

RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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MUSLIM AMERICA DIVIDING ALONG OBSERVANT- NON-OBSERVANT LINES?

A major split appears to be looming in the American Muslim community between "traditionalists" and those who seek more accommodation between their faith and American culture, according to the Washington Post (December 31). Estimated to number between three and five million adults, the Muslims are experiencing division over the extent to which their faith should shape their personal conduct in secular American society. According to recent research, not more than 15 to 20 percent of Muslims under 30 are expressing loyalty to traditional Muslims taboos on alcohol, diet, and marrying within the faith. The reasons for such divisions are many. The Muslim community is an amalgam of three ethnic and cultural sources: African, Middle Eastern and subcontinental Asian populations. Each has its own priorities and none command loyalty from the others. Also, the casual American lifestyle in career, personal behavior, and popular culture stands as highly attractive to young people. The stereotype of Muslims being political extremists has led Muslims to search for a more accommodating lifestyle in America. At the same time, scholars note a resurgence of Muslim traditional faith among a small but vocal number of young adults.

A new study confirms the view that there are far less practicing Muslims than previously estimated, according to the National Catholic Reporter (January 20). Although estimates of Muslims have ranged from four to eight million in the U.S., the study, conducted by the Islamic Resource Institute, found that there are only about 500,000 practicing Muslims who are active in the 1,000 Islamic centers in the U.S. and Canada. The far fewer numbers may be due to the traditionally small percentages of Muslims who attend midday Friday prayers at mosques. The study, said to be the most extensive of its kind, estimates that the overall Muslim population is growing at a rate of 125,000 yearly through immigration and conversion alone, not counting births. It was also found that nearly 40 percent of the mosques, or "masjids," are affiliated with the Islamic Society of North America based in Plainfield, Ind. Another 20 percent follow the leadership of Imam W. Deen Mohammed of Chicago, a black mainstream Muslim leader. Thirty percent of the masjids are unaffiliated. Metropolitan areas with the highest total attendance at the main Friday prayer service are, in order, New York, Southern California, Chicago, Washington and Toronto. Seven of every 10 mosques are multi-cultural, and, of those, either Indo-Pakistanis or African-Americans are most likely to be the largest group, with Arab-Americans close behind. (National Catholic Reporter, P.O. Box 419281, Kansas City, MO 64141)

-- Erling Jorstad contributed to this report.

**LUBIVITCHERS
REPORT GROWTH
AND MESSIANIC
TURMOIL**

Since the death of Lubavitch Hasidic Jewish leader Menachem Schneerson last June, there has been a good deal of speculation about what will happen to his movement of more than 300,000 followers. Schneerson's death was especially significant for the Lubavitch movement because many followers viewed him as the messiah. The U.S. News & World Report (December 26/January 2) notes that while it is too soon to know whether the Lubavitch organization can flourish without its leader, "members of the rebbe's inner circle are optimistic." If anything, the movement has grown in the past year, opening more than 100 new schools, libraries and "Chabad" or outreach houses, bringing the worldwide total of Lubavitch institutions to more than 2,000. Some 70 new emissaries--community organizers and teachers--have been added to the 8,000 based around the world, reports Jeffrey Sheler. Followers interviewed say that they still feel an access to Schneerson on a spiritual level, such as by asking for his blessings, although only a "dwindling few still harbor hopes that he will come back and declare himself 'King Moshiach.'" The Forward (December 2), a weekly newspaper on Jewish affairs, presents a different picture of the Lubavitchers, reporting that they "are alarming Jewish theologians with the growing fervor of their belief in the imminent 'resurrection' of Menachem Mendel Schneerson as the 'Messiah...'"

Such concerns are being voiced in the wake of recent community elections in the Lubavitch home base of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where a rabbi prominent among those advancing the notion of Schneerson as the messiah was elected. The election showed that "only people supporting the notion of the Rebbe as the next Messiah would remain in control," reports Lucette Lagnado. She adds that the idea that Schneerson will return from the dead "has caught on" among Lubavitchers in Brooklyn and around the world. Several critics believe that the Lubavitchers are "treading on dangerous ground, and that the Jewish community at large must act immediately to put a stop to practices and beliefs that are at odds with fundamental Jewish tenets." Even Jewish leaders who have supported the Lubavitchers in their attempt to win back secular Jews to religious observance, are distancing themselves from the movement. Rabbinical authorities respected by Lubavitchers and other Orthodox Jews, such as Aaron Soloveichik, "fear the Lubavitchers have crossed a line and are distorting fundamental tenets of Judaism," such as that the messiah cannot be resurrected from the dead. (The Forward, 45 E. 33rd St., New York, NY 10016)

