jorstad, RW contributing editor and professor of History at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minn.

## QUASI-DENOMINATIONAL NETWORKS COVER RELIGIOUS SPECTRUM

Last issue RW reported on the growth of networks that are said to be taking over some traditional denominational functions (such as theological education and missions work) while serving congregations both within and outside of their respective denominations, such as those associated with the Southern Baptist Convention. The formation of a similar network among evangelicals in the liberal United Church of Christ suggests this development is taking place across the denominational spectrum. United Church News (November), the newspaper of the UCC, reports that the formation of the Renewal Fellowship is different from other conservative caucuses that are rooted in the denomination because it is "transdenominational." Organizer Armand Weller says the network wants to maintain contact not only with conservative UCC members, but also with those who have left the denomination and like-minded people from other faith groups. "What we are seeing is people are less concerned about denominational affiliations...", Weller says. Already, the network is communicating with Presbyterians, Episcopalians and the Conservative Congregational Christian Churches. (United Church News, 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115-1100)

## HOMOSEXUAL ISSUES ARRIVE ON EVANGELICAL CAMPUSES WITH A BANG

Evangelical campuses across the country are experiencing sharp and often acrimonious controversy is erupting over the moral issue of homosexuality as a legitimate Christian lifestyle. At such leading colleges as Wheaton (Illinois), Calvin (Michigan), Gordon (Massachusetts), and Eastern (Pennsylvania), students, faculty, and administration are coming face-to-face with the claims by some students that their sexual preference is compatible with conservative Christianity and should be recognized, according to a report in the evangelical Christianity Today magazine (November 22). In a situation closely paralleling that of many evangelical and mainline denominations, the leadership and faculty of schools are in harmony in the view that the homosexual lifestyle is not compatible with traditional moral behavior. But some faculty claim the issue should be debated publicly; others, including administration, want to close the debate as quickly as possible. It is not known how many students who are homosexual are remaining silent during the confrontations. What is known is that through public forums, campus newspaper articles, and classroom discussions, the degree of anger and dissent is escalating. To date, no evangelical college administration has acknowledged the right of gay/lesbian students to claim peer approval of their preferences. -- By Erling Jorstad.

## AFRICAN RELIGION FINDING FOLLOWING IN AMERICA

"The United States is now experiencing a renaissance of African religions, and interest in the religion of the Yoruba people of West Africa is growing as quickly as any," according to the Utne Reader (November/December), a digest of the alternative press. The Yoruba religion originated in what is now southern Nigeria, Benin and Togo, and teaches that God is a genderless "life force," and that there are lesser deities which embody and mediate aspects of this force to believers. Followers make offerings to such deities and also venerate their ancestors. Jacob Olupona of the University of California at Davis says this interest in Yoruba religion began about 10 years ago, but in the last two years has spread throughout the U.S. and is now embraced by non-blacks as well as blacks. The interest in the religion is especially found among black professionals "seeking deeper meaning than they can find in career success in the white world or the adopted religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam," according to the magazine.

Aspects of the Yoruba religion are found in such growing Latin American- and Caribbean-derived religions as Santeria, Voodoo, Candobie, and Umbanda. But Yoruba followers intentionally reject these religious forms as accommodations to slavery (most were started by Africans in slavery) and "wish to restore to the Yoruba religion its original depth and complexity." The religion, which has the strongest presence in the New York area, is also increasingly appearing in media coverage and discussions on world religions. Olupona of the University of California says that the growth of Yoruba spirituality is something different than the use of an ethnic religion to strengthen black identity, and suggests that it will continue to spread beyond the black community. (Utne Reader, 1624 Harmon Place, Suite 330, Minneapolis, MN 55403)

## CURRENT RESEARCH RECENT FINDINGS ON RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES

\* Pentecostal Christians have a three times higher rate of major depression than adherents of other religious groups, according to a study by researchers at Vanderbilt University. The study, conducted during a six month period on 2,850 North Carolina residents, finds that "serious depression" occurred among Pentecostals at a rate of 5.4 percent, compared with 1.7 percent for the entire survey group. The survey group included mainline Protestants, non-Pentecostal evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Unitarians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians. Areopagus magazine (Trinity issue) reports that the researchers suggest that Pentecostalism may draw those who are already depressed because of its emphasis on spiritual and physical healing. It is also argued that the internal support provided by the faith "simultaneously isolates members from the broader culture...fostering feelings of social isolation and powerlessness." (Areopagus, Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre, P.O. Box 33, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong)

\* A sizable majority of Episcopalians believe that one can be a sexually active homosexual while still being a faithful Christian, according to a recent survey. Seventy percent of the nearly 20,000 Episcopalians surveyed said that committed Christians can be sexually active gays and lesbians, while three-quarters said a faithful Christian can live with someone of the opposite sex without being married, according to a report in the Christian Century magazine (November 3). It should be noted that the participants in the survey, which was conducted by a committee of the Episcopal bishops, did not constitute a representative sample of Episcopalians, but rather a poll taken during parish discussions of the denomination's statements on sexuality. But it is noted that it is one of the largest survey of church members, covering 75 of the church's 96 dioceses. The findings will aid the bishops in preparing an upcoming pastoral letter on sexuality, according to the report.

