

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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## THE FUZZY FUTURE OF DENOMINATIONS

Most observers and religious leaders agree that denominations are losing much of their influence upon congregants. Much less agreement or certainty can be found when it comes to determining how denominations should change and whether they can—or even should—gain back their influence upon congregations. Such ambivalence was in evidence among church leaders and scholars at the recent joint conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association. The conference, held in Nashville, Tenn., November 8-10, brought together over 600 participants—mainly social scientists—and presented about 100 sessions addressing a wide range of subjects—from computer religion to Eastern Orthodox saints. In special sessions on the future of denominations, scholars got a chance to listen in on how church leaders, clergy and seminary educators are facing such trends as the loss of theological identity among members and the downsizing and decentralization of denominational structures.

Being a denominational center (including the headquarter city for the Southern Baptist Convention and much of the United Methodist Church) and the proverbial "buckle" of the Bible belt, the Nashville location of the conference proved instructive. Local clergy and educators provided enough evidence (anecdotal and otherwise) to show that the relationships between congregation and denomination in Nashville reflects nationwide trends. Albert Wardin of Belmont College finds a growing tendency among Southern Baptists to shed the "Baptist" label from their congregation title in order to attract converts who have little connection to a Baptist or any denominational identity. Rev. Sherman Tribble, pastor of the First Baptist Church, echoed Wardin's comments for Nashville's Black Baptist community. Denominations are less important for those between 25 and 40, especially as the "full gospel" or neo-Pentecostal movement is gaining ground among African American Baptist groups. More surprising was the report from Rev. Rubel Shelly of the Woodmont Hills Church of Christ. The Churches of Christ have been a strongly insular movement having little association with other denominations. But Shelly finds a growing "post-denominational church community" in Nashville, with ministry programs going across denominational lines, involving both the Baptists and Churches of Christ.

John Fitzmeyer, associate dean of Nashville's Vanderbilt Divinity School, says that theological education in general is posing "severe challenges to denominations." On one hand, denominations expect leaders to meet "pre-ordered" standards. On the other hand, schools have had to lower

their expectations of students, as they are increasingly ignorant about doctrine and come to seminary as "seekers or questers." The faculty is pulling seminaries in a third direction as they are increasingly specialized, showing no "common theological calling," according to Fitzmeyer. John Mulder of the Presbyterian Church's (USA) Louisville Seminary, provided a more upbeat prognosis of denominations. He noted that--as in other mainline denominations--there is a cutting back of national staff among Presbyterians and a move away in funding from national causes to local congregations. But even if congregational giving continues to move to the local level, "denominations are sufficiently well-endowed so that they won't disappear," Mulder says. This is because endowments--such as individual gifts earmarked for specific causes--and foundation giving are assuming greater importance in mainline denominations; in the Presbyterian Church, only 30 percent of funding comes from congregations, according to Mulder.

Most of the participants in these sessions agreed that denominations will need to redeploy resources and personnel closer to congregations. Kenneth Bradsell, director of policy planning for the Reformed Church in America (RCA), finds that such decentralization is taking place whether or not leaders are ready for it. Thus, in California, RCA congregations are replicating the more decentralized "collegiate" model of ministry that the denomination used in 17th century America. But even if denominations are scaled back to mainly do the work of empowering congregations, that does not solve the problem of the loss of denominational and theological identity. In fact, such denominational "fuzziness" was not seen as much of a problem by some speakers. According to Mulder, "Fuzziness can be flexibility," meaning that the lack of denominational baggage can help institutions adapt to changing realities. Timothy Weber of Southern Baptist Seminary notes that even when a denomination tries to get rid of its fuzziness, such as when Southern Baptist conservatives forced out moderates, it does not necessarily firm up their identity. Today Southern Baptist identity is facing new challenges from the church growth and "seeker-sensitive" movements. "Conservatives [in the SBC] won the war, but they're in the process of losing their army," Weber says.

Sociologist Benton Johnson presented research showing that denominations do still have an influence upon clergy. In denominations with a strong liberal or conservative theological orientation, such as the United Church of Christ and the SBC, there is more likelihood clergy will take polarized positions. "Where there is diversity, there will be a tendency to avoid conflicted situations; There will be a large center," Johnson adds, referring to such moderate (or "fuzzy") denominations as the American Baptist Churches and the United Methodist Church. There was also evidence presented at the conference that denominations can still have a formative influence even among younger members. In a study of evangelical college students, the respondents from the strongly confessional Christian Reformed Church scored lower than the others on religious individualism (or privatization). The study, conducted by Corwin Smidt and James Penning of Calvin College, found that the Christian Reformed students were more likely than their evangelical counterparts to disagree with such statements as "one should arrive at one's own beliefs independently of one's church or denomination," and that "one can be a good Christian even though one does not attend church."

**RELIGIOUS RIGHTS'  
IMPACT ON '96  
ELECTIONS  
MIXED BAG?**

After months of well organized and financed political campaigning, in the wake of the November elections, the religious right and specifically the Christian Coalition (CC) is still something of an unknown force in national politics. The Coalition failed to gain the support of Bob Dole for its major planks of abortion, school prayer, and anti-gay rights, according to an analysis in the Arizona Republic (November 9). In Congress, several of the CC's endorsed candidates were defeated, such as Republican Reps. David Funderburk and Fred Heineman in North Carolina, and Linda Smith and Randy Tate in Oregon. Its endorsed gubernatorial candidate in Washington, Ellen Craswell was also defeated. Perhaps the most decisive contest was in Colorado, where the Coalition went all out supporting a parental-rights measure which would have given, among other things, parent control over public school curricula. The proposition lost by over 2 to 1. The same result occurred in Louisiana. There, a strongly supported candidate by the Christian Coalition, Woody Jenkins, lost to a pro-choice woman, Mary Landrieu, the first female ever from that state to be elected to the Senate.

