

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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## BLACK BABY BOOMER RETURNEES RESHAPING CHURCHES

A "back to church" movement among African American baby boomers and busters is having a significant effect on the theological and social character of the black church, writes Beverly Hall Lawrence in her recent book *Reviving The Spirit* (Grove, \$21). While there have been reams of literature about white baby boomers returning to churches and synagogues, there has been considerably less written on American blacks of the same generation. Lawrence, who is a newspaper reporter, notes that in the past blacks who strayed from churches often returned to organized religion in their forties and fifties. A recent survey of black ministers from many denominations showed that the current trend among those who have strayed from their childhood faiths is toward returning earlier, "with many of their new-member ages ranging between twenty and thirty." As with their white counterparts, most of the black returnees are concerned with providing a faith for their children, as well as finding meaning and a support system for themselves. There is also a greater concern with returning to ethnic roots and traditions among the black returnees than is usually found among white baby boomers and busters.

After achieving success and greater access to mainstream America, many middle-class blacks feel isolated in white communities where they still feel the lingering effects of racism, Lawrence writes. In her interviews with young returnees, the move back to the church is often viewed as a journey "home" to security and community, although such returns have also changed black churches. Although Lawrence does not present survey research on the views of the returnees, she treats Baltimore's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church as a case study of the churches to which many black baby boomers and busters are gravitating. Bethel, which is one of the fastest growing black churches with now over 10,000 active members, embodies such concerns of returnees as:

- 1) Afrocentrism: The search and recovery of African roots and traditions are part of the "spiritual journey" for members.
- 2) Charismatic practices and worship are often stressed (even in such non-charismatic denominations as the AME).

- 3) In these churches men often receive special attention (often a point of conflict for professional women members) to make up for the male deficit historically found in black congregations.
- 4) Social concern and political involvement have been hallmarks of the black church, but Lawrence notes that the returnees have introduced the new emphasis on networking to utilize members' skills and self-help traditions for enacting change in their communities rather than concentrating on traditional political advocacy. This emphasis is evident in the

entrepreneurial activities of many of these churches-- from opening schools to starting businesses. While the return of middle and upper class blacks to congregations often located in the inner-cities stirs resentment among some poor residents, such churches also provide ministries to lower class blacks. Bethel borrows freely from the Muslims, particularly the Nation of Islam and its military appeal, and has started "Mighty Men of God," a ministry for young men who often serve as bodyguards for the pastor and follow a strict code of personal behavior.

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**HISPANICS  
LOOKING TO  
PRE-CHRISTIAN  
PAST TO FIND  
GANG ALTERNATIVE**

There is a growing movement of politically involved young Hispanics seeking to revive pre-Christian practices and beliefs in their attempt to find an alternative to the gang culture, reports the Christian left magazine Sojourners (January/February). The new interest in an "indigenous" Latino spirituality is evident in the activities of the nationwide gang alternative organization Barrios Unidos and other groups working to stop the gang violence in Hispanic communities. A National Peace Summit organized by Barrios Unidos last summer emphasized a return to such pre-Christian traditions and rituals to help heal the effects of violence in their communities. The concept behind Barrios Unidos is that Latino youth need to find a substitute to violence and gang involvement by creating "spiritual warriors" for peace and justice. "Some Latinos, unable to find a niche within the mainstream Christian church, are nurturing their faith by returning to the spiritual roots of their Maya, Aztec, Apache, Yaqui, Inca, Navaho, and other Native American ancestors," writes Aaron Gallegos.

He adds that "Many Latinos in the United States who are conscious of their indigenous roots are joining American Indians in sustaining their faith through prayers in the sweat lodge, purification with sage, and sacred pipe and sun dance ceremonies." Returning to these native traditions "presents the potential of a serious dilemma for many Christians--especially those in the Latino community. [Yet,] the current crisis of violence in the Latino community is leading many to draw from other, older wellsprings of strength. Though some remain uneasy, this is consistent with the history of Christianity around the world that has always drawn upon the resources of the surrounding culture to address crisis and situations particular to that context," writes Gallegos. [Another emerging trend among Hispanics in the inner cities may be the growth of Islam. At the October conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Lawrence Mamiya of Vassar College reported that Hispanics in prisons are showing a growing interest in Islam--a development that may eventually carry over into the wider ethnic community] (Sojourners, 2401 15th St., NW, Washington, DC 20005)