**JEWISH OPPOSITION
TO VOUCHERS
EASING?**

While Jewish groups have long opposed government funding of private and parochial schools, they are now reconsidering their position, according to the National Catholic Reporter (January 6). One sign of how the issue is gaining new life in the Jewish community was a recent editorial in the New York Jewish Week, one of the nation's most influential Jewish weeklies. The editorial called for a review of the Jewish communities historic opposition to school vouchers in the face of changing priorities. The impetus for this rethinking is the "growing Jewish day school movement, which increasingly is seen as the strongest bulwark against Jewish assimilation into secular American culture," according to the NCR article.

While there is not likely to be a sudden and official change in Jewish groups' opposition to vouchers, "Jewish community officials say the current conservative political climate--coupled with Jewish angst over rising intermarriage and declining rates of synagogue affiliation--is forcing them to revisit the issue to a degree previously unthinkable." A recent study of Jewish day school graduates may have added to the new attitude about parochial schooling. The National & International Religion Report (January 9) says the study shows that among recent Jewish day school graduates (it is not mentioned which branch of Judaism these schools are affiliated with), only 4.5 percent have married non-Jews. Approximately 50 percent in the broader Jewish community have intermarried. (National & International Report, P.O. Box 21433, Roanoke, VA 24018-0145)

**SUFISM FINDS
FOLLOWING
DESPITE IDENTITY
CRISIS**

Sufism, a form of mysticism originating with Islam, is becoming increasingly popular in the U.S., as shown by the the growth of book titles focusing on this form of spirituality, according to the Publisher's Weekly (January 9). At least a dozen publishing companies ranging from Harper Collins to the State University of New York Press have "noted the emergence of a spiritual curiosity that seems to be rapidly evolving into a generalized fascination for the centuries-old, Middle Eastern religious tradition that Westerners historically have deemed esoteric," writes Bob Summer. The interest in Sufism follows a trend of a segment of seekers searching for alternatives to the Eastern spirituality popular in the 1970s and '80s.

A major example of this new interest is the popularity of the books of the Sufi "master," Jelaluddin Rumi, who has become the "bestselling poet in America" (with one work selling over 50,000 copies). Rumi's writings are said to be gaining a following because of his "presentation of the divine as Friend, or the Beloved," Summer adds. The interest in Sufism is not limited to books: Sufi musicians and dancers--known for their "whirling dervishes"--are being popularly received. But as Sufism becomes translated into popular books, the divisions that have plagued the movement are being played out on a larger stage. Many of the more popular books, such as those published by Omega Publications, maintain that Sufism is a non-dogmatic mysticism that is separate from Islam. Others, especially such scholarly writers as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, state that true Sufism is a component of Islam and that those separating the two are "part of the wave of pseudospirituality inundating the West."

**EVANGELICAL
LEADERSHIP
SHYING AWAY
FROM PRO-LIFE
INVOLVEMENT?**

While evangelicals have been increasingly joining and leading the pro-life movement, evangelical congregations and their leaderships have been relatively inactive on such issues, according to a cover story in the conservative evangelical newsweekly World (January 21). To gauge evangelical leadership on their pro-life advocacy, the magazine examined the preaching of 20 noted Christian leaders and found that only six of them provided a full sermon where they preached on abortion, and only three others could provide even an excerpt that mentioned abortion. The magazine also cites a survey of 104 pastors from evangelical, fundamentalist, charismatic and mainline pastors in Virginia where only about half of them focused on the issue in preaching. The study, conducted by Molly Stone of Last Days Ministries of Tyler, Texas, found

that while 76 percent agreed that life begins at conception, and 69 percent believed the church should take a firm stand on the issue, only 39 percent ever devoted an entire sermon to abortion-- 58 percent of self-described evangelicals have done so.

