

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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NEW ELITE  
PROMOTING  
BUDDHISM,  
BUT DIVISIONS  
REMAIN

The major media have lately been focusing on Buddhism and how it is undergoing a renaissance in America with the help of celebrities who are increasingly going public about their Buddhist beliefs and conversions. The new attention to Buddhism and its role in America is revealing some of the divisions and conflicts within this faith, particularly between ethnic and converted usually Caucasian Buddhists. As a monastic elite encouraged the spread Buddhism in Asian countries, an equivalent elite class in America consisting of movie stars and rock musicians are spreading Buddhism through the entertainment medium, according to Newsweek (June 13). The magazine reports that such a popular promotion of Buddhism includes Richard Gere's frequent endorsements of the Dalai Lama; the spiritual journeys of such well-known personalities as director Oliver Stone, software pioneer Mitchell Kapor, and Chicago Bulls coach Phil Jackson, which are often portrayed in the new Buddhist magazine Tricycle; the recent film "Little Buddha"; and the Rock group the Beastie Boys who have recorded "The Bodhisattva Vow," a tribute to Buddhist virtues.

New York magazine (June 6) reports that Buddhism has gained a foothold among other elite groups often based around the Manhattan-based Tricycle, whose readership has grown to 40,000 readers in three years. New York City is now the "unheralded nexus of the new Power Buddhism," according to the magazine. Aside from prominent leaders in the arts, such as artist Roy Lichtenstein and composer Phillip Glass, Buddhism is more unexpectedly attracting influential philanthropists, such as Henry Luce III, and "adherents from an even more surprising quarter-- lawyers, Wall Streeters, and other higher-tax-bracket types presumably scarred by years of corporate trench warfare." The Newsweek article says that the diffusion of Buddhism--usually the meditation-based Tibetan and Zen forms-- among Americans has resulted in a "new and distinctly American Buddhism" that is "egalitarian (women, generally subservient in Asian traditions, are allowed to rise in the hierarchy in American temples), technologically advanced...and sophisticated about the ways of power in American life." In reading such reports on Buddhism, one might wonder whatever happened to the ethnic Buddhists who first brought the faith to the U.S. In response to that question, Carol Himaka, director of education for the Buddhist Churches of America, said, "Journalists tend to go toward the visible, and the ethnic Buddhist community is not that visible."

Himaka told RELIGION WATCH that most ethnic Buddhist temples don't even advertise in the newspaper and that there has been little outreach to

other Americans, although that is slowly beginning to change. While the Buddhist Church of America--which is of Japanese origin-- is one of the largest organized Buddhist denominations in the U.S., there is little public attention paid to the body because it also does not give a strong role to meditation-- a practice most commonly associated with the religion. But on other points, such as giving women a greater role in the temples, the ethnic groups are moving in the egalitarian direction and are not as backwards as they are often portrayed. She said that as Asian-American Buddhists assimilate they are facing the same questions and concerns as Caucasian converts. There has long been the view that there are "two Buddhisms" in America: the ethnic branch which is considered more dogmatic and concerned with proper lineage, and the "Americanizers" that are more involved in innovation and shaping a distinctly American faith, writes Charles Prebish, a scholar of American Buddhism, in the Buddhist Studies Review (Vol. 10 No. 2. 1993).

Prebish cites other tension areas still existing between ethnics and Americanizers: The former are more likely to argue that organized monasticism should not be sidelined by an emphasis on the involvement of the laity; ethnic Buddhists are usually not strongly involved in activism like the Americanizers; a continuing clash between the meditators (which may also include ethnics) and the non-meditators; and the Americanizers greater attention to Buddhism's link with psychology. As one Buddhist Church in America official noted: "White practitioners practice intensive psychotherapy on their cushions in a life-or-death struggle with the ego whereas Asian Buddhists just seem to smile and eat together."

#### MODERATION, CONCILIATION IN PRESBYTERIAN, SBC MEETINGS

Conflict resolution has become an important part of denominational life judging by the proceedings of the recent bi-annual national conventions of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church (USA). Delegates of the two bodies voted to continue programs that would hold their denominations together during a period of theological and political conflict. The Presbyterians faced the potentially explosive issue of what to do about the acrimonious criticism over its leadership's involvement in the mainline Protestant feminist meeting, Re-Imagining 93 [see June RW]. When the national leadership met in Wichita in mid-June, there had already been the resignation of Mary Ann Lundy, a high ranking official who had helped shape the feminist conference, as well as over \$2 million in income lost because of protests over the event. In responding to this conflict, the delegates almost unanimously reaffirmed those historic Christian teachings of the church which, they believed, had been "criticized and ridiculed at the [Re-Imagining] conference," according to the New York Times (June 17). Lundy's resignation was accepted as an unfortunate but necessary gesture of that reaffirmation.