The most comprehensive exit polls were carried out by Voter News Service, which interviewed 16,359 voters. No specific category such as "religious right" was used in polling. According to the New York Times (November 9), Dole won the support of 50 percent of those identifying themselves as Protestant, while 41 percent voted for Clinton. Among Catholics, 53 percent voted for Clinton, 37 percent for Dole. Religious right specialist John Green of the University of Akron suggests that these and similar returns show no specific influence on voters based on religious preference; older categories such as "evangelical" and "Jewish" were not important as determining factors. Observers such as Laurie Goodman suggest that the Coalition is still new to elective politics and has not learned to appeal to the decisive center of American voters. Chairman Ralph Reed, however, argues that the Coalition's presence was decisive in helping Congress keep its Republican majorities, according to USA Today (November 6). At the recent conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Nashville, religious right specialist Lyman Kellstedt of Wheaton College found in comparing pre-election polls from 1996 with 1994 a new gender gap among evangelicals. In 1994 polls there was no gender gap among evangelicals, while in '96 polls there was a 17 point spread between evangelical men and women, with the latter voting Democrat.-- *By Erling Jorstad, RW Contributing Editor.*

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**DR. LAURA'S  
CONSERVATIVE  
THERAPY**

In an age of great ambivalence over personal and social morality, a new personality in talk radio, Dr. Laura Schlessinger, has become a national superstar. Within two years of her debut, she can now be heard in 80 percent of the country, and has some 12 million listeners daily on about 250 stations. Her show, titled "Dr. Laura Schlessinger," ranks second only to Rush Limbaugh, and in a few markets surpasses the long established conservative broadcaster. According to observers cited in the New York Times Magazine (November 17) and the Arizona Republic (November 26), she is sought after because of her no-nonsense, highly conservative advice to callers-in. She rejects all forms of abortion save that to protect the health of the mother; she opposes premarital sex; she calls on feuding parents to save their marriages for the sake of their children. She preaches personal moral accountability in all instances of moral confusion.

Observers believe her popularity, enhanced by personal appearances, a newsletter, and two books, stems from her authoritative advice. Her ascendancy points to a deep, on-going frustration among many listeners with more mainstream forms of counseling and psychotherapy, including those in the religious community. An example of her interreligious appeal could be seen in a review in the conservative Catholic magazine *Crisis* (November). Schessinger is cited for acknowledging her debt to Jewish thinkers, although she "recognizes there is a natural basis for the ethical dictates of biblical morality." (*Crisis*, 1511 K St., NW, Ste 525, Washington, DC 20005)--By Erling Jorstad.

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**CODE SEARCH  
DRAWS BACK  
NOMINAL JEWS**

American Jewish synagogues are drawing a growing number of seekers based on a new seminar that uses scientific proofs of God and mathematics rather than spirituality to draw back the disaffiliated, according to the *Wall Street Journal* (November 11). In the past year, about 240 U.S. Jewish community centers, schools and synagogues have sponsored "Discovery seminars" that appeal to the mind rather than the heart by using a computer analysis of the Torah which organizers say provides proof God hid codes in the text to foretell future events, writes Calmetta Coleman. Discovery is run by Aish HaTorah, a Jerusalem-based Orthodox group working to persuade secular Jews to observe Judaism. Treating the Torah text like a word-search puzzle, researchers try to find patterns that reveal predictions, such as warnings on the Holocaust and names such as Anwar Sadat. Such findings are said to show an intentional design that only God could have created, which gives people a reason to return to Judaism and live by the Torah, says Rabbi Noah Weinberg, founder of Aish HaTorah.

The codes research is not necessarily novel (although the computer search for such patterns is); theories of codes in the Torah date back to medieval times, says Rabbi Eugene Fink of the Rabbinical Seminary of America. Coleman adds that "Religious leaders who don't take Discovery too seriously sometimes promote it anyway. Hundreds of non-Orthodox Jewish organizations have held Discovery seminars, and it is beginning to attract interest from some Reform temples." It doesn't hurt to have such stars and personalities as Larry King, Jason Alexander (of TV's *Seinfeld*) and Kirk Douglas promoting and hosting discovery seminars. Irwin Katsor, an Orthodox rabbi in charge of marketing Discovery in the U.S., says that within the next two years he hopes to win over at least 10 percent of the 1.4 million U.S. Jews between 20 and 30-- thus targeting the group most likely to intermarry.

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**CONSERVATIVE  
SHIFT IMMINENT  
AMONG CATHOLIC  
BISHOPS**

A major shift in leadership is in the wings for the Catholic Church in the U.S. that would add a decidedly conservative complexion to American Catholicism, according to the *New York Times* (November 3). Within the next few years, four of the most influential archdioceses--New York, Chicago, Washington and Philadelphia--are likely to have vacancies, paving the way for the Vatican and Pope John Paul to make further changes in a basically conservative direction that departs from the social action-oriented, moderately liberal American bishops appointed since the Second Vatican Council. The most influential appointment will be in the Archdiocese of Chicago following the recent death of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.

