

RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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INTERNET CREATING NEW CHALLENGES AND CHANGES FOR RELIGIOUS GROUPS

As religious groups venture into cyberspace and the world of the Internet they are finding that such involvement is bringing changes and challenges to their traditional ways of doing things-- in everything from evangelism to conducting Neopagan rituals. The Internet is "changing the way Christians do evangelism" and missions, reports *Charisma* magazine (May). While most reports on the growing involvement of religious groups on the Internet have focused on fellowship or even spirituality, Kim Lawton writes that evangelical ministries are making significant efforts to engage in on-line evangelism. The most ambitious project is being coordinated by Gospel Communications Network (GCN), which pools information with 20 Christian ministries through the World Wide Web, a communications system on the Internet where organizations have designed their own information pages or "Web sites." GCN estimates that its sites have received more than 3 million contacts--known as "hits"-- from people in 90 countries. Jews for Jesus has designed pages with both texts and graphics and is planning to eventually offer animated versions of evangelistic tracts through the computer.

Lawton adds that "many Christians see the greatest evangelistic use of the Internet to be in providing resources for outreach. Missionary organizations have already been making significant use of this." Such resources include exchanging information about strategies for evangelism and holding online prayer meetings for missions. Participants in the movement to evangelize the world by the year 2000 regularly share information and resources through cyberspace. Quentin Schultze of Calvin College says the most effective evangelistic ministries will be integrating use of the Internet with other media, from video to printed materials. As in broadcasting, there will be a need for "local follow up" for those responding to such messages. The perception among some that Christians are only on the Internet to raise funds leads Schultze to caution: "If on-line evangelism takes the same commercialized forms that it often did in broadcasting, it will reduce the effectiveness of all on-line ministries," he says.

The Mormons are also considering evangelism programs via the Internet-- a method that will be superior to the traditional tract-giving techniques the church has engaged in around the world, according to *Dialogue* (Spring), an independent Mormon journal. Armand Mauss writes that the practice of Mormon missionaries going door-to-door presenting people with tracts of Mormon teaching has become a "last resort" for evangelism in many countries (especially Europe) as people have complained that the

practice infringes on their privacy. Many might be receptive to the Mormon message "if permitted to study it on their own initiative and at their own pace through the use of the Internet," Mauss adds.

While evangelicals are increasingly using computers for fellowship and evangelism, the computer and its related technologies are becoming a target of criticism and concern among evangelical apologists and counter-cult specialists. This is evident in the current issue of the SCP Journal (Volume 20, Number 2), a journal of the evangelical counter-cult organization Spiritual Counterfeits Project. The issue claims that such new computer technologies as virtual reality are taking on a religious life of their own. Virtual reality, a technology in which participants, through computer simulation, can feel they are taking part in programmed experiences. VR, which is in its infancy, is a vehicle for achieving "altered consciousness," that will enable people to create their own utopian realities apart from God, writes Tal Brooke. Computer technology in general, including the Internet, is criticized for being under control of a "computer elite" that seeks to substitute objective reality with artificial (or "virtual") realities that deny God's creation and a biblical view of humanity.

While the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, which has held conspiracy views toward the New Age and other new religious movements, may not be representative (although they are influential) of the views of many evangelicals, the journal points to another development that is likely to spark evangelical concern: the growth of Neopaganism on computer networks. Neopagan groups, such as wicca and other groups practicing magic, are highly active in cyberspace, forming fellowship and conversational groups on the Internet. But, more importantly, these groups often incorporate "computer hardware and software directly into their magical operations." These "cyberpagans" follow the traditional occult practice of "casting a circle," within which the ritual is performed and the magic is to occur. Such practitioners form such a circle through their computer link-up on the Internet.