Stone also found that less than half of the pastors ever announced a pro-life event from the pulpit or church bulletin; 70 percent said that crisis pregnancy centers were their pro-life activity of choice, although the same percentage said they do not in actuality support such centers; only one-sixth of the respondents had endorsed pickets or prayer at abortion clinics. While the black clergy surveyed were more likely to preach on abortion, none of them have supported pro-life organizations, crisis pregnancy centers or encouraged pickets. In interviewing ten pro-life leaders, the magazine also found the common view that evangelical pastors and other leaders have been less forthright than Catholics in pro-life advocacy. One leader predicts that in the wake of recent abortion violence and killings, the pastoral silence will become more widespread. A main reason cited for the reticence on pro-life activism is that many pastors have counseled members who have had abortions and do not want to offend or alienate them by preaching on it. Another article says that in the case Billy Graham, the reason for backing away from strong pro-life advocacy is the fear politicizing the gospel message. (World, P.O. Box 2330, Asheville, NC 28802)

SCIENTOLOGY CONFRONTS COMPUTER DISSENT AND COMPETITION

When strictly controlled religious groups use the computer to disseminate their teachings, they may find that things can quickly get out of control. The *Cult Observer* (Number 9 and 10) reports that last summer the Church of Scientology went on-line with an electronic bulletin board (known online as alt.religion.scientology) intending to introduce people to the faith, citing basic teachings and texts and listing Scientology locations around the world. Soon, however, the bulletin board filled up with the comments of critics of Scientology, especially targeting a campaign by the church to squeeze critics off the bulletin board. Dissenters and critics also started a bulletin board called United Free Zone Alliance (called alt.clearing.technology), which trades variations of Scientology ideas and has attracted believers in "alternate mind-clearing technologies or religions" outside of Scientology, according to the the article, which is based on a *Los Angeles Times* story. "The most expensive Scientology courses cost \$1,000 an hour, but 'Free Zoners' are doing it for nothing, or next to nothing." Such freedom and opportunities to learn "mind-clearing" outside official Scientology channels, makes the Free Zone Scientology's "worst nightmare," says Homer Wilson Smith, the founder of the Free Zone. Scientologists are reportedly pursuing "countless lawsuits" against such interlopers, whom they call "squirrels." (*Cult Observer*, P.O. Box 2265, Bonita Springs, FL 33959)

CURRENT RESEARCH *Recent Findings On Religious Behavior and Attitudes*

RELIGIOUS NOMINALISM GROWING AMONG HISPANICS?

* There is growing evidence that an increasing number of Hispanics are no longer aligning themselves with either Catholic or Protestant churches, according to a recent report from researcher George Barna. In his annual report, "Virtual America: The Barna Report 1994-1995," Barna writes that the struggle over national identity and acculturation in the U.S. has influenced the religious choices of Hispanics. Many "have chosen to

sidestep [the question of religious involvement] and are not involved in any church activities, including attending services on the weekend." Barna finds that while 43 percent of whites and 45 percent of blacks attended religious service in the last seven days, only 29 percent of Hispanics did likewise. He adds that "Hispanic adults will divide in one of three ways religiously: Some will retain their traditional tie to the Catholic Church, some will transition to Protestant churches and some will abandon organized religion altogether." The HBBM News Service (January 27), an agency reporting on Hispanic evangelical affairs, quotes one church official as saying the findings show that Hispanics are turned off more by institutional religion than by God or spirituality. But another finding by Barna shows that Hispanics are more likely than blacks, whites or Asians to be satisfied with their clergy-- 79 percent rate their clergy as "excellent" or "good."

SBC BAPTISMS DECLINING AMONG TEENS

* There has been a decline of teenagers baptized in the Southern Baptist Convention since the 1970s, according to recent statistics released by the denomination. In 1972, almost 31 percent of those baptized in SBC congregations were teens; last year, 23 percent were teens. Even though the percentage of youths in the nation has declined, teen baptisms have declined at a faster rate. Among other reasons, denominational officials blame a scarcity of adult volunteers working with youth for this decline, according to the National & International Religion Report (January 9).

CATHOLIC ATTENDANCE LOWER THAN TRADITIONALLY REPORTED-- THE DEBATE GOES ON

* A new study on American Catholic church attendance has reignited a controversy concerning whether the rate of church attendance in the U.S. has been as high as traditionally reported. The new study by Notre Dame University researcher Mark Chaves confirms research he made public last year which found that church attendance by Catholics is closer to 25 percent than to 50 percent, the figure usually generated by Gallup polls and other survey research. The study, based on head counts in 48 dioceses during Mass (last year's study covered 17 dioceses), represents a change in emphasis from the older method of reporting responses to telephone polls, according to an article in the National Catholic Reporter (January 20). Chaves says the lower figures may mean that church attendance is overreported by respondents but not necessarily subject to dramatic change; the numbers may have remained constant for decades. George Gallup Jr. says that he designed more detailed attendance questions (such as specifying the place of attendance) in response to Chaves' findings last year and has still arrived at the higher figure. Michael Hout of the University of California, Berkeley, says that while he has doubts about the accuracy of Chaves' findings, they may point to the question of whether the same group is attending every week or a much bigger group is attending on a less regular basis. Chaves' number "isn't inconsistent with the prospect that a majority of Catholics are active in their church, just not physically there every week," he adds.