While it is agreed among observers that the incoming leadership will be more conservative, it is difficult to discern what such conservatism will mean in practical terms. Peter Steinfels and Gustav Niebuhr write that it could mean maintaining a moderately liberal social position or focusing on sexual issues. It could mean disciplining dissenting Catholics or giving more power to local bishops. But a likely outcome of the shift in leadership is that will weaken the National Conference of Bishops, which issued the pastoral letters on nuclear arms and the economy in the 1980s.

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**FASTING FINDS  
EVANGELICAL  
FAVOR**

Fasting is becoming an increasingly accepted practice among evangelicals, particularly as it is tied to recent prayer gatherings, reports the Minnesota Christian Chronicle (November 7). Fasting has come into particular prominence among evangelicals through Fasting and Prayer" gatherings held around the country, which are organized by Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ. In 1994 and 95, the meetings mainly drew together thousands of evangelical leaders for fasting sessions. This year's "Fasting and Prayer '96" meeting, which was held in St. Louis in November (with satellite linkups across the U.S.), moved the "focus beyond leadership to the church at large," writes Doug Trouten. Fasting was added to the agenda of these nationwide prayer meetings because the practice is a sign of repentance for the passivity of Christians leading to "moral decay in America," according to conference organizers. Since fasting was part of the revival movements leading to the first and second "Great Awakenings" in the 18th and 19th centuries, "Christian leaders promoting the practice hope to bring about something similar," writes Trouten. (Minnesota Christian Chronicle, 7317 Cahill Rd., Suite 203, Minneapolis, MN 55439)

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**TURF WAR  
OVER RELIGIOUS  
STUDIES'  
IDENTITY**

The field of religious studies is becoming a new battleground between academics pressing for a strictly scientific, objective study of religion and those who integrate their own theological beliefs and questions into the discipline, according to a cover story in Lingua Franca (November), a magazine reporting on academic life. Religious studies has been closely aligned with the humanities and has often been harmonized with theological concerns, such as the search for the sacred, as formulated by such thinkers as Mircea Eliade, writes Charlotte Allen. A group of scholars, some represented by the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), are increasingly challenging the religious studies field to take a more objective, "value-free" orientation that would move it closer to the social sciences.

A major target of such critics is the 8,000-member American Academy of Religion, where, according to Donald Wiebe of the NAASR, "you cannot come to the conclusion that the gods don't exist." Opponents of the NAASR position criticize the society's reductionism. "It reduces the religious impulse to the interplay of political power or a social movement," says New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson. While NAASR is a small group it recently won a key victory over the academic establishment when the National Research Council evaluated only those schools producing Ph.D.'s specifically in religious studies, as opposed to theology. Even those opposing the agenda of the NAASR agree that religious studies is often a hodgepodge of fields—comprising such interests as mythology, comparative religion, theology, and sociology of religion—that lacks a common

**SCIENCE-RELIGION  
COURSES  
PROLIFERATE**

"One of the most dramatic new developments on the interface of science and religion is the rapid increase in the number of relevant academic courses taught at educational institutions throughout the world," reports the newsletter Science & Spirit (Winter). A conservative estimate of the courses taught dealing with science and religion numbers approximately 150 in the English-speaking world alone, plus many more in Eastern and Western Europe, Scandinavia and elsewhere. "Add to this the countless conferences, seminars, workshops, and numerous books and publications now in existence, evidence of incredible interaction taking place involving both the secular and religious intellectual life in societies worldwide." The Templeton Foundation is doing its best to significantly increase the science-religion interchange in colleges. The Washington Times (November 29) reports that the philanthropic foundation has given grants to set up 300 college-level courses on science and religion. (Science & Spirit, 65 Hoit Road, Concord, NH 03301-1810)

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

**RELIGIOUS  
INVOLVEMENT  
TIED TO  
LOWER  
RE-ARREST RATE?**

\* Participation in Christian ministries among prisoners is associated with lower re-arrest rates, according to a recent study. The study, conducted by Thomas O'Connor, Patricia Ryan, Fenggang Yang, Kevin Wright, and Crystal Parikh of the Center for Social Research, surveyed prisoners at four New York prisons, comparing a control group of subjects with participants in various Christian programs (including Bible studies) during a 12-month to 28-month period after they were released from the prison system. A minimum exposure to such Christian programs was not associated with any difference in if or when released prisoners were re-arrested, compared with inmates who were never exposed to such involvement. But "high participation" in such programs (attending 10 or more Bible studies) was found to be associated with a lower re-arrest rate. The study cautions that the results may not necessarily mean that a high degree of participation in Christian programs "causes" lower re-arrest rates; there may be an unidentified third factor which causes both high participation and lower re-arrest rates. (Center for Social Research, 10608 S. Dunmoor Dr., Silver Spring, MD 20901)

**CANADIAN  
CHRISTIANS  
INCREASINGLY  
SEXUALLY ACTIVE,  
PERMISSIVE**

\* Canadian Christians are increasingly taking more liberalized positions on issues of sexuality and are involved in nonmarital sexual relations--even when they claim to maintain stricter standards, according to recent research by sociologist Reginald Bibby. Bibby, who presented his findings at the recent meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Nashville, found in a 1995 survey of 1,765 people that some 80 percent of Canadian singles acknowledge they are sexually involved. Despite the position held by the Roman Catholic Church, 88 percent of single Catholics in Quebec (75 percent of single Catholics in the rest of the country) say they are sexually involved, with close to 50 percent reporting weekly sexual relations (Quebec Catholics indicating premarital sex is "not wrong at all" has jumped from 43 percent in 1975 to 75 percent in 1995). For single mainline Protestants, some 70 percent indicate that they are sexually involved. While the sample for conservative Protestants was small, the survey "does reveal that many

evangelical singles are breaking with the prevalent attitudes of their groups and engaging in sex."

