

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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## NEW DIRECTIONS FOR TORONTO BLESSING?

The Toronto Blessing is found to have strongly beneficial effects on participants and appears to be staking out a new path in the charismatic-Pentecostal movement, according to two reports. The "blessing," a phenomenon that includes such manifestations as laughing and falling down, started at a charismatic Vineyard church in Toronto which was subsequently expelled from that association, and has spread to Assemblies of God congregations and other churches around the world. In the Evangelical Studies Bulletin (Winter), sociologist Margaret Poloma reports on a survey she conducted of 900 blessing participants from 20 countries, finding that they report significant increases in "personal spiritual refreshment, holiness and healing, and evangelism and social outreach." As might be expected, most (91 percent) said they felt a greater sense of God's love; over half (54 percent) experienced some form of deliverance from the hold of the devil on their lives. Thirty seven percent said they had become more involved in works of mercy, such as feeling the hungry and 71 percent reported that the Toronto Blessing had a positive impact on their churches, with only 10 percent saying the response of their church community was a "negative" one.

Poloma goes on to note that the ousting of the "mother church" of the Toronto Blessing from the Association of Vineyard Churches led to the establishment of a "denomination in the making"-- the Partners in Harvest, a network of independent congregations impacted by the phenomenon. She adds that the blessing "has the potential to not only revitalize a faltering [Pentecostal/charismatic] movement, but to break out of the evangelical subculture. It offers a fresh presentation of the basic Gospel message that could serve as a Christian voice to postmodernists and could provide a Christian alternative to the New Age movement" and draw in the unchurched. In order for the blessing to find a hearing in the wider culture, it should draw on models where this has taken place, as in England or the Third World, as well as draw upon the resources of such mystical traditions as Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, according to Poloma.

But the Assemblies of God has been the most receptive denomination to the blessing in the U.S., reports Media Spotlight (Volume 17, No. 3), an evangelical newsletter critical of the charismatic movement. While the Brownsville Assembly of God Church in Pensacola, Fla. is the center of the phenomenon in the denomination, many other Assembly of God (AG) congregations are experiencing the blessing, and several national denominational officers have endorsed it. Interestingly enough, the

blessing came into the Pensacola church not through the Toronto site. but from an evangelist from the congregation who attended services at a Church of England parish. A recent issue of the official AG periodical was devoted to the blessing and the "revival" in Pensacola. Some Assemblies of God leaders liken the blessing movement to a gift for the church from God to equip Christians for the last days. The newsletter notes in AG churches some of the most controversial manifestations, such as barking and "roaring," have subsided somewhat. "While these phenomena are still in evidence, there appears to be a more toned-down approach." (Evangelical Studies Bulletin, ISAE, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL 60187; Media Spotlight, P.O. 290, Redmond, WA 98073-0290)

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**COMPUTER  
MINISTRY  
POPULARIZED,  
ORIENTED  
TOWARD  
EVANGELICALS**

The growing influence of the computer-powered ministry showed its muscle in mid-January with a well-attended conference in Phoenix, Ariz. Attendance at the "Christian Computing Expo," held at Southwestern College, jumped from 1,600 in 1996 to over 6,000 in 1997. With a vast array of scriptural, historical, office management, pastoral and children-oriented programs on display in 35 booths, participants could see what once was the future but is now very much a major part of everyday religious life. The programs receiving the most attention by visitors were the word and subject searches on the Bible, office management software (such as for keeping track of offerings) and illustrated websites with Bible stories for children. These and similar programs are being produced by independent firms, not managed by such evangelical giants as Zondervan, Baker House, or Eerdmans.

Most programs embrace classical evangelical themes such as the full authority of the Bible, end-times teachings, evangelism techniques, and personal testimonies of conversion. Of special interest was the fact that, as noted some years ago, that almost the entire leadership, momentum and resources are in the hands of the evangelicals; there was little mainline and Catholic presence at the conference. Observers suggested to RELIGION WATCH that this was due to the non-evangelicals lack of start up capital. Conference leaders also mentioned that within a few years the Catholic and mainline bodies would be online with educational and inspirational materials. Sponsored by Christian Computing Magazine and Southwestern (a Conservative Baptist school), leaders announced plans for similar conferences across the country in 1997.--This report was written by RW contributing editor Erling Jorstad, who divides his time between Phoenix and Northfield, Minn.