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**'COMMON GROUND'  
FINDING PLACE  
IN CHURCHES**

While the "common ground" movement has yet to gain a wide constituency among religious organizations on the divisive issue of abortion, its concepts are finding a hearing among religious believers and groups at the official and unofficial levels, according to observers. In the last five years, the "common ground" movement has sought to find areas of mutual concern between pro-choice and pro-life groups on the issue of abortion, often by organizing discussions and joint projects involving the two camps. The Christian Century magazine (January 3-10) reports that there about 20 groups nationwide that are tied to the Common Ground

Network for Life and Choice. Participants in these groups often discuss and seek to challenge stereotypes that they have held about opponents in the pro-life or choice movements. For instance, pro-lifers learn that most pro-choicers don't favor abortion as a method of birth control, while pro-choicers find that many pro-life supporters prefer collaborative decision-making over a top-down, authoritarian process. Frederica Matthewes-Green writes that common ground participants are often criticized by fellow pro-choicers and pro-lifers who feel that the project is lending assistance to the adversary.

Green also reports that organizers of Common Ground are often frustrated by the lack of joint projects organized by participants. But the concept of seeking "common ground" (or at least in using such terminology) on abortion issues has gained currency among the U.S. Catholic bishops and in some ecumenical documents, according to James Kelly, a sociologist at Fordham University who has studied the movement. In an interview with RELIGION WATCH, Kelly said that the formal common ground movement has had fairly strong religious participation; "consistent ethic" Catholics (Catholics linking abortion to other forms of violence) are prominent on the Common Ground Network's steering committee. The problem for the common ground movement is that it has a tenuous constituency among religious and non-religious groups (evangelical pro-lifers rarely participate in the movement), he added. There is, however, more religious participation in situations where abortion conflict is most intense, such as when the Buffalo (N.Y.) Council of Churches organized common ground initiatives during Operation Rescue protests or the conciliatory efforts made during abortion clinic violence in Florida. Kelly said that the movement can serve as a bridge between mainline Protestants who may be pro-choice but are morally concerned about abortion and a segment of pro-lifers. (Christian Century, 407 S. Dearborn, Chicago, IL 60605)

#### EVOLUTIONISTS, CREATIONISTS BUILDING NEW RELATIONSHIP?

Evolutionists and creationists are taking a more moderate and conciliatory stance in their encounters as compared to the stormy relationship these groups have had in the past, according to the Washington Times newspaper (January 17). The more moderate approach could be seen in recent debates between creationists and evolutionists, with scientists acknowledging the limits of science and "creationists admitting extremes in their crusades against evolution," writes Larry Witham. "It's a much more open and sophisticated debate now," says Phillip Johnson, a University of California law professor and one of the spokesmen for the "neocreationists."

The new kind of creationists are "model-builders," using "rigorous science to explore that belief," says Kurt Wise, a science professor at evangelical Bryan College, Dayton, Tenn. He criticizes the first wave of creationists, who still predominate in the field, as being "crusaders," using bad science and poor political judgement. Evolutionist Niles Eldredge of the American Museum of Natural History says that whereas creation science advocates in the 1980s denied their religious motives in public in trying to appear as legitimate scientists, the neocreationists are "very open about the religious presumptions...It's a much more open and sophisticated debate now." On the evolutionist side, such well-known advocates as William Provine of Cornell University now say that public school students should be exposed to creation and evolution ideas. Provine assigns Johnson's book "Darwin on Trial" (a neocreationist bible) to his

students.