More significant was the finding that some 40 percent of singles who say nonmarital sex is "always" wrong are sexually active themselves. Another 40 percent of singles who maintain that sex outside of marriage is "almost always wrong" are likewise engaged in sexual activity. Conservative Protestants are "somewhat more likely" than their Catholic and mainline Protestant counterparts "to practice what they preach" when it comes to matching sexual behavior with attitudes, according to Bibby. He finds that except for evangelicals, religious commitment, church attendance levels, sexual attitudes and gender are unimportant in deciding who is sexually involved as compared with the factor of age. Bibby concludes that "the vast majority of younger Canadians are living in a period of time when the cumulative impact of North American culture has resulted in their being socialized to see sex outside of marriage as normative. Such a mindset is not seriously altered by church teachings and expectations.... What we are seeing is a vivid example of secularization at the individual level—religion does not inform behavior, even in those group instances where it attempts to speak out."

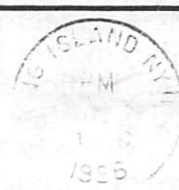
\* There has been a 72 percent increase in the number of Russians who consider themselves religious during the five years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, according to a recent survey. The poll, conducted in September by the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, found that most of the growth is among Russians claiming affiliation with the Orthodox Church (50 percent claimed the Orthodox faith in 1996, compared with 30 percent in 1991) and to Islam (from one percent in 1991 to four percent in 1996), reports Ecumenical News International (November 6). In 1991, 53 percent of respondents said they were not religious, compared to 37 percent in 1996. While Islam shows itself to be Russia's second largest religious community, the four percent figure still falls far short of the estimate of 20 million Muslims often cited by the Union of Muslims of Russia. (Ecumenical News International, P.O. Box 2100, 150, route de Ferney, CH-1211 Geneva 2 Switzerland)

Buddhism is finding a growing following and influence in Europe, especially in France, according to a report in the National Catholic Register (November 17-23). Polls show 15 percent of the French expressing an interest in Buddhism, and some two million describe it as the "religion they like the best." More than 200 Zen, Tibetan and other Buddhist meditation centers have sprung up since the first center was established in the late 1960s. The state run TV channel has just granted Buddhists a slot in its Sunday programming. "And what is hoped will form the embryo of Europe's first Buddhist university is due to be opened in the French capital" in late November, reports Diana Geddes. While there are 600,000 Buddhists in France, most are of Chinese or southeast Asian origin; only a "few 10 thousands" of native French are "full-blown Buddhists." But many millions are said to be influenced by Buddhism, particularly in France's professional and intellectual circles. Frederic Lenoir, a sociologist studying Buddhism in the West, says the religion has a "fine future" ahead of it in France in the next century. "Still very marked by Asian culture, it will gradually be transformed into a French-style Buddhism... alongside the surviving Judeo-Christian symbols, it could become the underpinning of a new religiosity..." (National

**CORRECTIONS:** In rushing the November issue into production (mainly to cover the conference reported on this month's cover page), a number of errors went uncorrected. Hopefully, most readers have figured out that page 6 and page 7 were placed in the wrong order. In the story on Jehovah's Witnesses in Japan on page 8, the 11th sentence from the top of the first paragraph should read: "While the Witnesses do not have the high numbers of the more recent Buddhist-related new religious movements..." Finally, in the supplement, we cited only the last name of the author of the article on spirituality writer Betty Eadie. The author's full name is Massimo Introvigne.