Marc Fonda, a researcher with the Center for the Study of Religion at the University of Ottawa, told RW that the Neopagans' use of computer generated images that result from their online rituals--as some practitioners call it, "making magic manifest"-- is something of a departure from the "traditional" Neopagan view, held by such leaders as Starhawk, that magic is only a metaphorical representation of one's inner-consciousness rather than anything tangible. He added that back in the 1980s, Neopagans were one of the first religious groups to "get wired," and are today "perhaps the most technically-inclined group of religious people in North America." But Fonda doubts that the Neopagan prominence on the Internet will lead to online "cult wars" with evangelicals since such different groups have little contact (unless desired) with each other in the diversified world of cyberspace. (Charisma, 600 Rhinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746; Dialogue, P.O. Box 658, Salt Lake City, UT 84110-0658; SCP Journal, P.O. Box 4308, Berkeley, CA 94704)

**UNITED METHODISM
FINDS MORE
DIVISION ON
HOMOSEXUALITY,
MOVES IN
LITURGICAL
DIRECTION**

During its recent General Conference, the United Methodist Church (UMC) found growing ambivalence about its prohibition of homosexual behavior, strengthened its identity as a liturgical denomination and wrestled with

bureaucratic centralization, according to two reports. For over 20 years, the UMC has considered homosexual behavior to be sinful and has rejected the official ordination of gay and lesbian ministers. At the recent convention, however, the margin of votes on these issues was reduced considerably than in previous years, leading some observers to believe that within a few years, the older position may be reversed, reports the Washington Post (April 27). The Christian Century (May 15) notes that one obstacle to such acceptance is that the UMC, unlike most other mainline bodies, is an international denomination. The UMC conferences in Asia, Africa and Latin America are much more opposed to an acceptance of homosexuality and are likely to shoot down any such proposals in the future.

The magazine also reports that United Methodism is officially moving in more sacramental, liturgical directions, with the delegates approving a new document on baptism which affirms its permanent nature (evangelicals had requested use of "re-baptizing") and now views children as baptized, rather than "preparatory" members. These changes show that a growing "confessing movement," which calls for a return to classical Christian theology, is having an impact within the denomination, according to observers. In another article, William Willimon writes that many delegates at the conference were "talking downsizing, simplification, new paradigms for ministry and the need to return power to the congregations." But he adds that agency officials "felt threatened by the new mood...Some women and ethnic-minority delegates feared that without the current complex of quotas, rules and mandated structures they would lose the ground they had only recently gained." Nevertheless, there were some signs that the decentralizing mind-set is having an impact; national agencies directors were reduced by one-third and delegates also gave local congregations more latitude in organizing themselves. (Christian Century, 407 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60605)--*This article was written with contributing editor Erling Jorstad.*

**MARKET-BASED
THEORY ON
RELIGIOUS
GROWTH
GAINING WIDE
ACCEPTANCE**

Economic-based theories, specifically supply side economics, and their value in explaining American religious dynamics are meeting with growing acceptance as well as generating debate among scholars, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education (May 17). There is reported to be "great intellectual excitement" in academe over the new understanding that religion is not significantly different from other spheres of human activity; it too can be understood by the rational-choice theory which people weigh the anticipated costs against the expected benefits by converting to a church. This theory came into national prominence in 1993 with the book, "The Churching of America," (Rutgers University Press) by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. They argue that the American religious scene is a free market, with providers flourishing or declining by how well they demand costs (such as rigorous religious practices and membership requirements) and provide rewards (such as a sense of belonging and community) for "customers."

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Such revisionist ideas have produced considerable criticism by scholars who see the churches' outreach more in spiritual terms. The article notes, however, that the market theory approach has taken hold in the field. [The market interpretation raises important questions for those clergy and laity who fear that it may turn the world of sacred experience into another secular category. The market scholars are saying that we now know

why people get involved in religious communities, and we know how to reach those outside of such congregations. Theirs is a recognition of the personal self-interest involved in religious commitment. In a time of growing upheaval in American religious life, the economic interpretation rings true for a growing number of religious professionals who themselves are not unfamiliar with marketing strategies in their ministries] --By Erling Jorstad.

