



RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

Volume 10 Number 6

April 1995

A RENAISSANCE IN CHRISTIAN ART?

Attempts to integrate Christianity with the arts and architecture are gaining momentum, although they are coming from unexpected quarters. In the last few years, several groups and publications have emerged that seek to encourage, create and critique the arts from a Christian perspective. Marcie Whitney-Schenck, editor and founder of the fledgling journal, "Christianity and the Arts," says that "Christian art is popping up all over the country among the common people. It really isn't happening among the bishops or among the professional artists. I'm finding people who are tired of going to the movies and who are getting together and saying 'Let's have an art festival.'..The best people aren't doing Christian art. They can't get it in the galleries or the churches. Christian art is becoming the last taboo. The arts people now see themselves as the cutting edge, but they're really behind the times. I see people searching for meaning in their lives..." Schenk, who was interviewed in the *National Catholic Reporter* (February 24), says that while Catholics once led the field, today they are not in the forefront of this trend. "I'm talking in Anglican and Presbyterian churches but not much in Catholic churches," she adds.

Protestants, who did not have a strong background in art images, are more likely to support lectures and sponsor artists in residence in their churches-- often using Catholic artists. She lays some of the blame on Catholic universities that are often not interested in exploring or supporting music and art that use Christian themes. The article traces much of the loss of Catholic art to the period after Vatican II, when historic inner-city churches were closed and economic considerations dictated the art and architecture of the new suburban worship spaces. Schenk sees some signs of change: Notre Dame University recently founded the Archives of Modern Christian Art, a scholarly collection of printed publications and audiovisual materials that record the development of religious art from all Christian denominations worldwide from the 15th century to the present. Schenk finds more support for her journal from conservative rather than from liberal Christians, whom she says give more attention to social issues. Other journals on art and religion, such as "Inklings" and "Image" also have a strong evangelical and conservative Catholic orientation.

In fact, there is something of a movement among conservative and traditional Catholic artists and architects incorporating religious tradition in their work. The Winter issue of *The Latin Mass*, a magazine seeking to restore the use of Latin and other traditional Catholic

practices, profiles a number of artists, one of whom is not yet a Catholic, who are rediscovering the Catholic artistic tradition and trying to incorporate and build on it in their work. Most of the artists interviewed blame the declining state of Catholic art on the "modernist" theology and practices of the post-Vatican II church. Last year The Latin Mass (May/June issue) reported on a growing movement of architects based around Notre Dame University who are launching an attack on modern architecture and seeking to revive traditional design for religious and secular buildings. Led by the dean of the university's School of Architecture, Thomas Gordon Smith, this movement of architects draws on classical, gothic and older styles of building that emphasize "beauty, harmony, and proportion." The New York Times (February 9) reports that Notre Dame has spearheaded a nationwide movement of "young turks" who are receiving both praise and heavy criticism for its rejection of modern architecture established after World War II and retrieval of older forms of design.

The religious factor in this movement is not mentioned by the Times, but it is plainly evident in the views of Smith and his colleagues at Notre Dame. In The Latin Mass article, Smith says that much of modern architecture involves a "rejection of the spiritual, a rejection of wholeness," and represents a "system of thought" that is "antipathetic to the basic attitude of the church." Smith charges that there is an "old boys' network" of bureaucrats in most Catholic dioceses that favor modernist architects and lock out more tradition-oriented ones. He adds that Catholic liturgists are "actually the enemy" because they insist that "only a modernist church [building] is fitted to a modernist liturgy." (National Catholic Reporter, P.O. Box 419281, Kansas City, MO 64141; The Latin Mass, 1331 Red Cedar Circle, Fort Collins, CO 80524-9998)

**ALCOHOLICS
ANONYMOUS
FACES DISSENT,
IDENTITY PROBLEMS**

As Alcoholics Anonymous enters its 60th year, the international organization is experiencing divisions over its traditional emphasis on pragmatic spirituality and personal responsibility, according to the New Yorker magazine (March 20). Although Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) continues to grow, now having more than one million members in the U.S., and close to another million in 140 other countries, "there is the feeling among A.A. veterans that the fellowship is at a crossroads," writes Andrew and Thomas Delbanco. With the passing of the founders and other participants in the beginnings of A.A., younger generations are coming to the forefront with little knowledge of the group's original methods and teachings (contained in the A.A. bible known as the "Big Book"). Other observers see the voluntary nature of the fellowship being threatened by the practice of courts and rehabilitation centers sending people to the self-help group. But the biggest challenge to AA is the widening gap between "pietist and rationalist wings of the movement." The organization has always called on its members to recognize and rely on a higher power to help them with alcoholism, although considerable leeway has been allowed in defining this transcendent force. The writers note that this belief is increasingly being questioned today.

