

RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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RE-IMAGINING INTENSIFIES MAINLINE'S DIVISIONS

The furor generated over a feminist conference sponsored by mainline denominations has served to highlight and deepen the divisions between liberals and conservatives in the churches, as well as strengthen a new protest movement that is linking together theology and economic action, according to recent reports. The "ReImagining conference," which took place last November in Minneapolis, has by delayed reaction become the centerpiece of controversy in mainline churches and the media for its criticisms of traditional Christian and masculine imagery for God. Participants focused on the theological concept of "Sophia," meaning "wisdom" in Greek, and the way it serves as a female personification of the divine, and celebrated female sensuality and sexuality in general and lesbian participants in particular [see the May 7 New York Times for a fuller account of the conference]. While all this is not exactly new in mainline circles [the use of Sophia has been an established part of Christian feminist thought since at least the late 1980s], the fact that the conference was officially sponsored by such denominations as the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America set off alarms across the country, especially among conservative groups within these mainline bodies.

There are signs that the controversy will be more long-lasting than past controversies between church bureaucracies and more conservative laity. In the Presbyterian Laymen (May/June), an independent conservative newspaper, church historian Richard Lovelace writes that the ReImagining conference has set off a "new reformation," particularly among the Presbyterians, creating a wave of unprecedented protest that joins economic protest with theology manifestos widely distributed among the laity. Half of the 117 overtures sent by local presbyteries to the denomination's General Assembly meeting in June are calling for official repudiation of the conference and about 350 congregations have or are planning to withhold funds to the denomination totaling to well over 2.5 million dollars. More importantly, "there are clear indications" that the church's right wing and centrists are moving closer together in response to the conference, "and the result will probably be a decisive shift in the denomination," writes Lovelace. He adds that with such a shift, feminists and other liberals sympathetic to the themes of the conference may eventually gravitate toward more liberal denominations, such as the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian church.

Denominational officials have sought to minimize the controversy surrounding the conference (which was attended by 2,000 women), claiming that the charges of heresy are overblown and that high staff officials

were not involved in the event. But supporters of the conference seem to agree more with conservative critics that something unprecedented did take place in Minneapolis. In the Reformed magazine Perspectives (May), Old Testament scholar and conference presenter Johanna van Wijk-Bos writes that the conference was a "harbinger" of a "new ordering of society and church," and that the participants "pushed indeed at the boundaries of traditional expressions of Christianity." She adds that the groundwork for what happened in Minneapolis had been prepared by numerous theological writings that have advocated overturning "patriarchy" and moving toward gender inclusiveness in church doctrine during the past 25 years. "Re-Imagining at Minneapolis was in planning and execution entirely congruent with the [above]...goals and may well turn out to have brought them to clearest expression, certainly in the United States if not in the world...In Minneapolis, a large group of Christian women of different denominations across the world issued a challenge to the patriarchy of the church and its traditions...And that is really scary and is the reason why the religious right is up in arms, without a doubt." (Presbyterian Laymen, 520 Mulberry St., SW, Lenoir, NC 28645; Perspectives, 502 Edgeworthe Drive, S.E., Grand Rapids, MI 49546-9623) Erling Jorstad, RW contributing editor, contributed to this report.

**BATTLE OVER
ACADEMICS
GOING PUBLIC
ON RELIGION**

A long-standing controversy over the role of religious commitment of academicians in the university is erupting into a major battle. First drawing national attention in November, 1993, at the American Academy of Religion meeting, the debate focuses on whether professors with religious convictions have the same right to make these views public as do feminist, gay/lesbian, or Marxian teachers. In the May 4 issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, leaders advocating greater public acceptance for expressing religious commitment, such as George Marsden of Notre Dame University, claim that in today's pluralistic atmosphere, only those with explicit religious convictions are held accountable and somewhat suspect among their colleagues for their particular commitments. Since Marsden sparked much of this controversy with an address on the subject at the AAR conference and an article in the New York Times (see November 26 issue), a number of critics of his position have emerged.