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**CHRISTIAN RIGHT  
FRAGMENTATION  
SEEN IN IOWA**

As the Christian right gains mainstream Republican acceptance there is a growing fragmentation in the ranks of activists as the movement gears up for the 1996 presidential elections, reports the Wall Street Journal (January 12). This new diversity in Christian right ranks was in evidence in preparations for the influential Iowa caucuses that determines Republican candidates. As many as two of every five Iowa Republicans are religious conservatives, making the state something of a bellwether?? of Christian right activism. "The dynamics of this year are so different it's unbelievable. Then we ran against the system. Now we are the system, or at least functionally part of it," says Rev. John Hulsizer, co-chairman of a statewide pastor-to-pastor drive for candidate Phil Gramm. Religious conservatives no longer have a "main man" as they did during the Iowa caucuses with Pat Robertson in 1988. Today, not only is the leadership of the Iowa Christian Coalition "split four ways, but individual foot soldiers are less likely to follow anybody's script," writes Dennis Farney. Political activists say a surprisingly large portion of Iowa Republicans remain undecided. Such fragmentation may be to Dole's advantage, since he has only lukewarm support among religious conservatives.

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**UNIVERSITY  
CHRISTIAN  
FORUMS FIND  
STUDENT  
FOLLOWING**

Popular support for a new series of forums on major religious questions in America's prestigious universities suggest a growing interest in religion among students, reports Christianity Today (January 8). The Veritas Forum, which was founded by Christians at Harvard University and an Ohio businessman in 1992, is bringing well-known conservative thinkers to schools such as Harvard, Yale and the University of Michigan to engage students with programs on such subjects as "Does truth exist? and is it worth seeking?" Such figures as Oz Guinness, law professor Phillip Johnson and philosopher Eleanor Stump are receiving an enthusiastic response from students. Some 25,000 students have attended a dozen forums, with another 15 such meetings scheduled for 1996. A byproduct of the forums is a growing visibility and unity of Christian campus groups, which must come together in order to organize and raise funds to host a meeting. Observers point to the program's popularity as evidence of the seriousness and enthusiasm of the so-called "Generation X" to pursue sustained philosophical and religious questions (Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188)--*By RW contributing editor Erling Jorstad.*

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**NEW WAVE OF  
WOMEN'S  
SPIRITUALITY  
BOOKS FOCUS ON  
GENDER  
DIFFERENCES**

Books on women's spirituality related to life stages and gender differences are increasingly finding readers, according to Publishers Weekly (January 8). The new wave of women's spirituality books combines a grasp of both theology and psychology. Such new books as "In the Womb of God," (Liquori) by Celeste Schroeder and "Sister to Sister," (Judson) by Susan D. Johnson Cook, suggest that women's spiritual experiences are significantly different from those of men. Such experiences include the menstrual cycle and menopause, childbirth, and the role of caregiving. These books also tie in the spiritual element in everyday activities such as decorating interior space, food preparation and in fostering

relationships. Best seller titles also cover such subjects as women's contemplative prayer, meditations for guidance through life's major transitions, and the facing of the problems of aging.--By Erling Jorstad.

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

##### BRAZILIAN SEMINARIANS INDIFFERENT TO LIBERATIONIST CONCERNS

\* Catholic seminarians in Brazil, which is often considered the stronghold of liberation theology, are far less political and more "evangelical" than their predecessors, according to a recent survey. The survey, conducted by Brazil's bishops' conference, found that the number of those who say they want to work among the poor, the homeless, and others on the margins of society has dropped by 50 percent over the past several years. One student interviewed in the study said "We are not unionists, nor do we have a role (in influencing) the government." The study also found that current seminarians considered liberation theology "to be something of the past," reports the National Catholic Reporter (January 12). (National Catholic Reporter, P.O. Box 41928, Kansas City, MO 64141)

##### CHURCH OF ENGLAND SEES INCREASED GIVING RATES, NEW PARISHES

\* Giving rates in Church of England parishes has increased by almost 20 percent in three years, according to a new church report. The Church of England report, entitled Signs of Life, also found that the church body is gaining, on average, one new congregation every week, outstripping the number of churches closing. In 1990, the average parishioner in the Church of England gave £ 3.77 a week; by 1993 the average weekly donation had increased to £ 4.52. The report also noted that the Church of England membership from 1990-1994 has remained steady at 1.5 million, while the decline in average church attendance has slowed, dropping from 1.14 million in 1990 to 1.09 million in 1994 (4.4 percent). Ecumenical News International (January 16) reports that church leaders view the more optimistic situation as reflecting a new concern with evangelism and a recognition that the church exists in some ways in a hostile environment. Another official cites the growing evangelical trend of a "less clergy-dependent, more team-based, user-friendly approach to communicating the faith." (Ecumenical News International, P.O. Box 2100, 150, route de Ferney, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland)