"There are members who believe that the fellowship actually has began to break apart into schisms," according to the article. On one side, there is a rival group known as Rational Recovery, which seeks to use A.A. principles while eliminating references to a higher power. On the other

side, there are the proliferating victims' rights groups, often existing within the fellowship, which use the A.A.'s 12-step program to address the needs of the "injured self," rather than fostering personal responsibility. Dr. Steven Hyman of the Mind, Brain and Behavior Initiative at Harvard University says the "great A.A. insight" has been that "alcoholism is a disease but that having this disease is not an excuse for anything"—a view that is becoming unpopular today in the medical community. There are current attempts to treat addiction in solely medical terms, using new drugs to block the feelings of pleasure created by alcohol. Yet Hyman says that such attempts have not been very successful because they don't give anything back to the addict. They lack the "spiritual therapy" component of A.A., which provides addicts with the "compensatory pleasure" which they find in taking responsibility for their actions and in "productive love that goes outward, seeking no reward, to other people and, through them, to God," according to the article.

CHRISTIAN CAPITALISTS' ASSETS GROWING

A significant number of major American businessmen are using their capital and products to advance their religious commitments to the American public, according to a cover story in U.S. News and World Report (March 13). Such corporations as Interstate Batteries, Thomas Nelson Publishing, fast food Chick-fil-A, Target Stores, and similar retail operations have greatly increased their religious oriented inventory with a growing variety of products, including music recordings, books, clothing, children's games and related products. At the same time, other businessmen are appealing directly to customers by identifying with the Christian faith. Well-established "Christian Yellow Pages" listing Christian-owned companies are finding more subscribers and investors. These Christian-owned businesses often openly compete with their secular counterparts. For instance, LifeLine, an Oklahoma-based long-distance telephone carrier, has attacked AT&T for its small mass-marketing campaign to attract gays last year, and markets itself as a Christian alternative.

The article calls these "Christian capitalists" an "emerging business class" made up mostly of "Southern suburban family men who belong to the non-denominational Protestant megachurches." Dan McGraw writes that Christian capitalists use their economic power in different ways. Some devote portions of their profits to charitable work. Others find that by donating to pro-family and other programs of the religious right, they are increasing their visibility and witness. One such Christian capitalist is Bob Reese, who is using his high-tech know-how acquired from his fast-growing Dallas industrial meter company to help "get the Republican conservative message" out to Texas voters. "Support of Christian business is one area where we can [regain control of] our culture, and politics is another," Reese says. Observers suggest that the increasing popularity of the religious right in politics is helping encourage Christian capitalist investors to expand their programs.-- *By Erling Jorstad, RW Contributing Editor.*

HISPANIC EVANGELICALS' UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

After RELIGION WATCH reported that a coalition may be developing between evangelicals and Roman Catholics over supporting the rights of undocumented immigrants in California [see December RW], some observers

expressed doubt over the extent of potential evangelical support for such activity. American Hispanic evangelical churches, it was said, are too conservative and congregational-based to form a network of concerted activism. But a Pacific News Service article (February 13-17) suggests that Hispanic evangelical churches throughout the Southwest and West have developed practices that already make their communities "sanctuaries" for illegal aliens. Dan Ramirez reports that "Latino evangelical churches--two-thirds of them Pentecostal--recognize only one document for accepting otherwise undocumented strangers: a 'carta de recomendacion'-- a letter from the sending pastor, written on his church's official letterhead, affirming that the newcomer is a person of good standing in the church."