Critics such as Bruce Kuklick of the University of Pennsylvania argue that the view that a scholar's personal beliefs are compatible with their academic interests is "loony" and reflects a "self-indulgent professoriate." The issue has reached the federal courts. Donald G. Schley of the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs is suing his former employee, the University of Charleston, for practicing discrimination against him by not extending his contract because he made a public religious profession. The college has replied that Schley's contract was not extended because a better-qualified candidate was selected. Schley, however, has drawn on the newly generated momentum of those claiming religious freedom to make a stand for allowing classroom freedom for religious teachers comparable to that of secular activists. (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1252 23rd St., Washington, D.C. 20037)
By Erling Jorstad

**FINANCIAL
MANAGEMENT
GAINS CHURCHES'
APPROVAL**

"Christian money management," a movement which links biblical teachings against debt with sophisticated financial advisement, is increasingly finding a place in churches and on the Christian book and conference

circuit, according to the Arizona Republic newspaper (April 16). While financial management and budgeting has become a priority for many Americans, what makes the Christian movement different is its insistence that it is a moral duty to manage one's money well and that it is a sin to run up debts. "While a few hard-liners say owing money to anyone is morally wrong, most Christian groups simply emphasize living within your means-- making a budget and sticking to it," reports Angela Winter Ney. Some involved in the Christian financial management movement are motivated by beliefs that the world is ending, but others are worried about more common concerns of job layoffs and high taxes and seek to integrate such concerns with the belief that Christians are stewards over their money. Among those prominent in the growing Christian money management field are Larry Burkett, whose organization, Christian Financial Concepts, has seen nearly a 10 percent increase in those attending its seminars over the previous year, and Ron Blue & Co, a large Atlanta firm.

**SHRINES DRAW
AMERICAN
PILGRIMS**

Catholic shrines in America are experiencing an upsurge in popularity, according to the National Catholic Register (May 15). European Catholic shrines, such as Lourdes, have been reporting a growing number of visitors in the past few years [see November RW]. The trend appears to be taking place in America also, as less-publicized "wayside shrines that are tucked away in the busy parishes of crowded cities or sit alone on a stretch of highway that winds through the Southwest...are becoming more and more popular," writes Mary DeTurris. Devout Catholics seek out shrines because they often feel ignored by the contemporary Church and their parishes, according to Fr. Benedict Groeschel, a specialist on spiritual formation for the New York Archdiocese. "The group that goes to shrines are usually rather devout Catholics interested in private revelations [usually concerning the Virgin Mary] and in devotions growing out of private revelations," he adds. The shrines that have recently been attracting large crowds include the Shrine of Our Lady of Martyrs in Auriesville, N. Y., to where some 50,000 people flock annually, and the National Shrine of the Infant Jesus of Prague in Prague, Oklahoma. (National Catholic Register, 15760 Ventura Blvd., Suite 1201, Encino, CA 91426-3001)

**SPIRITUALITY
BOOKS FIND
PROMINENCE ON
BEST-SELLER
LISTS**

In a major shift among American readers, books focusing on spiritual themes have become the most popular sellers in the secular market in recent months. A survey in Publisher's Weekly (May 16) suggests that while recovery title sales--the dominant genre for the past two years--have dropped sharply, Americans now are purchasing spirituality books by the tens of thousands. The new titles mostly blend meditation, self-help psychology, with Christian or Jewish teachings. Several are also aimed directly at women readers, replacing masculine language with feminist concerns. Among the leading titles are Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hanson's "Chicken Soup for the Soul," with sales of 180,000. Equally popular is Jacqueline Small's "Embodying Spirit," combining recovery themes with spiritual outreach. The phenomenal sales of Thomas Moore's "Care of the Soul, has inspired comparable titles, such as Judy Cameron's "The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity." There is often a "generic," non-theological and non-institutional thrust to many of these spirituality books. One such book making a stir in the publishing world is "The Celestine Prophecy," by James Redfield. The book, which has been on the New York Times bestseller list for several months, is called

a "spiritual adventure story" for its mix of modern physics, psychology and the mystical teachings found in all religions, according to the Miami Herald (April 11). -- *By Erling Jorstad*