##### WIDESPREAD DISSENT ON POLISH CHURCH'S POLITICAL ROLE

\* The crisis of confidence in the Catholic church as a political influence in Poland is borne out by recent polls as well as by the defeat of staunch Catholic Lech Walesa by former communists who are less friendly to the church. Recent surveys show that two-thirds of Poles resent the church telling them how to vote. More than 80 percent say the church should stay out of politics altogether, reports the Long Island Catholic newspaper (January 3). Polish sociologist Andre Flis says that a "good chunk of [president-elect Alexander] Kwasniewski's support came from people who were fed up with the church." In the British Catholic magazine The Tablet (November 25) Jonathan Luxmoore notes that at the time of the elections the church's approval rating had dropped below that of the Polish Radio and TV, the army and police and other national institutions. But Luxmoore maintains that the church's loss of influence is not so much due to Western-style liberalism and dissent as much as many Poles' refusal to translate the religious and national values they associate with the church into political commitments. (Long Island Catholic, P.O. Box 700, Hempstead, NY 11550)

ORTHODOX  
DISAFFECTION  
SPURS PAGAN,  
LUTHERAN REVIVAL  
IN RUSSIA'S  
VOLGA REGION

Those involved in nationalist movements in the Russian Federation are seeking to distance themselves from Russian Orthodoxy and are embracing a diversity of faiths that they feel are more indigenous or adaptable to their cultures--from paganism to Lutheranism, according to the current issue of Religion, State & Society (September), the journal of the Britain's Keston Institute. This "break with traditional forms of religious life" is evident throughout Russia but especially in the Volga region of Russia (in the heartland of European Russia), where nationalists view Russian Orthodoxy as the "religion of occupation." In the "eyes of some sections of the Russian population the Moscow Patriarchate is seen to have compromised with the Bolsheviks and so for them 'any faith is better than Orthodoxy,'" write Sergei Filatov and Aleksandr Shchipkov. In such Volga nations as Mordavia, Mari El, and Chuvashia, "the most powerful current is the attempt to revive paganism," often through the work of the "creative intelligentsia," such as writers, artists and theatre producers. Since Orthodoxy came late to these republics, many elements of paganism have been preserved. Among Mordavian nationalists, there is a "complete reconstruction of a pagan worldview and religious services based on a reworking of ethnographic, folkloric and linguistic material."

Mari El may be the most pagan nation in Europe. According to a recent sociological survey, five to seven percent of Mari El inhabitants are "pure pagans," 60 percent are "dual faith" (both pagan and Russian Orthodox) and 30 percent are Orthodox believers. Dual faith means that such believers attend Orthodox services (without partaking of sacraments) while also visiting "sacred groves" and practicing pagan traditions. A pagan "scriptures" is being completed and public prayer services (including animal sacrifices) are drawing both "native" pagans and nationalists. Paganism could provide a "common faith," which taken together with political circumstances, could "lead to the creation of a separatist-minded union of Volga nations more monolithic than the association of the mountain nations of the Caucasus," write Filatov and Shchipkov. Such faiths as Islam and Lutheranism are also drawing followers in this region. In Mordavia, the resistance of Russian Orthodox leaders to adapt the faith to the local language and culture has led to the emergence of an indigenous Lutheranism. This brand of Lutheranism is highly traditional and ritualistic (due to Orthodox influence) as compared to the more liberal Western Lutheran tradition. "We should not rule out the possibility that Russia will become a stronghold of Lutheran conservatism in Europe," the writers conclude. (Religion, State & Society, Keston Institute, 4 Park Town, Oxford OX2 6SH, UK)