**NEW CHURCH
LEADERSHIP
PARADIGM
STRESSES
LAITY'S
INVOLVEMENT,
SPIRITUAL GIFTS**

Team-led ministries and an emphasis on encouraging church members to develop their spiritual gifts is becoming part of a "new paradigm" for church leaders, according to the evangelical digest Current Trends & Thoughts (June). This change is taking place after four major movements have changed congregational life in the last 25 years: The church growth movement, the seeker movement, the contemporary worship movement, and the small group movement. "Innovative churches trying to ride the wave of several movements in quick succession have often found themselves overworked, overprogrammed, and burned out...Churches in the 1990s are working to keep the 'front door' open, but they're also trying to close the 'back door'" [on church dropouts]... Yet the efforts to help new members discover their gifts and find places of service have often been less intense than the programs that drew them in to begin with," writes Brad Smith. The new shift in ministry is based around such terms as "team-based leadership, equipping-centered church, permission-giving leadership, and purpose-driven church," which all imply that leadership is decentralized and an emphasis is placed on people and ministry rather than "plug-in programs." (Current Trends & Thoughts, 7889 Lexington Dr., Colorado Springs, CO 80902)

**EVANGELICAL
CHURCHES FEAR
IRS CLAMPDOWN
DUE TO
GROWING
ACTIVISM**

There is a growing concern among churches that they are being scrutinized by the government and the Internal Revenue Service for engaging in political activity, according to the Washington Post (May 19). "With churches increasingly stepping into the political fray--especially in this presidential election season--a few recent cases, including one in which a New York church was stripped of its tax-exempt status by the IRS, are creating real concern among church leaders," reports Laurie Goodstein. New Christian Right leader Lou Sheldon says that "about 25 percent of churches in America are scared to be [politically] activated. They just don't want to be hassled by the IRS." These new tensions are due to the growing political involvement of conservative churches through such organizations as the Christian Coalition, as well as the emergence of liberal watchdog groups now monitoring the religious right for church-state infractions. The New York case involved the non-denominational Church at Pierce Creek in Vestal that lost its tax-exempt status for sponsoring a newspaper ad which lambasted President Clinton.

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

**PARACHURCH
SOCIAL ACTION
GROUPS UNIFY,
DEPOLITICIZE
CHURCHES**

* "Parachurch" or paradenominational groups involved in social activism serve as a unifying force in congregations as well as training centers for citizenship in the wider community, according to a recent study. Sociologist John Coleman of the Jesuit School of Theology studied six paradenominational activist groups, the ecumenical Habitat for Humanity,

the Catholic-founded community organizing group Pico, the mainline Protestant and Catholic Bread for the World, the pacifist Catholic Pax Christi USA, the evangelical Focus on the Family and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He found that these groups serve to train members in civic skills (providing them with what Coleman calls "social capital"), from money-raising to networking, playing a similar role as trade unions do in other countries. Writing in the Jesuit America magazine (May 11), Coleman adds that such community organizing groups tend to provide bridges between different groups within a parish or congregation.

These groups bring together isolated clumps of individuals within churches, such as friendship cliques and lifestyle enclaves, to engage in common work. Coleman and his researchers found, however, that the people involved in these activist organizations are not seeking to fulfill religious needs, as they still rely on family and congregation for discipleship. Coleman writes that "paradenominational groups serve local congregations by providing outlets for a social and political faith without dividing the congregations [on political issues] as such." (America, 106 W. 56th St., New York, NY 10019)

**PESSIMISTIC
RELIGION
FINDING
GROWING
PLACE IN
FILMS**

* The film industry has not so much abandoned or dismissed religion as much as they have "reoriented religious movies toward the darker side of spiritual belief," writes Stanley Rothman in the American Scholar (Spring). Rothman and his colleagues at the Center of the Study of Social and Political Change analyzed the content of the ten top-grossing films for each year from 1946 to 1990 (440 films) and an additional sample of 21 of the ten top-grossing films for each year from 1990 to 1994. They found the prestige of traditional religious characters and institutions dropping with each decade. In the same vein, the percentages of religiously identified characters who fail to achieve their goals in films has risen during recent decades. In the first decade, only 15 percent of the characters with religious ties are unsuccessful compared with 31 percent of non-religious characters; by the most recent period, the number of religious characters who fail to achieve their goal rises to 36 percent compared to only 28 percent of non-religious characters.