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**YOUNG AMERICAN  
MUSLIMS  
'SPIRITUALIZE'  
RAMADAN**

A new generation of American Muslims are reshaping the practice of Ramadan, the traditional month of fasting in Islam, making its observance both more community- and spiritually-oriented, reports The Minaret magazine (January). Most Muslim immigrants are surprised by the differences in Ramadan observance between their home countries and America. Women and children usually do not participate in the mosques where prayers are offered each evening of the holy month (fasting takes place during the daytime and eating is permitted after dark) in many Muslim countries. But immigrants are finding that "Mosques and centers in other parts of the country are slowly beginning to realize that Ramadan is not just a manly affair. Rather, it is a family affair...More women and children are visible in mosques and Islamic centers, and more centers

are catering to the interests of a cross-section of the community, offering them a variety of programs."

The article adds that in interviews with young Muslims across the U.S., there is the widely held view that the fasting of Ramadan involves, in the words of one young adult, a "process of spiritual reawakening and social empowerment. It is a process of gaining control over oneself." Some of these young Muslims criticize the activities surrounding Ramadan, such as feasting after sundown, as unspiritual. One 50-year-old Muslim from Chicago says, "In our countries, we never looked at Ramadan as a month of spiritual reawakening. It was more a cultural festival... You would notice an emphasis on culture rather than on spirituality." The article concludes that "Young Muslim Americans will add their flavor to [Ramadan's] celebration, a flavor that will taste much different and more like the original without any cultural and social contaminations." (The Minaret, 434 South Vermont Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90020)

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**'DOWNSHIFTING'  
SIMPLIFYING  
CONGREGATIONS'  
PROGRAMS?**

The trend of "downshifting," where middle-class Americans choose more simple lifestyles and more family time is having an impact on congregations, reports *Leadership* (Winter), a journal for church leaders. Gerald Celente of Trends Research Institute estimates that by the year 2000, about 15 percent of baby boomers will embrace a lifestyle which sets limits on careers in order to gain more control over family, money, time and clutter. Baby busters without the career opportunities of boomers are experiencing an "involuntary voluntary" simplicity. Many searching for such a simple lifestyle are turning to congregations for peace and community. Some are growing averse to programs and want to control their schedules in order to spend more time with their children.

The Church By The Side of the Road in Seattle is modifying its programs to allow families to sing together in the choir or attend Sunday school together. One church leader finds that there is less willingness to attend more than one service in a week. By allowing for more "options" in a church, such as Saturday night services or home study groups, the trend is paradoxically also creating more complexity in church structures, writes Ginger McFarland. The hunger for simplicity also challenges the congregations in the areas of money and volunteerism. Some churches are being forced to adopt lean budgets as families take lower incomes. With fewer members having the time to volunteer, one pastor finds "people are willing to give [financially] to be released from the responsibility." (*Leadership Journal*, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188)

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**FEMININE  
SPIRITUALITY  
UNDERGIRDS  
HILDEGARD  
REVIVAL**

The teachings and music of Hildegard von Bingen, a medieval nun, are drawing a wide following, particularly among women who appreciate her feminine spirituality, reports the *Washington Post* (January 18). "It's not enough to say there are 25 Hildegard sites and hundreds of references on the Internet... Seminars and retreats on the 12th century German abbess, visionary, prophet, dramatist, healer and musician have increased across the country in the last five years, and her morality play "Ordo Virtutum" ("The Play of Virtues") has become one of the most frequently staged productions at colleges," writes Bill Broadway. Such gatherings often have a "New Age-y" quality, as they focus on Hildegard's unique style of chanting, as well as studying her theories of healing, praying,

breathing, writing and "guided introspection." Elizabeth Dreyer, a specialist in medieval female mysticism, says "ecological spiritualists" and others try to read their agenda into Hildegard, making her an Eastern mystic when she was an orthodox, if mystical, Catholic. Women most appreciate Hildegard's drive to follow her own visions and her music, which started the whole trend. The music's haunting melodies have been compared to Gregorian chant but yet "exhaust every form of expression," says one commentator.