In many churches a part of the service is reserved for the pastor to read these letters of recommendation while the newcomer stands up-- a ritual which "transforms the letter into a credential of legitimacy and the newcomer into a full-fledged member of the congregation." Such acceptance is often translated into support and assistance to the newcomer, which can include hiding the immigrants from authorities. This practice of giving recommendations is especially evident in the relations between the U.S.-based Apostolic Assembly and its sister church in Mexico, the Iglesia Apostolica, which, combined, represent some half a million people. These religious communities and others "view residents of the region as one people, united historically by blood, language, music, cuisine and faith. When secular law capriciously divides them, biblical law takes precedence," Ramirez writes. (Pacific News Service, 450 Mission St., Rm. 506, San Francisco, CA 94105)

CATHOLIC HOSPITAL MERGERS DRAW ATTENTION TO LIFE AND DEATH ISSUES

As many private and community owned hospitals merge with Catholic institutions, there is a growing conflict between the parties involved in such agreements concerning contentious issues of life and death and church teachings, according to the New York Times (March 8). Many hospitals and health maintenance organizations across the U.S. have entered into mergers or joint ventures with Catholic institutions, which represent the nation's largest private health care provider. In these mergers, hospitals have had to review their medical practices in areas concerning the beginning and the end of life, such as abortion, contraception, and life support decisions, to comply with Catholic teachings. Although many hospitals do not normally conduct abortions or prescribe contraceptives, more ambiguous issues, such as taking out feeding tubes for terminally ill patients or providing morning after pills for rape victims, are being debated-- and quietly practiced in some of the hospitals. Other institutions have found a way around the prohibition on reproductive technology by setting up separate corporate entities to handle them. Women's advocacy groups are becoming increasingly active in challenging the new affiliations; one group in Albany, N. Y. recently filed a lawsuit to undo a merger.

REVAMPING OF WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD CAUSING DECLINE?

The Worldwide Church of God is experiencing a loss of membership and a cut-back of programs in the process of moving from beliefs once called quasi-Christian and cultic to a more orthodox Christian identity. The church is known for its television ministry and magazine, "The Plain Truth," and once taught the doctrine of British Israelism, which holds that Anglo-Saxons are the lost tribe of Israel. Today the 95,000-member

church is coping with a one-third loss in revenue and a ten percent loss of membership, according to the National & International Religion Report (March 20). The 56-acre denominational headquarters site is for sale, although officials say the church is not headed for bankruptcy. A leader says that the losses stem from a wholesale revision of doctrine in the last five years. While the denomination once rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, it is now accepted, as well as adopting the teaching that salvation is through grace rather than following Biblical laws. (National & International Religion Report, P.O. Box 21433, Roanoke, VA 24018-0145)

**SANCTIFIED DANCE
CAPTURING
EVANGELICAL
ATTENTION**

A new expression of Christian worship among evangelicals is creating controversy in churches across the country, according to the Arizona Republic newspaper (March 25). Young adults and teens are expressing their faith in what they call "sanctified dance music," which includes vigorous dancing to heavy beat music accompanied by lyrics centering on "Jesus, God, and clean living," according to the article. Not just the latest trend from southern California, Christian dance is attracting participants in all parts of the country. It has outlets on religious radio stations, Christian music publishing firms, and in a few sanctioned congregational young adult programs. Proponents insist it offers the chance for fellowship with friends, expressing joy, and for releasing energy. Critics point to its vivid parallel with secular dance, a long-time taboo among evangelicals. They fear that allowing even 'sanctified music' will be the first step towards breaking down the barriers against secular temptations. As with Christian rap and rock music, evangelical leaders and parents believe the sanctified dance trend is too close to its secular counterpart.

The practice of dancing among evangelicals during worship is also taking place in Germany, according to the Catholic newsletter Overview (March). One of the most popular of the new German religious groups are the self-styled "Jesus Freaks" of Hamburg, who run a disco-cum-proselytizing mission in the heart of the city's red light district. "The idea is that young people can embrace the Christian message while dancing to religion-inspired rock," according to the report first published in the European, an English-language newspaper. The Jesus freaks say they are of no particular denomination, "although their rituals differ little from those of the Lutheran church." The group's base is a bar-restaurant called Gnipswxybd (pronounced gnips-wix-ee-bid) and its 29-year-old leader, Martin Dreyer, says "this kind of Christian mission is becoming increasingly popular." The group also distributes bread to the homeless and stages baptism parties and mock funerals and crucifixions to get its message across. (Overview, 205 W. Monroe St., 6th Fl, Chicago, IL 60606-8880)--*This report was written with Erling Jorstad.*

**COURT CASE
SHOWS GROWING
LEGAL
ACTIVISM IN
RELIGIOUS RIGHT**

The U.S. Supreme Court recently heard testimony on what all parties involved agree is a landmark case involving church-state relations. The case focuses on whether the University of Virginia was within its constitutional rights to prohibit the use of public funds to finance an avowedly Christian campus newspaper, although the school does fund publications of other world religions active on campus. Advocates on both sides are treating *Rosenberger v. University of Virginia* as a watershed testing of the influence of the religious right in public life.