Rothman adds, "Yet, at the same time, the decline of traditional religion has been accompanied by the increasing presentation of alternate sources of supernatural roles," especially in horror and science fiction films. This trend of Hollywood featuring increasingly non-traditional religion in films has been previously reported [see February '94 RW], but Rothman finds that in such depictions, "Characters seldom expect divine or supernatural intervention, or rely on the power of religious institutions to deliver them from supernatural evil... Having abandoned so much of religious tradition, Hollywood is unable to offer compelling and authoritative alternatives. The kinds of movies that have filled the void have not ignored religion altogether but instead have re-created it in such a way that it loses much of its previously affirmative value." Such science fiction films as "Alien" document the "triumph of evil," and may be symbolic of a feared loss of control of the evil impulses within the self, Rothman concludes. (American Scholar, 1811 Q St., NW, Washington, DC 20009)

**CATHOLICS
MORE LIKELY
TO PATRONIZE
ARTS THAN
PROTESTANTS**

* Practicing Catholics are more likely to be involved and interested in the fine arts than Protestants, according to an analysis by sociologist Andrew Greeley. Writing in America magazine (May 18), Greeley found

Catholics were more inclined to say they like opera and classical music than most Protestants. Fifty six percent of Catholics had attended at least one kind of fine arts performance in the last year, as opposed to 44 percent of the Protestants. Twenty-seven percent of Catholics attended two or more events, as did 15 percent of the Protestants. Greeley writes that these findings are not just due to demographic factors, such as the fact that Catholics are more likely to live in urban areas where such art forms flourish and on the average have higher education levels than Protestants. Greeley maintains that practicing Catholics register the highest levels of interest (and practicing Protestants the lowest) in the fine arts because they are regularly exposed to sacramental and religious imagery that draws on art and because they share a "Catholic imagination" that is more likely to view God as "lurking" in the objects, events, persons and relationships of ordinary life.

***STUDY FINDS
EVANGELICALS
SUPPORTIVE
OF 'CULT
RESCUES'***

* An informal study of evangelicals on questions of new religious movements and "cults," finds that most of such respondents find such controversial tactics as deprogramming and "cult rescues" as acceptable, according to the anticultist Cult Observer (March/April). The survey, conducted by Stephen Martin, was distributed in questionnaire form to 115 evangelicals in churches in 11 states. It was found that 87 percent of respondents do not agree that rescuing and deprogramming sons and daughters from cults is an infringement upon their religious freedom. Ninety percent agreed that mind control exists. (Cult Observer, P.O. Box 2265, Bonita Springs, FL 33959)

***RELIGIOUS
PROGRAMMING
ON RADIO
INCREASES***

* The Secular Humanist Bulletin (Summer) cites statistics showing that 1,463 American radio stations now carry 15 or more hours a week of religious programming--which is an increase of 10 percent since last year and is almost double the number from 15 years ago. The fastest growing category of such programming is Christian-oriented commercial stations. (Secular Humanist Bulletin, Box 664, Amherst, NY 14226-0664)

***SURPLUS OF
CHURCHES
PREVENTING
GROWTH,
BURDENING
MEMBERS IN UK?***

* The large number of British church buildings are an impediment to growth as well as an increasing burden for church members, according to research presented in the Quadrant (May), the newsletter of the Christian Research Association. The newsletter cites the research of Robin Gill who debunks the image of Britain in the past as being a nation of full churches. Most British churches were never regularly full, even in the Victorian heyday of churchgoing. The total church seating in a given community usually exceeded the number of people locally available. By creating an over-supply of churches, the Victorians helped start a membership decline that has accelerated since the last century.