#### **CHURCH ENDOWMENTS DRAW ON MEMBERS' WILLS**

In RW's report on the future of denominations in the December issue, it was noted that mainline church leaders viewed "endowments" as an important source of denominational funding for the future, especially as local church giving continues to decline. It appears that the source of such endowments are donations from the last will and testament of American Christians, according to the National Catholic Register (December 29-January 4). There are estimates that the older generation of Americans will give away in their wills more than \$10 trillion as they die in the next few decades. "Most of this capital will be left to family members, and some of it to various secular causes. But some within the churches are saying that substantial amounts could also be obtained to provide a more solid base for religious ministry." The program of the Episcopal Church Foundation is viewed as a model of such "planned giving."

The foundation, a growing agency independent of the denomination, now has \$23 million in assets. Many prefer the independent nature of the foundation, since there is a level of distrust toward the national church, due to recent cases of embezzlement as well as concern among some about the "liberal bent" of the national church leadership, according to Frederick Osborn of the Episcopal Church. The foundation also allows givers to designate that their gifts go to specific causes. The Episcopalians, however, lag behind the Presbyterian Foundation, which has assets of more than \$1 billion. Congregation specialist Loren Mead says that mainline churches are heading toward a "financial meltdown" and could not continue their ministries unless they develop "major new resources." The increasing number of Catholic parishes hurting financially may also generate Catholic interest in greater endowment giving, according to the article. (National Catholic Register, 33 Rosotto Dr., Hamden, CT 06514)

#### **NEW PURITANISM SPROUTING IN U.S.?**

There is considerable anecdotal evidence that a new moralistic "puritanism" is entering public life, reports the Los Angeles Times (December 28). For instance, major television networks are putting into place a new rating system to alert parents about violence and profanity in programs. Wal-MART, Blockbuster Video, and Kmart are refusing to stock compact discs, videos and magazines that they deem to be sexually explicit or overly violent. Throughout the adult population, mounting criticism has been raised against the hard liquor industry's decision to bring its advertising into television. School uniforms are also increasingly viewed as an idea whose time has come." Radio commentator Rod MacLeish writes that these signs indicate the question now being raised is whether responsible citizens acting voluntarily can help repel the floodtide of objectionable content, or whether some extralegal

authority is needed. "To date, Americans haven't decided that one," he says.

One sign of the growing concern with morals is the popularity of Justice Robert Bork's book, Slouching Toward Gomorrah (Harper-Collins). The best-seller, which has sold some 250,000 copies (many think it may achieve the notoriety of Allan Bloom's "The Closing Of The American Mind.") cites religious liberalism as a major cause for the virtual decline of decency, integrity, and traditional morality in many sectors of American life. He writes that the feminist movement has been permeated if not controlled by witchcraft proponents and the fallout in the churches from radical individualism and personal gratification has weakened religion's ability to generate the traditional morality it once did. Bork favors having the courts tighten up the current definitions of sexually explicit and offensive speech in the print and electronic media. Reviewers suggest that this proposal harmonizes fully with the current "puritanism." Critics have charged Bork with thus advocating censorship; the Justice and like-minded spokespersons state they are only seeking to protect traditional morality.--By Erling Jorstad.

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

#### CLERGY CAREER PROSPECTS BRIGHT FOR CATHOLICS, JEWS. BLEAKER FOR PROTESTANTS

\* Job prospects for Protestant clergy look increasingly pessimistic, but the career outlook for rabbis and Catholic priests is more favorable, according to The Futurist magazine (January/February). The magazine cites the 1996-97 Occupational Outlook Handbook as reporting that full-time Protestant ministers will face a competitive job market through the year 2005 due to the slow growth of church membership and the large number of qualified candidates. Ministers willing to work rural, part-time and smaller congregations replacing retirees should have more favorable prospects. Job opportunities for rabbis are expected to be generally favorable; they will also earn more than their Catholic and Protestant counterparts (in 1993, rabbis earned about \$50,000, while Catholic priests received around \$29,000, and Protestant ministers earned about \$20,000). Although there is a "current modest increase in seminary enrollment, the Catholic priest shortage is likely to continue, making job prospects for priests generally favorable. (The Futurist, 7910 Woodmont Ave., Suite 450, Bethesda, MD 20814)