Time magazine (March 23) reports that the case is showing the ever-growing influence of conservative Christian attorneys with well financed activist agendas that challenge the long-standing strict church-state separation position.

In recent years, several associations of attorneys, such as Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice, have made their facilities available for a wide variety of home schooling, school prayer, and free speech cases. Financed largely by televangelists and direct mail solicitation, these groups have established an alliance on common concerns. So successful have they become that they are accepted by the religious right as an important part of the larger movement. The Los Angeles Times (March 4) reports that the Rosenberger case could increase the movement's influence in both legal and political circles should the Supreme Court rule that Virginia should finance the Rosenberger newspaper. A decision by the high court is expected this summer.
--By Erling Jorstad.

CURRENT RESEARCH: *Recent Findings On Religious Attitudes And Behavior*

INDIANA CATHOLICS FOUND TO BE DIVIDED ON VATICAN II'S EFFECTS

* A recent statewide survey of Indiana Catholics found that many of the respondents don't know enough about the Second Vatican Council to comment on whether its effects were more positive than negative. The survey, directed by sociologist James Davidson of Purdue University, found that 53 percent of Indiana Catholics said they don't know enough about the council to evaluate its effects, while 29 percent found Vatican II to have a mostly positive effect; 13 percent said it helped and hurt the church about equally; and seven percent said it had mostly negative effects. The National Catholic Reporter (March 24) reports the study showed that awareness of the council varied by age group. Fifty three percent of Indiana Catholics who were raised before Vatican II and 46 percent of those who grew up while it was in session were aware of its effects, compared with 27 percent who were born after it was concluded. The survey, said to be the most extensive study every conducted of a religious group in the state, will be replicated on a national level starting this spring.

GOVERNMENT AID TO CHARITIES TAKES SHARP INCREASE

* There has been a dramatic rise in the rate of government support of religious and secular non-profit charities over the last two decades. A recent survey of the 100 largest non-profit fundraising institutions by the NonProfit Times found that 22 percent of their incomes are from local, state and federal government, according to an article in the American Spectator. (February). This figure has increased steadily from 17 percent in 1992 and eight percent in 1965. Lutheran Social Ministries was the top fundraiser last year but did not even qualify for the recent survey because the organization no longer gets 10 percent of its income from charitable donations. (American Spectator, 2020 N. 14th St., P.O. Box 549, Arlington, VA 22216-0549)

AUSTRALIA'S PROTESTANTS DIVIDED OVER EUTHANASIA

* Almost half of Australia's Protestant churchgoers believe that people should be able to choose to die rather than suffer a prolonged death from an incurable illness, according to a national survey. The survey of church life in Australia was conducted on 6500 congregations in 1991 but many of its findings are just coming to light with the publication of two books, "Views from the Pews," and "Mission under the Microscope." Ecumenical News International (March 14) reports that the survey shows

that on many issues the churchgoers were divided along the lines of whether they held liberal or conservative views of the Bible. Those who held literal views of the Bible (47 percent) tended to oppose euthanasia, while those with more liberal views (who were older) tended to support the practice.