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**Inside This Issue:**

- *The End Of Denominations?*
- *Hidden Biblical Codes; Fasting Evangelicals*





## Religion Watch Subject Index --December 1995-November 1996

### Abortion

'Common Ground' Finding Place In Churches-February 1996

### Alcoholism

Prayer Found To Have Negative Effect In Alcoholic Study-May 1996

### Algeria

Inclusion Of Islamic Party In Algerian Elections Setting Trend?-  
February 1996

### Angels

Book Trends Show Angel, And Devil Interest Declining-September 1996

### Annual Review Of Religion

Dramatic News Shapes 1995 Religion Trends-January 1996

### Argentina

Church Membership, Reincarnation Beliefs Grow In Argentina-  
July-August 1996

### Arts

Catholics More Likely To Patronize Arts Than Protestants-June 1996

### Atheism

High Rate Of Young Atheists In Austria-May 1996

### Australia

Australia's Charismatic Growth, With The Help Of Toronto Blessing-  
April 1996

Buddhism Young And Growing In Australia-September 1996

### Austria

High Rate Of Young Atheists In Austria-May 1996

### Baby Boom Generation

Church Attendance Declines Further With Baby Boom Losses-April 1996

Black Baby Boomer Returnees Reshaping Churches-February 1996

### Bioethics

Theologians And Scientists Gearing Up For Genetic Wars?-May 1996

### Blacks

American Black Catholics Eschew Separatism-January 1996

Black Baby Boomer Returnees Reshaping Churches-February 1996

Unchurched Spirituality Grows Among Blacks-November 1996

### Brazil

Protestant Impact Cited In Brazilians Positive Self-Image-March 1996

Brazilian Seminarians Indifferent To Liberationist Concerns-February 1996

### Britain

British Women Being Drawn To Islam-March 1996

Catholic Attendance Falls In England, Wales-April 1996

Church Of England Evangelicals Also Have Problems Keeping Youth-  
April 1996

Declines In British Methodism Pointing To Extinction?-June 1996

Surplus Of Churches Preventing Growth, Burdening Members In Uk?-  
June 1996

British Christian Teens Less Likely To Take Drugs?-November 1996

British Prefer Women In Team Leadership-July-August 1996

High Rate Of Inter-marriage Among British Jews-March 1996

### Buddhism

Japanese-American Buddhist Group Facing Decline And Dissention-  
March 1996

China Seeks Japanese-Style Buddhist Revival-April 1996

Women In Buddhist Leadership Changing Religion?-April 1996

Buddhism Young And Growing In Australia-September 1996

### Bulgaria

Charismatics Facing Restrictions In Bulgaria, Lithuania-November 1996

### Business

'Marketplace Christians' Seek New Kind Of Activism-March 1996

Evangelicals Take Up Corporate Protests, Boycotts-November 1996

### Canada

Active Catholics Important In Turning Back Quebec Separatism-March 1996

Canadian Catholic Seminarians More Conservative-November 1996

United Church Of Canada Failing To Reach Adults-September 1996

### Catholicism

Catholic School Shortage Developing?-December 1995

Catholic Feminists Rethink Women's Ordination-January 1996

New Challenges Besetting Czech Catholic Church-February 1996

Widespread Dissent On Polish Church's Political Role-February 1996

Active Catholics Important In Turning Back Quebec Separatism-March 1996

Sexual Morality Among Poles Becoming Privatized, Divorced From  
Church-March 1996

New Papal Election Rules Reinforcing Conservative Leadership Trend?-  
May 1996

Catholic Vocation Decline Due To Lack Of Parental Support?-  
September 1996

Canadian Catholic Seminarians More Conservative-November 1996

Catholics More Likely To Patronize Arts Than Protestants-June 1996

Catholic Attendance Falls In England, Wales-April 1996

Associate Member Ranks Grow In Religious Orders-March 1996

Catholics' Views More Liberal On Married Clergy, Women Priests-  
March 1996

Catholic Parishes Finding Place In Revived Urban Centers-January 1996

American Black Catholics Eschew Separatism-January 1996

Catholic, Mainline Campus Ministries Feel Financial Crunch-December 1995

### Charismatic Movement

Australia's Charismatic Growth, With The Help Of Toronto Blessing-  
April 1996

Charismatics Facing Restrictions In Bulgaria, Lithuania-November 1996

Almost 10 Percent Of U.S. Population Charismatics, Pentecostals-October  
1996

Charismatic Movement Grows Among Korea's Presbyterians-February 1996

### Children

New Market For Religious Children's Books-January 1996

### China

Pressure Mounts As Christianity Flourishes In China-March 1996

China Seeks Japanese-Style Buddhist Revival-April 1996

'Third Wave' Evangelicals Seek Middle Ground In China Conflict-May 1996

### Chinese-American Churches

U.S. Chinese Churches Decentralized, Evangelical-January 1996

Korean, Chinese, And Rastafarian Religion Adapts To American Religious  
Patterns -September 1996

### Church Attendance-Membership

Church Attendance Declines Further With Baby Boom Losses-April 1996

Fifth Year Of Declining Church Attendance-November 1996

Church Attendance Affects Divorce Views Among Youth More Than Other  
Family Issues-December 1995

### Church Growth

Surplus Of Churches Preventing Growth, Burdening Members In Uk?-  
June 1996

Independent Congregation-Planting Flourishes-October 1996

Growing Churches In Mixed, Changing Communities-July-August 1996

Market-Based Theory On Religious Growth Gaining Wide Acceptance-  
June 1996

### Church Of England

Church Of England Sees Increased Giving Rates, New Parishes-  
February 1996

Church Of England Evangelicals Also Have Problems Keeping Youth-  
April 1996

### Church Universal And Triumphant

Cut Decentralizing Power?-November 1996

### Church-State Issues

Evangelical Churches Fear IRS Clampdown Due To Growing Activism-  
June 1996

Court Decisions Creating Resistance Movement?-November 1996

### Clergy

Clergy-Labor Alliance Revived-September 1996

Men's, Women's Ministry Preference Shape Careers?-November 1996

Administrative Tasks Found To Occupy Clergy's Time-December 1995

**Clergy (cont)**

- High Resignation Rate Found Among Evangelical Clergy-January 1996
- Catholics' Views More Liberal On Married Clergy, Women Priests-March 1996
- SBC Conservative Clergy Take Up Politics While Moderates Withdraw-May 1996
- Political Gap Grows Between Protestant Clergy-May 1996
- United Church Clergy Turn 'Professional,' Careerist-July-August 1996
- Jewish Groups Facing Clergy Sexual Abuse Issues-October 1996

**Computers**

- Religious Faith Strong, Diverse On Internet-November 1996
- Internet Creating New Challenges And Changes For Religious Groups-June 1996
- Online Spirituality Becoming A Reality-January 1996

**Congregations**

- American Hindus Generate New Forms Of Community-January 1996
- Urban-Suburban Congregational Connections Growing-April 1996
- Denominational Switching Grows Among Conservative Congregations-July-August 1996
- Merged Congregations Face Decline, Need Goal-Setting-October 1996
- Independent Congregation-Planting Flourishes-October 1996

**Creationism**

- Creationist, Pressure Silencing Evolution In Schools?-December 1995
- Evolutionists, Creationists Building New Relationship?-February 1996