CURRENT RESEARCH *Recent Findings on Religious Attitudes and Behavior*

* The emphasis on large congregations in the Southern Baptist Convention may have diluted the strength of the denomination in the long run, according to a recent study. A recent study published in the current issue of the Review of Religious Research by Purdue University sociologist Roger Finke finds that since the 1950s Southern Baptist congregations have been growing increasingly larger, often in far greater proportion to other denominations' church membership sizes. The study, cited in the Salt Lake Tribune (May 14), finds that until 1950, Southern Baptists averaged 255 members per church, less than the average of 277 members per church of other Protestant denominations. By 1990, the other denominations had increased church size to only 297, while Southern Baptists increased to 396 members per church, often closing or merging their smaller congregations. The SBC has suffered from the pattern of developing larger churches because it has created more midsize congregations whose members give less in time and money than members of smaller congregations. Finke says that stronger religious commitment is shown to be generated in small groups, as evidenced by their higher giving rates and Sunday school enrollments. The article reports that Southern Baptists are beginning a movement back to "house churches," small congregations that meet in homes or public buildings that do not require a full-time pastor.

* Most Americans pray at home and address their prayers to a supreme being, such as God, the Lord or to Jesus Christ, rather than to a non-personal force, according to a recent Gallup Poll. The poll, cited in the Gallup religion newsletter Emerging Trends (April) finds that nearly half of those who pray say they started because of family influences (47 percent). Church influences are reported by 10 percent as leading to prayer. A majority of people (74 percent) say they pray most often at bedside or in bed and 27 percent in other parts of the home. By comparison, only 10 percent say they pray most often when they are in church. Only one percent each report that they pray to a "transcendent or cosmic force," to one's "inner self," or to the "God within." It is also found that young adults, ages 18-29, show the greatest increase in saying that prayer has become more important to them in the last five years. The May issue of Emerging Trends reports that of the nine adults in 10 in America who pray, about three in 10 (29 percent) say they always give thanks or say grace before meals, and an additional 22 percent say they do it frequently. Gallup was surprised that the presence of children in the household appears to have no effect upon how often prayers are offered before meals. (Emerging Trends, 47 Hulfish St., Suite 215, P.O. Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542)

* There continues to be a dispute among survey researchers about the actual percentage of Americans attending religious services every week. A recent Louis Harris poll found that the number of adults saying they attend church, synagogue, or other houses of worship at least weekly dropped from 51 percent in 1986 to 43 percent in 1994. Those attending less than monthly increased from 14 percent to 19 percent in the same

period, and 23 percent of respondents said they never attend church, up from 21 percent, according to the National & International Religion Report (May 30). Harris President Humphrey Taylor says that church attendance is "notoriously overreported as a socially desirable activity, so true attendance figures are surely lower than those reported."

But Emerging Trends (May), the Gallup newsletter on religion, maintains that the rate of those attending weekly worship services has remained at about 40 percent since the early 1970s. The newsletter adds that overreporting among respondents is not a significant factor in attendance polls. To prove this, Gallup conducted a split-questionnaire approach survey last December where the respondents were asked the traditional question of whether they attended church in the last week, and then were asked a more stringently worded question which included a request for them to write in the name of the church they attended. In response to the traditional question, 41 percent of respondents say they had attended, and in answer to the more stringent question, 40 percent responded they had attended (97 percent were able to name the church or synagogue they attended). "All in all, it appears evident that in a typical week, four adults in 10 in this country do indeed attend church or synagogue," the newsletter concludes. (National & International Religion Report, P.O. Box 21433, Roanoke, VA 24018-0145)

* The growth of evangelical Protestantism in Latin America has prompted some sociologists and other observers to predict that this new religious current will transform the region by creating a new work ethic, strengthen families and help weed out political corruption. Others, however, have said that the independent and often syncretistic Pentecostal faiths growing in Latin America are not as likely to effect the above changes which are more often associated with "Calvinistic" churches. Recent research, however, suggests that evangelical faith is impacting the social and economic life of Latin Americans. In the conservative Christian Rutherford magazine (May), researcher Amy Sherman writes that the adoption of evangelical faith creates a "moral code" in families enabling them to save money for investment in their children's education and better housing and clothes. In a survey of 1,000 households in Guatemala, Sherman finds that "orthodox evangelicals" were doing better economically than their neighbors. These evangelicals were more likely than non-believers to live in houses with cement rather than dirt floors; slightly more likely to have electricity in their homes and to be working in higher paying occupations.