DIVORCE GROWING SHARPLY AMONG INDIA'S HINDUS

* Divorce is "skyrocketing" in India as the Hindu-based extended family has broken down, according to Hinduism Today (February). The newspaper reports that divorce rates are up 350 percent in Kerela, 158 percent in Haryana, Punjab, and New Delhi. Despite the sacred Hindu vow of marital companionship through "seven births" (or stages of reincarnation), more than 8,000 marriages are ending in divorce in India's capital of New Delhi alone. One specialist laid the blame for the divorce rate on the nuclear family structure replacing a joint family structure where elders would guide and advise young couples. (Hinduism Today, 107 Kaholalele Rd., Kapaa, HI 96746)

**SATELLITE TV
GIVES EVANGELICALS
ACCESS AND
CRITICS IN
MIDDLE EAST**

Satellite television is becoming an increasingly important concern for both evangelicals and Muslims in the Middle East, with the former hailing the new technology as a breakthrough in evangelization of the region and the latter group fearing its effect on traditional Muslim societies. As satellites have become increasingly available, Middle Easterners are spurning the government controlled channels to dial up a wide range of new and often Western-based programming. *One World*, the magazine of the World Council of Churches, reports that the popularity of satellite television has led Islamic groups and governments to stamp out or control the new media; Iran recently banned satellite dishes. At the same time, Western evangelical groups are gearing up to transmit evangelistic programming in the Middle East, believing it represents one of the "most strategic missionary opportunities in the history" of the region, according to a statement by Middle East Media, an international fellowship of Christians in the media who are spearheading the effort.

The Middle East has become a prime area of concern among evangelicals who view Islam as the major contender against Christianity for world domination after the fall of communism. Many evangelicals' view that the Middle East is strategic in biblical prophesy and is the last region on earth to be evangelized--a task which must be completed before Christ returns, according to some evangelical prophetic teachings-- has also fueled the interest in satellite evangelism. Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network is prominent among evangelical broadcasters seeking access to the region. The issue is likely to be a major source of division between Western evangelicals and mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Middle Eastern Christians who fear that the new programming will serve to identify Christianity with Western interests, harm interfaith relations, and possibly intensify the hostility of Muslims toward all forms of Christianity. (One World, P.O. Box 2100, 150 route de Ferney, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland)

**JAPAN'S HIDDEN
CHRISTIANS
NO LONGER
PASSING ON FAITH**

Japan's "hidden Christians" are facing extinction in the face of migration of these believers away from their native region as well as the growing disinterest among younger generations, according to the *Associated Press* (January 2). The hidden Christians, or "kakure," are the descendants of Japanese converts, mainly Catholics, who were persecuted during the 16th century. Large numbers of these persecuted Christians apostasized under the command of the powerful shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi, but a few clung to their faith, even though they were without clergy, churches and Bibles. They secretly passed down prayers and Bible stories to future generations. The hidden Christians adopted a mixture of Japanese folk beliefs and Christianity, such as chanting unknown prayers in Portugese and Latin. Today, "young people are fleeing the isolation of the villages around the East China Sea where sect members made their homes, and those who stay are losing interest in the ways of their elders," reports P.H. Ferguson. Kentaro Miyazaki, an anthropologist at Nagasaki Jyun Shin University, says that "Two generations from now, there will probably be no more kakure Christians left." When Japan decreed religious freedom in 1873 there were about 50,000 kakure Christians, half of whom eventually became Catholics. Today there are approximately 5,000, most of whom choose to remain isolated and are reluctant to be

photographed or talk with strangers.