**Crime**

- Hispanics Looking To Pre-Christian Past To Find Gang Alternative-February 1996
- Delinquency Affected By Region As Well As Religion?-July-August 1996

**Czech Republic**

- New Challenges Beseating Czech Catholic Church-February 1996

**Denominational Structures**

- Denominational Switching Grows Among Conservative Congregations-July-August 1996

**Devil**

- Books On Evil, Devil Finding New Interest-January 1996
- Book Trends Show Angel, And Devil Interest Declining-September 1996

**Eastern Orthodoxy**

- Orthodox Disaffection Spurs Pagan, Lutheran Revival In Russia's Volga Region -February 1996
- Schism Looming In Eastern Orthodoxy?-April 1996

**Education**

- Catholic School Shortage Developing?-December 1995
- Creationist, Pressure Silencing Evolution In Schools?-December 1995
- University Christian Forums Find Student Following-February 1996
- Canadian Catholic Seminarians More Conservative-November 1996
- Seminaries Form New Partnerships, Engage In Marketing-November 1996
- Religious Studies Major Rejuvenated And Reinvented-May 1996
- Catholic, Mainline Campus Ministries Feel Financial Crunch-December 1995

**Europe**

- European, Russian Governments Targeting New Religious Movements-July-August 1996

**Evangelicalism**

- Courtship Gaining Hearing Among Evangelical Parents-December 1995
- U.S. Chinese Churches Decentralized, Evangelical-January 1996
- Church Of England Evangelicals Also Have Problems Keeping Youth-April 1996
- Many Evangelicals Failing Test On Orthodoxy-April 1996
- Study Finds Evangelicals Supportive Of 'Cult Rescues'-June 1996
- Christian Psychotherapy Drawing Criticism For Methods, Treatments-October 1996
- Evangelicals Take Up Corporate Protests, Boycotts-November 1996
- American Evangelicals Turn To Human Rights Drive-October 1996
- Definitions Matter In Counting Evangelicals-July-August 1996
- Evangelical Churches Fear IRS Clampdown Due To Growing Activism-June 1996
- 'Third Wave' Evangelicals Seek Middle Ground In China Conflict-May 1996
- 'Marketplace Christians' Seek New Kind Of Activism-March 1996
- University Christian Forums Find Student Following-February 1996

- High Resignation Rate Found Among Evangelical Clergy-January 1996

**Evangelism**

- Luis Palau And The, Hispanic Moment In Evangelism-July-August 1996

**Family Issues**

- Church Attendance Affects Divorce Views Among Youth More Than Other Family Issues-December 1995
- Churches Targeting No Fault Divorce-May 1996
- Courtship Gaining Hearing Among Evangelical Parents-December 1995
- Religiosity Not A Strong Factor For Happiness In Marriage-December 1995
- Family Issues Gain Mainline Attention-July-August 1996

**Feminism**

- Re-Imagining Gives Feminist 'Public Face'?-December 1995
- Catholic Feminists Rethink Women's Ordination-January 1996

**Finances**

- Church Of England Sees Increased Giving Rates, New Parishes-February 1996
- Mainline's Memberships Decline While Contributions Increase-May 1996
- Americans Find Church Donations Well-Spent-September 1996

**Germany**

- Immigration Cushioning German Church Decline-May 1996
- Religion Getting Bad Press In Germany-January 1996

**Guatemala**

- Mayan Religion Finding Public Face In Guatemala-September 1996

**Health**

- Prayer Found To Have Negative Effect In Alcoholic Study-May 1996
- Health-Spirituality Connections Grow, Encountering Religious Traditions-December 1995

**Hinduism**

- Hindu-Christian Tensions Mount In India-February 1996
- American Hindus Generate New Forms Of Community-January 1996

**Hispanics**

- Hispanics Looking To Pre-Christian Past To Find Gang Alternative-February 1996
- Hispanic Adventists Bring New Conservative Influence To Adventism-March 1996
- Luis Palau And The, Hispanic Moment In Evangelism-July-August 1996

**Homosexuality**

- Metropolitan Community Church Growing, Intensifying Gay Rights Activism-October 1996
- United Methodist Finds More Division On Homosexuality, Moves In Liturgical Direction -June 1996

**Human Rights**

- American Evangelicals Turn To Human Rights Drive-October 1996

**Immigration**

- Immigration Cushioning German Church Decline-May 1996

**India**

- Hindu-Christian Tensions Mount In India-February 1996

**Interfaith Issues**

- Jewish-Christian Relations Advance On Theological Front-April 1996
- New Religions Seek Interfaith Acceptance-September 1996

**Islam**

- Inclusion Of Islamic Party In Algerian Elections Setting Trend?-February 1996
- American Muslims Disaffected From Both Parties-September 1996
- British Women Being Drawn To Islam-March 1996
- 'Fundamentalism Lite' Finds Political Role In Turkey-March 1996

**Israel**

- Right-Wing Orthodox Influence In Judaism Grows In U.S., Israel-June 1996
- Spiritual Interest Grows Among Israel's Soldiers, Sport Stars-September 1996

**Japan**

- China Seeks Japanese-Style Buddhist Revival-April 1996
- Unification Church Support Shifting From Japan To Latin America-September 1996
- Japan's Jehovah's Witnesses Show Growth Amidst Obstacles-November 1996