A similar yet more surprising consensus was reached at the Orlando, Florida meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination. Public and internal attention there had centered on the highly divisive dismissal of Russel H. Dilday, president of Southwestern Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Tex., which took place several months ago. The Washington Post (June 11) reported that the delegates realized the long-standing acrimony over such theological issues as biblical inerrancy had contributed to serious internal difficulties and low morale in the denomination. After some months of pre-convention maneuverings, two candidates were put forward for the SBC presidency-- the conservative Fred Wolfe, and the more moderate James

Henry. The latter ran on a promise of keeping conversations between different factions alive, preventing the seminaries from splitting off from the convention to maintain their academic independence, and of further study of the theological and administrative issues that continue to divide the body after 15 years. The election of Henry--causing the first upset for conservatives in 15 years-- is seen as a victory for those who want to avoid further controversy. Delegates also gave unprecedented support to closer SBC-Roman Catholic relations. Observers and leaders in both the Presbyterian Church and the SBC agree that deep divisions remain, but the recent meetings created at least breathing room and renewed good will for the next two years. --By Erling Jorstad, RW Contributing Editor.

NEW ACCESS  
AIDING  
RELIGIOUS  
BOOK REVIVAL;  
NEW AGE IN  
ROMANCE BOOKS

The recent flourishing of religious books in the mainstream publishing market is being helped along by a series of innovations that provides greater access to such titles, according to Publisher's Weekly (June 13). The popularity of books dealing with such religious topics as angels, spirituality, and self-help is evident in the fact that the sales for such books gained 56 percent between February 1993 and February 1994 (see June RW). A major factor in such growth has been that book clubs are now including mainline and evangelical titles for the first time, leading to a 12-fold increase in membership in the Literary Guild's ecumenical program, "Crossings Book Club." Catholic and Jewish book clubs are also finding growing interest in titles that accentuate the uniqueness of their respective traditions as well as interest in current themes. A growing number of customers are also taking advantage of the discounts found in the newly formed direct mailers, such as Theological Book Services and Christian Book Distributors. Finally, some religious book distributors are posting reviews and taking orders on the Internet computer network. This new service is said to especially be reaching clergy.

Elsewhere in the publishing world, romance novels are increasingly utilizing themes involving New Age and alternative spirituality, according to Gnosis magazine (Summer). In the 1990s, "romance publishers are tagging books with paranormal themes and creating special lines to showcase them," writes Waverly Fitzgerald. This trend is reflected in trade publications and statistics. Last spring the Romantic Times Magazine created a new review section to deal with the flood of books with supernatural or paranormal themes. In 1993 alone, about 150 romances were published which featured reincarnation, witches, vampires, ghosts, possession, psychics or angels. This is double the number published in 1992 and triple the number published in 1990. Fitzgerald adds that this trend is especially significant "when you consider that approximately 46 percent of all paperback books sold in the U.S. are romance novels." What may be happening is that the romance genre is merging with the fantasy category. While the supernatural is sometimes treated skeptically by characters in these books, Fitzgerald thinks the interest in such themes "reflects a hunger to learn more about these subjects." This hunger is evident in the "extraordinary" response to writer Marion Zimmer Bradley's romance, "The Mists of Avalon." Hundreds of women "have begun exploring Paganism and goddess spirituality as a result of reading this novel." (Gnosis, P.O. Box 14217, San Francisco, CA 94114-0217) --Erling Jorstad contributed to this report.

CHANT'S APPEAL--  
RELIGIOUS OR  
MARKETING  
PHENOMENON?