But such factors as age, education and professional background also had an impact on such attitudes. The researchers maintain that younger respondents who are in the prime of their life may find it easier to take a hard line on euthanasia than church attenders who are facing a greater possibility of disability, frailty or long-term illness. They conclude that "Church leaders may not want to change their stance on euthanasia; however, they need to hear the fears and concerns of older people and provide them with appropriate support to work through such issues." Approximately 45 percent of Australians belong to or attend Protestant churches. The Catholic Church, the nation's largest denomination, was not included in the survey. (Ecumenical News International, P.O. Box 2100, 150 route de Ferney, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland)

**SCANDALS
DISTURBING
HINDU, BUDDHIST
RANKS IN
INDIA, THAILAND**

Sexual scandals involving Hindu and Buddhist leaders are causing increasing disenchantment and protests among followers and non-followers in India and Thailand, according to two reports. The "godmen," the holiest of the many gurus in India, have recently been caught in serious scandals, according to the Washington Post (March 1). The godmen are the most revered figures in India, as they allegedly perform miracles, such as walking on coals, and offer guidance to their followers. Indian politicians—including the current prime minister P. V. Narasimha Rao—have all had their favorite godmen and gurus. The wealthiest godmen also run hospitals and social service centers. But in recent months, "Indians have been stunned by a number of scandals involving godmen, the most serious being charges that Swami Premenanda, a godman with numerous political devotees, detained and raped about 20 girls at his posh 125-acre retreat in south India. He was also charged earlier this year with the murder of a man who objected to his conduct," reports John Ward Anderson. There was also the case of the followers of a deceased godman attacking and injuring police after they refused to cremate his body for 56 days after his death. Such incidents have enraged India's educated middle class, who see the godmen as perpetuating stereotypes of India as being home to the bizarre, and has ignited a campaign by the Indian Rationalist Association to expose the holy men as frauds.

But the godmen are still popular among judges, doctors, politicians and businessmen. Ashis Nandy of the Center for the Study of Developing Societies found that godmen are important to people who work in fields where "there is a lot of uncertainty, but [who] must behave as if the outcome is predictable." Meanwhile, Thailand has been facing an escalating controversy over sexual scandals involving Buddhist monks. Thailand's most popular holy recluse, Phra Yantra Amaropikku has been in the headlines of the nation's newspapers for a series of alleged sexual encounters with female followers, including visits to brothels, according to the Fresno Bee (February 25). Thailand's Buddhist clergy are worried that the current scandal will worsen an ongoing religious crisis. According to one report, at least 130 monks have AIDS, with many of them

having caught the virus in brothels. Thai authorities for religious affairs were forced to set up a "monk police force merely to combat crooked dealings and keep begging for alms under control," according to the Deutsche Presse Agentur-based article. Buddhist scholar Ravi Bhavila says the monk community (or Sangha) has become a "big social welfare institution" that draws those looking for economic gain rather than "seekers of the truth."

**PAKISTAN
BECOMING LEADER
IN ISLAMIC
MILITANCY**

In Pakistan, Islamic militancy is growing and, in some quarters, is turning to violent methods of protest, according to the Economist (March 4). There have been several recent attacks by militant Muslims against religious minorities, including Christians and even minority Shia Muslims. Last November, thousands of gun-toting men seized an airport and kidnapped civil servants, demanding the implementation of Islamic "sharia" law. There is also the spread of "fundamentalist organizations and of training camps where extremists are taught military skills." Along with the rightward trend among Muslims, there exists a growing intolerance toward the West, even though the nation was until recently friendly with America. Some observers see the shift as taking place after the U.S. cut off aid to Pakistan in protest of the nation's nuclear program, which led to the feeling that "America is a hypocritical, self-serving anti-Muslim bully."

Such Islamic militancy is also fueled by growing criticism of Islamic nations by American leaders (such as Newt Gingrich recently urging that the U.S. establish a strategy for fighting "Islamic totalitarianism,"), as well as a disenchantment among the poor with their own government being run by a closed circle of rich landowners, according to the article. Although Islamic fundamentalists have continued to fare badly in elections, "experience has taught them that violence, and other means of extra-parliamentary pressure, get them their way." Militant Muslims have been able to pass several laws, including a mandatory death sentence for blasphemy. This has led to "a flood of blasphemy charges," usually against Hindus and Christians. The article concludes that Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto "seems frozen by the fundamentalists: unwilling because of her liberal instincts and her wooing of the West to placate them, but afraid to oppose them. Her weakness just gives the movement strength." The Washington Post (March 8) reports that Pakistan has become a haven for armed Islamic militants since the early 1990s. Harkat, one of the largest and most militant of Islamic groups in the country, is supported with money from Saudi Arabia and claims members from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, Algeria, Bangladesh and other countries.

Religion Watch

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