NEW CHALLENGES  
BESETTING CZECH  
CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catholic Church in the Czech Republic has a growing credibility problem due to its failure to address the growing religious pluralism and relativism of post-communist society, writes Tomàs Halik in First Things magazine (January). Halik, a priest and philosophy professor at Charles University in Prague, writes that since the fall of communism in the Czech Republic, the Catholic Church assumed that its major challenge would be the "Enlightenment atheism" deriving from the communist or pre-communist eras. While post-Vatican II Catholics have viewed secular humanism as its main dialogue partner, they would do better to address such trends as "fundamentalism (evident in the growth of many American evangelical groups in the Czech Republic), with its attempt to return to the premodern; syncretism, with its New Age and neo-gnosticism; and

deconstruction, with its skeptical nihilism and moral relativism," he writes. Research shows that in the first four years of freedom, confidence in the Catholic Church fell rapidly and the number of declared Catholics declined by almost one-half. "But at the same time the number of declared atheists also declined by one-third. The crisis in the Church is not a crisis of religion," Halik concludes. (First Things, 156 Fifth Ave., Suite 400, New York, NY 10010)

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### CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT GROWS AMONG KOREA'S PRESBYTERIANS

There is a growth of charismatic teachings and practices among non-Pentecostal denominational churches in Korea, according to Charisma magazine (January). The six main branches and 56 smaller groups of Presbyterians, comprising 7.7 million people, or about 62 percent of Korea's Christian population, are most highly influenced by charismatic practices, such as healings and speaking in tongues. It is estimated that 30 to 40 percent of the students at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Seoul have received the baptism in the Holy Spirit, the initiatory charismatic experience often involving speaking in tongues. The key leader behind the Presbyterian movement is Na Kyum-il, pastor of Ju An Presbyterian Church in the industrial city of Inchon. From a congregation of just 250 people 17 years ago, the church has grown to 55,000 registered members--the fourth largest church in Korea. The nation has been a leader in producing megachurches--several of them Presbyterian--but the Ju An church has continued to expand "even as some other Korean megachurches are noting a slowdown or even a slight decline in membership after years of rapid growth." (Charisma, 600 Rhinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746)

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### HINDU-CHRISTIAN TENSIONS MOUNT IN INDIA

There are growing Hindu-Christian divisions and tensions in India, reports the Christian Century magazine (January 17). The tensions have been generated by incidents where Christians charge that they are being persecuted by Hindus, as well as by countercharges that Christians are proselytizing Hindus. In one recent incident, a Christian was allegedly attacked by Hindus accusing Christians of desecrating Hindu shrines in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. In response to this incident, Christians have taken to the streets to protest such actions. During such a rally some demonstration leaders accused Dilip Singhjudeo, a leader of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, of inciting unrest against Christians. Singhjudeo has recently charged that foreign aid coming into India is being used by Christian missionaries to convert indigenous people. Mother Teresa is also being criticized by leading Hindu priests and officials for allegedly trying to convert Hindus to Christianity.

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### INCLUSION OF ISLAMIC PARTY IN ALGERIAN ELECTIONS SETTING TREND

The recent inclusion of an Islamic party in the election of Lamine Zeroual as president of Algeria represents a "turning point which has profound implications for other Arab states challenged by Islamist opposition forces," reports Pacific News Service (December 18-29). "The elections put an end to the debate in the Arab world over whether an Islamist party should be allowed to run for elections. Mahfoud Nihnah of HAMAS was not only accepted as a candidate but came in second with 25 percent of the vote," writes Mamoun Fandy. While the inclusion of HAMAS showed that the Islamists have a constituency that can be ignored

"only at the risk of bloody upheaval," they may also be having less appeal to Algerians. In the 1992 parliamentary elections, the Muslims won a clear majority (which was viewed as a protest vote against mismanagement of the ruling party). The loss of support in the recent elections may be "part of a general backlash against the violent actions of some Islamists" who have called for revolution. But the new willingness to participate in the electoral process is "bound to influence how Islamist forces like the Muslim Brotherhood are perceived elsewhere in the Arab world...With Jordan having set the model for inclusion and Algeria now implementing it with success, other Arab states, including Egypt, are going to find it more difficult to resist." (Pacific News Service, 450 Mission St., Rm. 204, San Francisco, CA 94105)

CORRECTION: In the item on the expulsion of the Airport Vineyard Fellowship in last month's review of 1995, we gave an incorrect title for the national Vineyard organization. The correct title is the Association of Vineyard Fellowships. We also mentioned that the media had not reported on the expulsion as RW was going to press. A few days later we learned that the Los Angeles Times had reported on this development on December 10th. Scooped again.

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**Inside This Issue:**

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