Sales of 1.3 million copies for CD releases of Gregorian chants by Benedictine monks from Spain, mainly among young people, has been hailed

as a phenomenon, but observers are debating how much religiosity has to do with it. In the Christian Century magazine (June 1-8), David A. Hoekema writes that the CD, known as "Chant," is marketed in such a way that its Catholic, or even Christian, message was rendered unintelligible; the liner notes are in Latin with no translation, and an accompanying essay sold with the CD "effuses over the beauty and grandeur of the monk's liturgical music, yet fails to mention that they are used in Christian worship or to set them in context of the monks' life of contemplation and service to God." The disks appeal to "those who are into spirituality but not into organized religion." But the Utne Reader (July/August), a digest of the alternative press, notes that the Chant phenomenon may be more than just another example of "channel-surfing among the world's spiritual traditions." The magazine reports that the "Gregorian boom is being felt in churches too." St. Mark's Cathedral in Seattle now features chant at special compline or prayer services and is drawing crowds of "twenty- and thirtysomething skeptics who never experienced the power, mystery, and sublime presence of sacred music in their childhood churches." (Christian Century, 407 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60605; Utne Reader, 1624 Harmon Pl., Minneapolis, MN 55403)

#### INTERIM CLERGY SERVE AS TROUBLE-SHOOTERS IN MAINLINE CONFLICTS

Interim ministers are increasingly being used as trouble-shooters for mainline Protestant congregations encountering mounting budget problems and disputes, as well as over more recent dilemmas concerning clergy sexual abuse, according to the Hartford Courant (June 3). Interim ministers, or supply pastors, have long been a part of church life, often stepping into pulpits during summer vacations or when a pastor is sick, quits or gets fired. A new breed of interim minister emerged during the 1970s as a result of research showing that new pastors did not last long when they went to churches that had been in conflict or where the pastor had served a long time. Such mainline bodies as the United Church of Christ, the American Baptist Churches, and the Episcopal Church began to promote the use of specially trained ministers in conflict resolution to help ease the transition.

"With nothing personal at stake, [interim ministers] can be expected to make the hard decisions that a new permanent pastor might shy away from," writes Gerald Renner. The number of interim ministers used today are "growing in direct proportion to the problems of the churches," says Ralph Colby of the Baltimore-based Interim Ministry Network. Citing the declining memberships of mainline denominations, Colby said, "When things are shrinking and budgets are shrinking, people tend to get into disputes. Now the whole issue of sexual misconduct has come out of the closet and causes more dissension." The membership of the Interim Ministry Network, which was started in 1980, has grown to 700 ministers from 25 denominations.

#### BUSINESS GROWTH AMONG AMISH LEADING TO SECULARIZATION?

The growing involvement of Amish people in business enterprises has become the greatest agent of change and secularization within this religious community, according to the Country Journal (May/June). For almost as long as the Amish have been in America, scholars and observers have been forecasting that their communities could not withstand the pressures of modernization--especially technology-- and secularization. While tourism, the migration of Amish out of their home base in Lancaster Country (because of high land costs) and the acceptance of some

technology have had some long-range effect on this group, it is the growth of businesses and the Amish involvement in non-farm work that has wrought the greatest changes to their identity. A recent study found that 60 percent of the Amish businesses in existence today in south-central Pennsylvania began since the 1980s.

More surprisingly, 20 percent of the Amish businesses are owned or managed by women. This may be because the need for two family incomes has increased with land prices, drawing women out of their traditional roles as homemakers and into work as quilters, cooks, clerks and domestics. As Amish men have been squeezed out of farm work by the high land costs many have moved to such work as carpentry and retail sales, either working for a company or starting their own companies. As a result, fathers are increasingly exposed to technology and secular society; they are tempted to take company insurance benefits instead of relying on their congregations and have more free time and disposable income. In a paper presented on a conference on the Amish at Elizabethtown College last year, geographer Harold Leaman proposed that "the long-term impact of the suburban nonfarm Amish is unknown, but...the trend points to an erosion of traditional Amish values, which are much easier to maintain in an agrarian-based community." (Country Journal, 6405 Flank Dr., Harrisburg, PA 17112)

#### COMPUTERS CREATING NEW JEWISH-ISRAEL TIES?

The growth and diversity of Jewish computer networks illustrates the way such technology is creating religious community life and unity between fellow believers, and at the same time providing outsiders and inquirers with greater access to unfamiliar religions and theology. The Jewish magazine Moment (June) reports that Jewish participation has risen sharply in recent years; the popular Jerusalem One network has grown from 5,000 to 10,000 active users when it was established in May 1993 to over 100,000 networkers "on-line" today. "Call up a computer screen, and you can face a menu of such 'postings' from some 100 Jewish forums, covering subjects such as Yiddish, Jewish feminism, Israel, Torah, Sephardic issues, Hebrew, Jewish music, politics and the Holocaust," writes Paula Jacobs. Aside from creating forums for discussion, the computer networks are able to reach those on the margins of Jewish life, such as alienated Jews, Jewish people in remote locations and even non-Jews curious about Judaism.