Sherman adds that evangelical converts who have left their former "animistic religion" (often mixed with Catholicism) change their cultural attitudes that often affect economic development. In her research, Sherman found evangelicals less fatalistic, more likely to legitimize individual initiative, and more open to innovation than their non-evangelical neighbors. She adds that these evangelicals were also more likely to "legitimize the free market and the norms that undergird it. In my survey I asked respondents whether they thought the free market 'usually gave everyone the opportunity for success' or whether it 'was unjust because it exploits the poor.' More orthodox evangelicals than others gave the first response. They were also more likely to legitimize profit and individual initiative. Another question in the survey asked respondents whether a just economy was one where everyone earned the same amount or where people with higher skills earned more. Orthodox

evangelicals were more likely than others to affirm a merit-based distribution." (Rutherford, The Rutherford Institute, P.O. Box 7482, Charlottesville, VA 22906-7482)

* Japan continues to be resistant to the evangelical upsurge, although Catholicism is enjoying modest success in the country, according to recent Japanese church membership statistics. The annual Japan Christian Review (Vol. 59) looks at membership figures for 1993 and finds that the Catholic Church (with 431,633 members) grew by 12,927 members, a "remarkable" increase, considering the next highest growth rate in the United Church of Christ in Japan (with a membership of 204,260) was 2,139. The review attributes the Catholic growth to "a successful national incentive on evangelization." The smaller Pentecostal and charismatic churches experienced little or no growth in Japan, "despite explosive expansion rates in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere in Asia." (Japan Christian Review, 2-24-9 Higashicko Kicijoji, Musashino-shi, Tokyo 180, Japan)

* A recent survey of the religious attitudes of the French bears out trends that are taking place throughout Europe and increasingly in North America: religious belief is being severed from institutions and becoming increasingly a matter of consumer choice. The survey, conducted by sociologists Guy Michelat, Jacques Sutter and Fr. Julien Potel, lays to rest recent talk of a "religious renaissance" in the country, according to The Tablet (May 21), a British Catholic magazine. The last survey taken of French religious attitudes in 1986 found that 88 percent of the adult population declared a belief in the existence of God, and 81 percent described themselves as Catholics. In the 1994 survey these figures have dropped respectively to 72 percent and 64 percent. The proportion of "convinced Catholics" has fallen from 30 percent to 24 percent while those who practice their faith remain stable at nine percent of the overall population.

On moral matters, 89 percent of French people think that religious belief is irrelevant to ethical behavior, 83 percent hold that the conscience is the sole criterion of moral actions and only one percent look to the teachings of the church. Practicing Catholics were shown to be strongly influenced by the prevailing culture; only nine percent (compared to four percent of the general population) view living together outside marriage a sin, and 17 percent (compared to eight percent of the population) consider homosexual relations to be a sin. French society is found to be sharply divided by age on religion; those under 50 are more likely to have encountered the supernatural (53 percent versus 35 percent for the population as a whole), while those over 50 are more attached to the institutional church. Alain Woodrow writes that the "overall impression is that the institutional Church with its dogmas and rules is losing ground to a more informal 'self-service' approach to religion. Faith has been replaced by a vague religiosity." (The Tablet, 48 Great Peter St., London, SW1P 2HB England)

* While there are reports of a revival in Russia [see last month's Current Research section], a new survey suggests that many of these believers may be non-active and lukewarm about their faith. Although 39 percent of Russians consider themselves religious, only six percent attend church, according to the survey conducted by Russia's Public Opinion and Market Research Organization. The survey also finds that only four percent of respondents said their beliefs are strongly held. Those

who held deeply to their beliefs tend to be conservative and to distrust current changes, according to the poll which was published by the Munich-based Radio Free Europe. In Moscow and St. Petersburg believers tend to be more politically liberal and more open to psychic and other "cosmic" phenomena.

**AUGING THE
CATHOLIC
IMPACT ON
CHIAPAS UPRISING**

How influential was the role of the Catholic priests and liberation theology in the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico's state of Chiapas last January? Months after the rebellion of the Zapitista Army of National Liberation against the federal government, the answer to that question is still not clear. The Christian left Sojourners magazine (May) reports that Catholic activists and Chiapas' Catholic Bishop Samuel Ruiz played an indirect yet influential role in the rebellion by making the Indian population aware of their human rights. "Consciousness raising by the Catholic Church, many say, provided fertile soil to shake Chiapan foundations of injustice and power. In other Mexican states, the Christian ministry has not been so deeply established and resolute about its mission and role in society." One priest says that such "consciousness raising" of the Indians has been "carried out by thousands of lay catechists, who are unpaid, who go out to their Indian communities and work with a reflective process through which Indians learn to express their word and feel themselves to be persons."