**ADDITIONAL AND
MODERATE ISLAM
STILL HOLD
SWAY IN BOSNIA**

Recent news reports and Western government leaders have suggested that Islamic fundamentalism is gaining power in Bosnia as Muslims seek to rally against Serbian aggressors. But such portrayals of a Middle Eastern-like Islamic takeover of Bosnian society are misguided, writes Yahya Sadowski in the *Brookings Review* (Winter). Sadowski writes that while there have been several attempts to introduce militant Islamic activism in Bosnia, such fundamentalism (or, as Sadowski terms it, "Islamicism") is a marginal force among Bosnians. In 1993, a sizable Muslim Armed Forces (MOS) had developed in Bosnia with the assistance of Muslims from around the world. Qur'an schools were opened in rural villages and women were pressed to adopt the veil. But the MOS grew increasingly ruthless--challenging local Serbs and Croats, and harassing young girls for being immodestly dressed-- and by the end of 1993 "the number of volunteers for the MOS, the enrollment in Qur'an schools and even the number of [foreign Islamic freedom fighters] had begun to decline."

Bosnian Muslims are more likely to follow Islamic "traditionalism" or "reformism," according to Sadowski. Rural Bosnians are more likely to be practicing Muslims than their urban counterparts, and when such villagers "are mobilized into politics and announce themselves ready to 'defend Islam,' they usually mean that they want to restore all aspects of traditional village life." But these Muslims lack resources and organizational strength. More influential are the urban elites known as reformists, who emphasize that the state cannot impose virtue and seek no single blueprint for all Islamic societies. This view is seen in rural communities, where "religious officials commonly say that although Islam proscribes alcohol and pork, 'each man must make his own choice.'" Reformist Muslims dominate the Bosnian government and the influential Party for Democratic Action (SDA). The lack of Islamic militancy does not mean that Bosnian Muslims have not engaged in extremism, such as advocating an all-Muslim state. "Ethnic cleansing did provoke a political hysteria among some Bosnian Muslims--but it took the form of secular-nationalist extremism, not religious fundamentalism." Sadowski concludes that "Rather than distinguishing between and maneuvering among various Muslim political movements, [Western analysts] lump them all together with Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian extremists under the label of fundamentalism." (*The Brookings Review*, 17775 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C., 20036-2188)

**SPECIAL REPORT--
MINORITY RELIGIONS
ZONED FOR
DISCRIMINATION
IN BRITAIN?**

A conflict over zoning between Indian Hindus and local authorities in a rural village near London has escalated into a national controversy over the rights of minority religions in Britain. The source of the conflict is the center of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, also known as ISKCON or the "Hare Krishnas," in the village of Letchmore Heath. Although ISKCON are usually associated with white converts practicing a "strange" Indian religion, most pilgrims visiting this center are in fact ethnic Indian Hindus, most of whom settled in north west London in the 1960s and 70s. The center, which was donated to ISKCON by the former Beatle George Harrison, contains a Hindu temple which has become a pilgrimage centre, drawing upwards of 25,000 Hindus during festivals and causing traffic jams and general disturbance to village

residents. In fact, the local district authority considers such public worship to be unlawful in a building officially registered as a theological college. Since 1987, ISKCON has challenged enforcement orders preventing Hindu worshippers from using the center as a place for worship. Last March, the order came into effect, and attendance by Hindus at the temple became illegal.

Such a situation has been interpreted by Hindus as an attack on their rights to freedom of religion as they are unable to worship at a primary religious center. However, in Britain there is no legal safeguard for such religious freedom; the legal process has given consideration to the religious needs of the users as a "special circumstance," but they are not great enough to allow worship in a building which has no permission for such public activities. At present a new inquiry is looking into an application made by ISKCON for a new road to be built that bypasses the village. This case has taken a long time to get through the courts which is of great importance to many minority religious groups in Britain. That is, what right do religious minorities have in a democratic pluralistic society? The unambiguous conclusion is that such rights are subject to other factors, such as the need to preserve the countryside and to prevent disturbance to others. While such zoning difficulties can affect any religious group, the impact of this legislation on the Hindus is particularly debilitating, creating the feeling among them that this is racist exclusion, in which their needs are considered out of place in white English society.-- *By Malory Nye, a lecturer in anthropology of religion at King's College London. Nye has conducted research on several Indian Hindu groups in Britain and is currently working on a book on the ISKCON controversy.*

Religion Watch

P.O. Box 652

North Bellmore, N.Y. 11710



Inside This Issue:

- *American Muslim Divisions Intensifying?*
- *Scientology's Virtual Wars; Hindus and Religious Freedom in Britain*