**Jehovah's Witnesses**

Japan's Jehovah's Witnesses Show Growth Amidst Obstacles-  
November 1996

**Judaism**

High Rate Of Inter-marriage Among British Jews-March 1996  
Reform Versus Conservative Judaism--Who's Winning?-April 1996  
Spiritual Interest Grows Among Israel's Soldiers, Sport Stars-  
September 1996  
Jewish Groups Facing Clergy Sexual Abuse Issues-October 1996  
American Jews Returning To Jewish-Based Activism-October 1996  
Jewish Converts Serious About Faith-September 1996  
Jewish-Christian Relations Advance On Theological Front-April 1996  
Signs Of Hope Amidst Jewish Decline In Former Soviet Union-March 1996  
Bar, Bas Mitzvahs Catching On With Adults-December 1995  
Right-Wing Orthodox Influence In Judaism Grows In U.S., Israel-June 1996

**Korea**

Charismatic Movement Grows Among Korea's Presbyterians-February 1996

**Korean-American Churches**

Korean, Chinese, And Rastafarian Religion Adapts To American Religious  
Patterns -September 1996

**Labor Movement**

Clergy-Labor Alliance Revived-September 1996

**Laity**

New Church Leadership Paradigm Stresses Laity's Involvement, Spiritual  
Gifts -June 1996

**Latin America**

Unification Church Support Shifting From Japan To Latin  
America-September 1996

**Liberation Theology**

Brazilian Seminarians Indifferent To Liberationist Concerns-February 1996

**Literature**

New Age Writers Turn To Fiction To Express Teachings-December 1995

**Lithuania**

Charismatics Facing Restrictions In Bulgaria, Lithuania-November 1996

**Lutheranism**

Orthodox Disaffection Spurs Pagan, Lutheran Revival In Russia's Volga  
Region -February 1996

**Mainline Protestantism**

Family Issues Gain Mainline Attention-July-August 1996  
Catholic, Mainline Campus Ministries Feel Financial Crunch-December 1995  
Mainline's Memberships Decline While Contributions Increase-May 1996

**Mayan Religion**

Mayan Religion Finding Public Face In Guatemala-September 1996

**Media-Entertainment**

Pessimistic Religion Finding Growing Place In Films-June 1996  
Religious Programming On Radio Increases-June 1996

**Media-News**

Religion Getting Bad Press In Germany-January 1996

**Methodism**

Declines In British Methodism Pointing To Extinction?-June 1996  
United Methodism Finds More Division On Homosexuality, Moves In  
Liturgical Direction -June 1996  
United Methodist Clergy Graying, Declining-October 1996

**Metropolitan Community Church**

Metropolitan Community Church Growing, Intensifying Gay Rights  
Activism-October 1996

**Mormonism**

Mormon Growth Slowing?-January 1996  
RLDS Moves Further From Mormon Tradition-April 1996  
Mormon World Expansion Keeps American Accent?-May 1996

**Music**

Christian Country Music Establishes Identity-December 1995

**Muslims**

Harassment Of Muslims Intensifies After Oklahoma City-May 1996

**Netherlands**

Dutch Want Less Opinions From Churches On War, Peace  
Issues-December 1995

**New Age Movement**

New Age Writers Turn To Fiction To Express Teachings-December 1995

**New Christian Right**

Christian Right Supporters Look To Government Support?-September 1996  
Christian Right Fragmentation Seen In Iowa-February 1996

**New Religious Movements**

How Distressful Are 'Cults'?-May 1996  
New Religions Seek Interfaith Acceptance-September 1996  
Study Finds Evangelicals Supportive Of 'Cult Rescues' -June 1996  
European, Russian Governments Targeting New Religious  
Movements-July-August 1996

**Paganism**

Orthodox Disaffection Spurs Pagan, Lutheran Revival In Russia's Volga  
Region -February 1996

**Palau, Luis**

Luis Palau And The, Hispanic Moment In Evangelism-July-August 1996

**Parachurches**

Parachurch, Social Action Groups Unify, Depoliticize Churches-June 1996

**Pentecostalism**

Almost 10 Percent Of U.S. Population Charismatics, Pentecostals-  
October 1996

**Poland**

Widespread Dissent On Polish Church's Political Role-February 1996  
Sexual Morality Among Poles Becoming Privatized, Divorced From  
Church-March 1996

**Politics**

American Muslims Disaffected From Both Parties-September 1996  
Parachurch, Social Action Groups Unify, Depoliticize Churches-June 1996  
American Jews Returning To Jewish-Based Activism-October 1996  
Court Decisions Creating Resistance Movement?-November 1996  
More Americans Support Churches Speaking Out On Politics-  
July-August 1996  
SBC Conservative Clergy Take Up Politics While Moderates Withdraw-  
May 1996  
Political Gap Grows Between Protestant Clergy-May 1996

**Prayer**

Books On Prayer Found To Be Most Popular Subject-January 1996  
Prayer Found To Have Negative Effect In Alcoholic Study-May 1996

**Presbyterians**

Charismatic Movement Grows Among Korea's Presbyterians-February 1996

**Promise Keepers**

Promise Keepers' Impact Growing At Congregational Level-April 1996

**Psychology-Psychiatry**

Christian Psychotherapy Drawing Criticism For Methods,  
Treatments-October 1996  
Churches, Synagogues Adopting And Adapting Rites Of Passage-March 1996

**Publishing**

Books On Prayer Found To Be Most Popular Subject-January 1996  
New Wave Of Women's Spirituality Books Focus On Gender  
Differences-February 1996  
Book Trends Show Angel, And Devil Interest Declining-September 1996  
Books On Evil, Devil Finding New Interest-January 1996  
New Market For Religious Children's Books-January 1996