"The Internet offers relative anonymity to users, allowing them to explore new ideas and settings without embarrassment or an intimidating commitment of time or money." Joining a group sending each other "e-mail" over the computer "is not such an awesome commitment as joining shul [synagogue]...It's not a substitute either, but it can definitely be a first step," says one Jewish leader. For Jews in areas without rabbis or synagogues, the networks are viewed as connecting them to the larger Jewish community. Says one Midwestern student, "It has helped me to hold on to my Jewish identity instead of having it fade into the cornfields." More significantly, the networks are strengthening the link between diaspora Jews and Israel, which has been strained in recent years. The Israel Ministry of Communications has established a Global Jewish Information Project which will "connect all of the Jewish communities around the world, allowing them to share data, knowledge and experience in an effort to multiply and cement the ties that bind the Jewish people together," says one project official. (Moment, 3000 Connecticut Ave.,

DRAMA FINDING  
A PLACE IN  
WORSHIP

"From churches who are using drama in their Sunday morning services to parachurch theatre groups...drama is an increasingly popular way to reach both Christian and non-Christian audiences," reports the Minnesota Christian Chronicle (May 26). In the last 10 years, the use of drama within churches has been a growing phenomenon. "Once considered a sacrilegious use of a sanctuary, drama has found a niche in 'seeker sensitive' churches, as well as urban and suburban congregations," according to the newspaper. With overhead projections and other aids now used in many churches, the interest in religious drama in congregations suggests a "moving back toward visual and auditory learning," from the traditional emphasis on cognitive learning that emerged with print, says one church drama coordinator. Most churches still use drama on a semi-regular or occasional basis rather than weekly. But those involved in the medium take its role in the churches very seriously. "Many of us believe that theatre is the last platform for communicating the gospel to our culture. We're an entertainment-oriented society and other methods of reaching people are not as current," says Martha Doolittle of the Houston-based A.D. Players. (Minnesota Christian Chronicle, 1619 Portland Ave., S., Minneapolis, MN 55404)

CURRENT RESEARCH *Recent Findings On Religious Attitudes And Behavior*

\* The American South continues to register highly conservative views on Christian belief and its relation to society. A survey taken by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution found that two of three Southerners believe the Bible is not only literally, but historically and scientifically true. Outside the South, this belief drops to 52 percent. The National & International Religion Report (June 13) reports that the poll also found that 53 percent say the United States is a Christian nation and that government should pass laws to support that idea. Outside of the South, two-thirds of Americans disagree with that viewpoint. (National & International Religion Report, P.O. Box 21433, Roanoke, VA 24018-0145)

\* Catholic school students in Canada are just about as liberal and libidinous as public school students, according to a recent comprehensive study of more than 2,500 Canadian students. The study, cited in the newspaper Christian News (June 13), shows that Catholic high school students are slightly more likely than public school students to be sexually active (51 percent compared to 47 percent). Seventy two percent of Catholic school students support homosexual rights, as against 67 percent of public school students. While Catholic school students are more likely to consider themselves committed Christians (37 percent to 29 percent), they are no more likely than their public school counterparts to place great importance on such values as honesty, forgiveness and concern for others. Sociologist Reginal Bibby of the University of Lethbridge, who conducted the survey, says that "Our examination of students in the Roman Catholic systems suggests that, even when religious groups attempt to increase their influence by operating their own schools, they are experiencing very modest amounts of success." (Christian News, Rt. 1, Box 309A, New Haven, MO 63068-9568)

\* If current trends continue up to the year 2010, ultra-Orthodox Jews in

Jerusalem will represent more than 40 percent of the city's population, according to Inside Israel newsletter (Volume 14, No. 6). Currently 27 percent of Jerusalem's residents are ultra-Orthodox. The increase will not be due to conversions or the return of secular Western Jews as much as because of natural growth. There has also been a 100 percent increase in ultra-Orthodox school children in Jerusalem in the last 10 years while the number of children from secular families has dropped 25 percent. (Inside Israel, Box 22029, San Diego, CA 92192-2029)