\* The number of church-state conflicts in the U.S. rose to an all-time high of 247 incidents in 50 states in 1992-93, according to a recent study by Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. Church & State (November), the magazine of the strict church-state separatist Americans United, reports that this year's number of conflicts was a substantial increase over that of last year's total of 196 in 48 states. The survey breaks down these conflicts into four categories: Religion in the schools: 111 incidents in 38 states; Public funding of religious groups: 47 incidents in 28 states; Disputes about the free exercise of religion: 46 incidents in 31 states; and state endorsement of religion: 43 incidents in 30 states. Michigan led the nation with 14 incidents, followed by California with 13 and Texas with 12. The sharp increase in problems related to religion in the public schools may be due to the legal activism of the American Center for Law and Justice, a new organization started by Pat Robertson, according to Americans United official Rob Boston. (Church & State, 8120 Fenton St., Silver Spring, MD 20910)

\* A recent study by a Marquette University communications professor shows that the best known television talk shows are increasing their endorsement of unconventional lifestyles and are becoming increasingly defensive against critics who find such programming hostile to Judeo-Christian morality. Professor Helen Stark of the Wisconsin-based university bases her research findings on the content of several weeks of

Oprah Winfrey and Phil Donahue programs. As summarized in an article in the National Christian Reporter (October 15), Stark notes an overall favorable portrayal by the hosts of sexual deviation, certain acts of violence, and alternative forms of conception. At the same time, when audience members criticize such endorsements, the hosts often ridicule them, as Donahue did in calling one critic a "jerk," and "Reverend Pooh-Bah." Winfrey frequently uses sarcasm or ridicule to silence dissenters. Stark concludes that so long as these programs continue to bring in huge revenues to the networks, the situation is not likely to change. (National Christian Reporter, P.O. Box 222198)-- By Erling Jorstad.

\* A recent poll shows a growing liberalization on religious and social issues among people in Ireland. An opinion survey published in the Irish Times found that most of the 1,000 individuals questioned favor legalizing divorce and allowing priests to marry. The National Catholic Register (October 24) reports that the survey found that 64 percent of respondents were willing to vote for the removal of Ireland's ban on divorce. Sixty-nine percent said they believe that priests should be allowed to marry. Seventy-one percent said women should have access to information on abortion, and 41 percent of those said the law should permit abortion in circumstances where there was any threat to the life of the mother." (National Catholic Register, 15760 Ventura Blvd., Suite 1201, Encino, CA 91426-3001)

\* Sweden, long seen as the most secularized of nations, is experiencing modest religious stirrings, according to a recent Church of Sweden survey. The Christian Century magazine (November 3) cites the survey as finding that 47 percent of the Swedish population now say they believe in God or a "higher authority." That figure is up from 36 percent seven years ago. The Church of Sweden has embarked on a major information campaign that includes issuing a pocket book explaining the Christian faith in a modern context. The book has been distributed to 3 million households. One church official also reports increased interest in "spiritual matters."

## NEW RESPECT FOR RELIGION IN THE NETHERLANDS

Like Sweden (see above item), the Netherlands has been viewed as a bastion of secularization, with steep declines in church membership and tolerance of unconventional lifestyles and values. But a cover story in the conservative Christian newsweekly World (November 20) reports that there are "signs of a turnaround." The new respect for religion is even seen in politics. The Christian Democratic Appeal (founded by 19th century Dutch Calvinist social thinker Abraham Kuyper) is finding a growing following in its attempt to renew its religious roots. The party, which now has more seats in parliament than any other, recently turned down overtures to undercut the religious nature of its historic principles (which states that its source is the "Good News that God has revealed to mankind in the Gospel," and that its political creed "is established in dialogue with the Bible."). Theo Brinkel of the party's Institute for Policy Research and Planning told the magazine that after the relativism of the last couple of decades, "research is showing that espousing Christian principles attracts political support."