**Rastafarians**

Korean, Chinese, And Rastafarian Religion Adapts To American Religious  
Patterns -September 1996

**Re-Imagining**

Re-Imagining Gives Feminist 'Public Face'?-December 1995

**Reincarnation**

Church Membership, Reincarnation Beliefs Grow In Argentina-  
July-August 1996

**Religious Beliefs-Commitment**

Index Of Religious Commitment Reaches 10-Year High-May 1996

**Religious Leadership**

- Women In Buddhist Leadership Changing Religion?-April 1996
- New Church Leadership Paradigm Stresses Laity's Involvement, Spiritual Gifts -June 1996

**Religious Left**

- Religious Left Reinvigorated?-January 1996

**Religious Prejudice**

- Many View Minority Religions As Negative Influence-March 1996
- Harassment Of Muslims Intensifies After Oklahoma City-May 1996

**Reorganized Church Of Jesus Christ Of Latter Day Saints**

- RLDS Moves Further From Mormon Tradition-April 1996

**Russia**

- Orthodox Disaffection Spurs Pagan, Lutheran Revival In Russia's Volga Region -February 1996
- Signs Of Hope Amidst Jewish Decline In Former Soviet Union-March 1996
- European, Russian Governments Targeting New Religious Movements-July-August 1996
- Scientology Gaining Ground In Russia-December 1995

**Santeria**

- Santeria Takes More Universal, 'American,' Approach-November 1996

**Scientology**

- Scientology Gaining Ground In Russia-December 1995

**Seventh Day Adventism**

- Hispanic Adventists Bring New Conservative Influence To Adventism-March 1996
- Adventists Suffering From Own Success In Developing World?-September 1996

**Sexual Issues**

- Sexual Morality Among Poles Becoming Privatized, Divorced From Church-March 1996
- Jewish Groups Facing Clergy Sexual Abuse Issues-October 1996

**Small Groups**

- Cell Groups--Urban, Upscale And No Cure For Slow Growth-April 1996

**South Africa**

- Growing Disaffection From White South African Churches-October 1996
- Witchcraft Scare Fuels Killings, Disappearances In South Africa-July-August 1996

**Southern Baptist Convention**

- SBC Conservative Clergy Take Up Politics While Moderates Withdraw-May 1996

**Spirituality**

- Online Spirituality Becoming A Reality-January 1996
- New Wave Of Women's Spirituality Books Focus On Gender Differences-February 1996
- Churches, Synagogues Adopting And Adapting Rites Of Passage-March 1996
- Fitness Finds Spirituality-November 1996
- Unchurched Spirituality Grows Among Blacks-November 1996
- Health-Spirituality Connections Grow, Encountering Religious Traditions -December 1995

**Theology**

- Jewish-Christian Relations Advance On Theological Front-April 1996
- Theologians And Scientists Gearing Up For Genetic Wars?-May 1996

**Toronto Blessing**

- Australia's Charismatic Growth, With The Help Of Toronto Blessing-April 1996

**Turkey**

- 'Fundamentalism Lite' Finds Political Role In Turkey-March 1996

**Ukraine**

- Signs Of Hope Amidst Jewish Decline In Former Soviet Union-March 1996
- Unification Church Support Shifting From Japan To Latin America-September 1996

**United Church Of Canada**

- United Church Clergy Turn 'Professional,' Careerist-July-August 1996
- United Church Of Canada Failing To Reach Adults-September 1996

**United Methodist Church**

- United Methodism Finds More Division On Homosexuality, Moves In Liturgical Direction -June 1996
- United Methodist Clergy Graying, Declining-October 1996

**Universal Church Of The Kingdom Of God**

- Universal Church Grows At Home And Abroad Despite Controversy-May 1996

**Urban Issues**

- Cell Groups--Urban, Upscale And No Cure For Slow Growth-April 1996
- Catholic Parishes Finding Place In Revived Urban Centers-January 1996
- Urban Religion-Pluralistic With Weakening Ties To Neighborhoods-October 1996
- Urban-Suburban Congregational Connections Growing-April 1996

**Wales**

- Catholic Attendance Falls In England, Wales-April 1996
- Serious Decline In Church Attendance, Congregations In Wales-October 1996

**War And Peace Issues**

- Dutch Want Less Opinions From Churches On War, Peace Issues-December 1995

**Welfare Reform**

- Many Americans Not Convinced On Religious Groups As Welfare Providers-March 1996

**Wicca Movement**

- Wicca Takes More Accessible, Public Expression-October 1996

**Witchcraft**

- Witchcraft Scare Fuels Killings, Disappearances In South Africa-July-August 1996

**Women**

- Catholic Feminists Rethink Women's Ordination-January 1996
- New Wave Of Women's Spirituality Books Focus On Gender Differences-February 1996
- Catholics' Views More Liberal On Married Clergy, Women Priests-March 1996
- British Women Being Drawn To Islam-March 1996
- Women In Buddhist Leadership Changing Religion?-April 1996
- British Prefer Women In Team Leadership-July-August 1996
- Men's, Women's Ministry Preference Shape Careers?-November 1996

**YMCA**

- YMCA's Attempt To Stem Secular Tide-January 1996

**Youth**

- British Christian Teens Less Likely To Take Drugs?-November 1996
- Church Attendance Affects Divorce Views Among Youth More Than Other Family Issues-December 1995
- Teens Want More Religious Discussions-November 1996
- Most Congregations Failing To Keep High Schoolers-July-August 1996
- Church Of England Evangelicals Also Have Problems Keeping Youth-April 1996

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