Because denominations are retaining many more church buildings than are actually needed, they are "helping to sustain a general picture of more or less empty churches. This in turn sends out negative signals that Christianity is failing and churches are passè," according to the newsletter. In another article, the newsletter notes that with the number of those attending church in the United Kingdom declining while the number of churches stays about the same, there will be "fewer people to pay the costs of upkeep on what are often ancient buildings, or Victorian edifices now in a poor state of repair... Will people continue to be willing to pay the price of keeping our buildings habitable?" (Quadrant, Christian Research, Vision Building, 4 Footscray Rd., Eltham, London SE9 2TZ UK)

**DECLINES IN
BRITISH
METHODISM
POINTING
TO EXTINCTION?**

* If the current loss of membership among British Methodists continues into the next century, the denomination will face the possibility of extinction, according to recent church statistics. The British Methodist Church—with a membership of about 1.2 million—has experienced a 6.8 membership decline in the past three years. In this period, attendance at worship has declined by 9.6 percent, and the number of young people under the age of 26 involved in the church has decreased by 19 percent. These figures, which are reported in the Christian Century (May 8), are similar to statistics reported for the church in the 1950s. But similar forecasts made about these statistics during that time indicated that British Methodism would have disappeared by now, according to one church official.

**RIGHT-WING
ORTHODOX
INFLUENCE
IN JUDAISM
GROWS IN U.S.,
ISRAEL**

Right-wing or "ultra-Orthodox" Judaism is having a growing impact in both the American and Israeli Jewish communities, according to recent reports. Moment magazine (June) reports that Orthodox Judaism is moving in a right-ward direction, with the "modern" or centrist wing of Orthodoxy now finding itself on the margins of the movement. Orthodoxy has long been divided between a modern wing and right-wing. The former seeks to integrate and apply Orthodox Judaism to modern life, typified by New York's Yeshiva University's concern to address secular and religious subjects, as well as establish greater contact with non-Orthodox Judaism. Right-wing Orthodoxy focuses almost exclusively on religious observance and the values of Torah study, as well as being strongly separatist in lifestyle and dress. While these differences are not new in Orthodoxy, the right-wing has recently taken the reins of leadership in this community. Even at such once-modern bastions as Yeshiva University, the right-wing leaders are beginning to dominate. The National Council of Young Israel, a modern Orthodox synagogue body which once pioneered such innovations as English-language sermons, is now filling vacant pulpits with right-wing trained rabbis.

Writer Eli D. Clark adds that modern Orthodox day schools are hiring teachers and principals trained in right-wing yeshivahs. He writes that the modern Orthodox failure to produce enough of its own rabbinic talent has led the right-wing to fill the gap, giving laypeople the impression that the modern movement "occupies an uncomfortable middle, not modern enough for most Jews, not Orthodox enough for others." But even right-wing Orthodox Jews are "modernizing." In one way, they are "making their religious practice ever more strict and their contacts with other Jewish denominations and the secular world ever more infrequent. They have done this by creating an alternative, traditionalist cultural universe," often in upscale suburbs, such as in Los Angeles's Hancock Park and in the village of Lawrence on Long Island. But in such suburbs, "fruppies," (observant yuppies) have emerged, who dress elegantly and work in Wall Street firms and corporate headquarters rather than in the small shops and businesses where right-wing Jews have traditionally worked. "Right-wing weddings now feature rock music with Orthodox lyrics," Clark adds.

When it comes to the subject of Israel, the distinction between modern and right-wing Orthodox is not too clear. Modern Orthodox have been among the strongest Zionist leaders, while others have been supporters of the peace negotiations. Because the right-wing Orthodox believe that God's reign is not tied to the establishment of Israel, they have tended to favor negotiations on national borders, although others, such as the

late hasidic leader Rabbi Manachem Schneerson, were and are fervent "hawks." The recent election of conservative opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel's prime minister is likely to significantly increase the right-wing Orthodox influence in the nation, according to the New York Times (May 31). More than 90 percent of the Orthodox voted for Netanyahu "not out of any affection, but because of their anger at [the ruling party] Labor's entrenched secularism... The rising power of the Orthodox as lawmakers is sure to constitute a setback for the fledgling Reform and Conservative movements here. They have been trying to break the Orthodox monopoly on such central life events as marriage, divorce, burial and conversion." Meanwhile, Labor party officials view Netanyahu's victory as sending a message that "the issues of religion in society and education have to be recognized as a central concern," says one official. (Moment, 4710 41st St., N.W., Washington, DC 20016)



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