Another sign of religious renewal is the growing support for EO, the

evangelical radio and television broadcasting system. When EO, which now has more members than the oldline churches, network, ran a campaign for members about a year ago, its number of supporters jumped from about 330,000 to 550,000, reports Arthur Matthews. The other broadcasting systems--which were started as voices for Catholic, labor unions, and secular humanist--have so broadened their approaches that EO is the only one left with a real identity based on a worldview, according to a religious broadcaster. For all the growing influence of evangelicals, Dutch church attendance is still declining (20 percent of the population attended 10 years ago, and now the figure is in the single digits). But some see the beginnings of a return to the churches by baby boomers and younger generations, particularly to evangelical congregations. There has also been an increase in missionaries sent from the Netherlands--from 225 a decade ago to about 1,000 today. The rate of distribution and sales of Christian literature and the Bible is now about three times as high as it was in the 1950s. (World, P.O. Box 2330, Asheville, NC 28802)

## THE MORMON 'TRIBE' EMERGING IN THE GLOBAL MARKETPLACE

Joel Kotkin, author of the recent book "Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy," says Mormons are far more than a religion; they make up a new kind of non-ethnic "tribe" that is "well-positioned in the global marketplace." In an interview in Sunstone (November), the independent Mormon magazine, Kotkin says that such ethnic groups as the Jews, Chinese and Indians act as increasingly influential "tribes" that prosper around the world by meeting three conditions: they take advantage of their international connections; they have a tradition of self-help and a sense of uniqueness; and they are interested in technology and gathering information. The Mormons are similarly famous for "taking care of their own;" are high placed in the technological world; and have expanded around the world. Kotkin writes that Mormonism is "expanding at the time when English is becoming a global language, when there is global technology, and it has a strong lay presence." He adds that the "Calvinist values" of the faith will become "extraordinarily useful" in Latin America as it industrializes, and that there is a "great opportunity for Mormons in the Confucian countries, because the Confucian values and the values of Mormonism are extremely similar."

Both Mormonism and Confucian values "are family oriented; there's an interlock between the Chinese worship of ancestors and Mormon geneological work. But again, there has to be market differentiation of Mormonism from other Western Christian faiths...If it tries to be another fundamentalist sect or another washed-out WASP sect, it can't compete." Kotkin notes that Mormons, unlike the other ethnic tribes, tend to permeate mainstream institutions more than create their own economic institutions, which can dilute identity. Mormons have been viewed as a sort of ethnic group because of a common ethnic background and regional base. But now, "they're breaking the ground for a new non-racial, kind of global economic tribe. For example, environmentalists may become an eco or green tribe, people who are united by their common ecological sense. In many ways, ecologists in California, Denmark, and Japan have a lot more in common with each other than with people in their own country--they read the same books, fund the same charities, have the same holidays...But Mormons are leading the way." (Sunstone, 331 South Rio Grande St., Suite 206, Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1136)



## WORLD NOTES

\* The Yazidi, a small religion based in Iraq, is rapidly losing members due to continuing conflict between Saddam Hussein and nomadic Kurds, and because of secularization among the younger generations, according to Areopagus (Trinity issue), a Hong Kong-based interfaith magazine. Yazidis are said to believe Satan is actively evil, while God is passively good. By putting their faith in Satan, the group believes they can use his power to their own advantage. To ward off any ill effects, Yazidis worship an entity they consider Satan's representative, known as the Peacock Angel. Because of the conflict in Iraq, some 150,000 Yazidi worshippers living in the Baghdad-controlled regions no longer have access to their ancient shrine in northern Iraq. "The Iraqis have now taken most of our older believers who are no longer allowed to come worship," says one follower. Until about 30 years ago, the Yazidi faith was kept alive by priests and elders who passed on religious knowledge by word of mouth. But the magazine says that "...youth distracted by television and other modern diversions, lost interest in listening to long discourses."

\* The lay Buddhist movement Soka Gakkai is said to be exercising increasing political influence in Japan, according to the Far Eastern Economic Review (November 4). Japan's mass media has been recently alleging that Daisaku Ikeda, the honorary chairman of the large and controversial Buddhist group, has been wielding power over the leaders of the Japan Renewal Party, a 60-member group which started a series of radical changes in the political scene when it defected from the former ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in June. At the same time, Ikeda being accused of linking Soka Gakkai with the Komei (clean government) party, which he started in the early 1960s. "What is at stake, according to some political analysts, is the emergence of a new conservative party, operating under strong religious influence, which could play a crucial balancing role in future non-LDP coalitions," reports the magazine. Soka Gakkai in Japan has been accused of using "strong arm" methods in recruiting and keeping adherents. (Far Eastern Economic Review, 181-185 Gloucester Rd., Centre Point, Hong Kong)

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### Religion Watch

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



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