## ZOROASTRIANISM FINDS FOLLOWING WHILE TORN BETWEEN OLD AND NEW WAYS

The Zoroastrian faith is experiencing a renewal even as the ethnic group which has handed down the religion for over three thousand years is in decline, reports two recent articles. Zoroastrianism developed in Persia from the teachings of its founder Zarathushtra and has taken on several forms and theological perspectives in its evolution. The faith has often been thought to be extremely dualistic, teaching that the world is a battlefield fought between a good God and an evil God. But the recovery of ancient Zoroastrian scriptures known as the "Gathas" in the last 100 years has reintroduced older teachings emphasizing that God is both transcendent and yet present in all creation through various emanations and that the conflict between evil and good takes place in human hearts (called "moral dualism") rather than in the Godhead. Gnosis (Summer), a magazine on the occult and mysticism, reports that there are no more than 120,000 Zoroastrians around the world, with most being Parsees, an ethnic group which emigrated from Iran to India in the Seventh century. Today there is growing conflict between conservative believers, who hold to the more dualistic view of the world and ancient purity laws, and "reform" believers who have been inspired by the recovery of the Gathas and have adapted their ancient practices to life in Western society.

Areopagus (Pentecost issue), a magazine on world religions, reports that this conflict is largely taking place in the Parsee stronghold of Bombay. More conservative Zoroastrians still hold to the practice (only in India) of leaving the dead to be eaten by vultures, thereby returning them to living nature and not polluting the earth. Reform believers want to replace this tradition with cremation. A more crucial debate is over whether conversion to the faith should be allowed. The conservatives hold that only children of Zoroastrian parents should be considered part of the faith-- a problem for the Parsees since they are in decline in India. The Gnosis article notes that many reform believers interpret the Gathas as universal teachings that could inspire Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians alike. "Some creative Zoroastrian thinkers are attempting to relate ancient doctrines...to an ecological and social vision that would apply to the modern era." While probably remaining a minority faith, Zoroastrianism is being revitalized through believers creating "associations in many of their homes to teach both children and adults, and Zoroastrians have participated fully in interfaith gatherings such as the 1993 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago." Inquirers are also now tapping into Zoroastrian teachings on various computer networks, such as the Internet. (Areopagus, P.O. Box 33, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong)

## RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE FINDS NEW HEARING IN ARAB WORLD

Since the gulf war there has been an increasing debate about and concern with religious tolerance in the Arab popular and scholarly press, according to the New Perspectives Quarterly (Spring). The disillusionment



that emerged in much of the Arab world after the defeat of Iraq and Sadaam Hussein, turned many writers to increasingly focus on the "problem of toleration...what it means, and whether or not the Arab-Muslim tradition can be said to have been tolerant." Tolerance has not been an issue for Arabs in their quests for "national liberation" from outside control and modernization during much of the 19th and 20th centuries. Today it is increasingly recognized that toleration has to be "actively and self-consciously appropriated by Arab-Muslim culture in order for it to work... Toleration, in the sense in which we know it from the Western political experience of the 17th and 18th centuries, is an idea whose time has come." The magazine cites the writings of Iraqi playwright and novelist Arif Alwan, Libyan Islamic writer Muhammad Al-Naku'a on the need for dialogue between Islam and other faiths, and Egyptian writer Jaber Asfour, who is researching the historical foundation of tolerance in the Middle East. (New Perspectives Quarterly, 10951 W. Pico Blvd., 2nd Fl., Los Angeles, CA 90064)

#### A NOTE TO READERS

RW's lean budget usually becomes leaner during the summer months because of a drop in subscriptions and renewals. It should be remembered that the newsletter is supported only by new subscribers and readers renewing on a regular basis. Since we usually plan for the upcoming publishing year during this time, additional funds are crucial. In other words, it's a good time to give gift subscriptions. For every reader giving a gift subscription, we will extend their subscription by two issues. Gift subscriptions are available for a discount of \$18 each. To send a gift subscription, just send us your payment with the the recipient's name and address. Be sure to also mention your name and address so we could extend your subscription.

#### Religion Watch

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#### Inside This Issue:

- *Elite and Invisible Buddhists*
- *Conflict Resolution in the Churches; Zoroastrianism Revamped*





# FINDINGS & FOOTNOTES

— A Bi-Monthly Supplement of Religion Watch —

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## PRESSNOTES

\* The following new books may not exactly qualify as summer reading, but they do provide important background information to much of the trends and events taking place on the religious scene today. Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers (Westminster/John Knox Press, 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202-1396. \$17.99) by Dean Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, looks at how the emergence of baby boomers in church and society is related to the decline of mainline Protestant identity. The authors bring this subject to life by tracking down a group of former Presbyterian confirmation students in the baby boomer age range and interviewing them on their religious beliefs and practices. The results confirm anecdotal reports: There has been a major loss of denominational identity, even among those who are still loyal Presbyterians. The book traces such a loss of identity not so much to the influence of the 1960s as much as to the Presbyterians' openness to secular society and their discarding of distinctive doctrines and practices, such as sabbath observance.