In the conservative Catholic World Report (May), Mexican radio and television commentator Sergio Sarmiento writes that the Catholic priests and liberation theology have been among the major protagonists in the Chiapas rebellion and that such involvement has polarized the church. Sarmiento writes that Chiapas is the Protestant stronghold of Mexico (16.2 percent of Chiapas' population is Protestant compared to a nationwide percentage of 4.8) and that this has led to Catholic leaders in the state to compete with such churches. In the 1970s and 1980s, Bishop Ruiz brought in many priests who were influenced by liberation theology and sought--like the Protestants and unlike more traditional Catholics -- to work closely among Chiapas Indians, usually in encouraging social activism. Eventually this led to priests becoming directly involved in the Zapatista Army rebellion, according to Sarmiento. Some accounts claim that the leader of the rebellion, known only to the public as Subcommandante Marcos, is a priest himself. Such involvement has led middle class traditional Catholics to recently take to the streets themselves, protesting the role of Bishop Ruiz in the conflict and calling for the temporary closing of the churches in the town of San Cristobal de Las Casas, where much of the negotiations between the Zapatistas and the government have taken place. (Sojourners, Box 29272, Washington, DC 20017; Catholic World Report, P. O. Box 1328, Dedham, MA 02027)

**CHARTING
A CATHOLIC
SPRING FOR
BRITAIN**

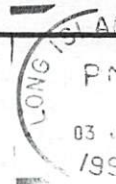
Catholic leaders and observers are increasingly making the claim that the Church of England's declining condition, evidenced by financial problems, dropping membership, and many disgruntled priests and members leaving the body over the recent decision to ordain women, places Catholicism in a new and advantageous situation in the nation. The new attitude is evident in a paper written for England's Catholic bishops by Clifford Longley, a religion writer for the Daily Telegraph, which was published in The Tablet (April 9), a Catholic magazine. Longley advises the Catholic

bishops that the church should no longer act as a counterculture as it has in the past (due to its immigrant character and anti-Catholic prejudice in England). He adds that it is "no longer appropriate... to treat the Church of England as the 'Church in possession,' which therefore must not, for the sake of ecumenical good relations, feel challenged or rivalled by the Catholic Church." Longley adds that there is a growing "fit" between the Catholic church and the British people today. Demographic research has shown that Catholics represent a "complete and accurate crosssection of society, the only church body of which this is remotely true." Thus, "the Roman Catholic Church's mission to the nation must change. It has now to shoulder a greater share of the national burden...No longer will the Catholic Church be able to think only in terms of the needs of Catholics and Catholic interests." Longley adds that "People sense that they have drifted too far from the certainty of moral fundamentals, and as a result they see civilization itself beginning to be threatened by lawlessness and anarchy. The Catholic Church, by being true to itself, is a beacon of hope in such a society...Gradually, instead of being primarily concerned with the specific needs of a subculture, the institutional machinery of the Catholic Church will begin to address the general needs of the whole culture."

**PROLIFE
CAUSE GROWS
IN RUSSIA--
BUT WHERE ARE
THE ORTHODOX?**

There is a growing advocacy of pro-life concerns by the Orthodox Church in Russia, reports the New York Times (May 19). Russia recently had its first major anti-abortion conference, bringing together Orthodox participants and activists from the West. The conference, co-sponsored by the Orthodox Church and Human Life International, an American conservative Catholic prolife group, opposed both contraceptives and abortion, although it stopped short of calling for a ban on either practice. With the highest abortion rate in the world, Russia's new prolife movment, spearheaded by the group Right to Live, is initially hoping to convince Russians not to have abortions. The Russian Orthodox Church has only recently begun speaking out against abortion. Patriarch Alesky II, the leader of the church, endorsed the recent conference by sending a letter of support in his absence. The Washington Post (May 19) reports that despite its sponsoring the conference, the Orthodox Church is not very active in the fledgling prolife movement. Although Right to Live claims some 1,000 members, just 30 activists form the core of the group, and many of them are from Catholic, Baptist and Lutheran churches in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

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