The Revenge of God (Pennsylvania State University Press, \$14.95) by Gilles Kepel, provides a unique comparative study of conservative religious "revival" movements in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism around the world that he sees as having made a break with secularism and the Enlightenment. Kepel writes that Muslims led the others in forming such revival movements in their resistance to Marxism and secularism in the 1970s. Also noteworthy is Kepel's examination of European conservative Catholic movements, such as Communion and Liberation, and how they are similar with the New Christian Right in the U.S. in often using both a strategy of "Christianization from above" (through politics) and "Christianization from below" (through evangelism and charitable activity).

Although existing more on the margins of American religion, the Christian far right continues to make headlines through outbursts of racist and anti-Semitic activity. Michael Barkun's Religion and the Racist Right (University of North Carolina Press) is a groundbreaking exploration of the history and current developments among racist groups adhering to Christian Identity teachings, such as the Aryan Nations and the Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord. Christian Identity developed from a school of thought known as British Israelism, which taught that Anglo Saxons as fellow chosen people with the Jews. When fused with American far right conspiracy-based politics and apocalyptic thought the resulting Christian Identity movement became militantly anti-Semitic and racist. Barkun, a Syracuse University political scientist, sees Christian Identity retaining its influence through a third generation of leaders, "not simply younger than their predecessors but better educated, more polished in shaping their message to a skeptical audience, having learned from David Duke's example how effectively appearance and manner can deflect hostility."

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

1) Salt Shakers is an influential organization spearheading the emergence



of Christian right activism in South Africa. With the removal of apartheid policies, there have been movements pressing for further liberalization in South Africa, such as on women's rights, homosexuality, free speech and abortion. Salt Shakers emerged in this post-apartheid situation to preserve conservative Christian influence in the country. For instance, as soon as economic sanctions were ended, "pornography flooded the country. Literally, this tiny David took on the entire publishing industry in South Africa." Led by Charl Van Wyck, the group operates mainly with part-time and volunteer workers through letter writing campaigns and other forms of protest. (Source: Chalcedon Report, May)

2) Momentum is a controversial program blending evangelical Christian with New Age and confrontational human potential concepts and methods. The Santa Rosa, Calif.-based group was founded in 1990 by 38-year-old Jim Tocchini in an attempt to create an evangelical Christian version of Lifespring, a human potential organization with connections to est. Momentum, which is active among charismatic and evangelical churches in California, Texas and Hawaii, brings Christians together in small groups to speak candidly on their faith, especially focusing on issues of repentance and confession. One exercise that has courted controversy is called the living mirror, where participants stand in front of each other and listen to what these people think of them. Sometimes participants are confronted publicly with their "sins," resulting in dramatic claims of spiritual renewal, as well as growing criticism from other Christians. Conflict over involvement in Momentum has already split some churches in California. (Source: Los Angeles Times, April 17)

3) Dialogue Dinners are serving to defuse some of the tensions between conservative Christians and liberals in politically charged Colorado Springs. The city has gained wide attention for having attracted many evangelical organizations in recent years, resulting in conflicts over gay rights and other "culture war" issues. The dinners are organized by Colorado Springs Citizens Project, a group formed to counteract the conservative Christian influence, yet they are said to give people with different worldviews a chance to meet and find common ground in less confrontational settings. Each group at the dinners is composed of equal numbers (usually about 8-10 people) who identify themselves as leaning toward "orthodox" or "progressive" beliefs, and there is no attempt to reach consensus or change the other party's views. Participants say they often discover more shared values between the groups than they expected. (Source: National & International Religion Report, June 27)

4) Kenrick-Glennon Seminary of Shrewsbury, Missouri, offers what is seen as the first academic course in celibacy for prospective Catholic priests. Acknowledging the mounting criticism of the church and its handling of sexual abuse cases and the continuing decline of candidates from the priesthood, school officials say they inaugurated the course to meet such negative reaction, as well as fortify the centuries-old practice of celibacy. Taught by a priest and a married clinical therapist, the course focuses on the psychological, practical, and ecclesiastical aspects of celibacy. It examines sexual development and identity, loneliness, homosexuality, and pedophilia. The course, which has the sanction of local church officials, has been met with strong enthusiasm by students, and there are plans to try the program out at least one other seminary. (Source: Chronicle of Higher Education, May 25)-- By Erling Jorstad.