#### BENEFICIAL SIDE TO CHURCH SPLITS?

\* Church splits may cause acrimony and divisiveness between religious believers, but they can also create enough energy that leaves two stronger churches standing in place of one dysfunctional congregation, according to recent research. The study, conducted by sociologists Frederick Starke and Bruno Dyck of the University of Manitoba, examined 11 congregations in the U.S. and Canada which had experienced a split, resulting in 22 churches. Writing in the Review of Religious Research (December), the researchers found the splits to result in the formation of new congregations that are "functionally similar to the diaspora [dispersion] of the early church. Viewed in this way, the formation of breakaway congregations can be seen as a promulgation of the faith and an improvement in the performance of the larger church. Thus, it is possible that the formation of breakaway congregations acts as a backhanded way of church planting." Starke and Dyck found that conflicts over doctrine and governance were the two primary reasons churches split. Those who stay with the parent congregation generally perceive the conflict as authority-based, while those who break away to form a new congregation

are more likely to describe the conflict as doctrinally-based. (Review of Religious Research, Texas Tech University, Dept. of Sociology, Lubbock, TX 79409-1012)

**MEGACHURCHES  
DON'T DISCARD  
ALL TRADITIONS**

\* With the popularity of megachurches and seeker-sensitive services, many church growth experts and other observers have predicted that traditional features of congregational life, such as organs, pews, church steeples, hymn books, collection plates, choirs, and formal dress, are rapidly heading for extinction. But in a survey of nearly 400 U.S. megachurches, researcher John Vaughan finds that things have not changed that radically. In Church Growth Today newsletter (Volume 11, No. 1), Vaughan found that 78 percent of these churches have adult choirs; 83 percent use collection plates; only 35 percent report a majority of attenders dress casually; 80 percent have organs or pianos; 70 percent have more pews than chairs. Even in planning their next sanctuary, 52 percent said they will have more pews than chairs. However, only 24 percent use hymnals and 27 percent have steeples. (Church Growth Today, P.O. Box 47, Bolivar, MO 65613)

**GERMAN CHURCH  
MEMBERS MORE  
SOCIALLY  
ENGAGED,  
PATRIOTIC**

\* Active church members in Germany are more patriotic Germans, have a greater sense of obligation, and show more interest in politics than the general population, according to a recent study. German political scientist Andreas Puettmann found that the stronger the person's church ties, the more he or she rejects tax evasion, insurance fraud, and the misuse of the welfare system, reports the German news service Idea (January 16). Active church members were also more opposed to domestic violence, abortion, euthanasia and racial and religious intolerance. Three-quarters of those with strong church ties consider the German democracy "worth defending," while only half of the non-affiliated feel this way. Puettmann says active German church members form an "elite" and are an asset to society. (Idea, Postfach 18 20, D-35528 Wetzlar, Germany)

**ATHEISM  
PART OF  
EASTERN GERMAN  
IDENTITY?**

\* The evidence continues to show that the reunification of Germany in 1990 has brought a sharp decline in German religious beliefs, with a recent poll showing that atheists and agnostics outnumbering believers for the first time. Ecumenical News International (January 15) cites a recent survey showing that half the citizens in Germany's western regions claim to be religious, compared to only one in five in former East Germany, producing an overall national average below 50 percent. Twenty two percent of westerners believe in the devil compared to 8 percent of easterners. The survey, conducted for Der Spiegel magazine by the Enmid organization, found that two-thirds of western Germans age 18-30 and an even higher proportion of easterners said that God has "no meaning" for them. Berlin sociologist Klaus-Peter Jorns, said that atheism may be one of the "few surviving features" of former East German life, and still forms an "important element of eastern German identity." (Ecumenical News International, P.O. Box 2100, 150, route de Ferney, CH-1211, Geneva, Switzerland)

**TAIWANESE  
BUDDHISM GROWS,  
DRAWS CRITICISM  
OVER FINANCES**

The controversy surrounding Taiwanese Buddhist groups that had contributed to Bill Clinton's legal defense and the Democratic Party reveals the new power of Buddhism and the marriage of money and religion in Taiwan, according to news reports. The Wall Street Journal (January 2) reports that almost \$800,000 of political donations currently being investigated came from Taiwanese Buddhist groups, most notably from the

disciples of Ching Hai, known as the Taiwanese Supreme Master. The mixing of money and religion in American politics may have raised controversy, but in Taiwan there are fewer such scruples. "Religious groups owe their rise in popularity in the past decade to Taiwan's rapid economic growth." The boom left many residents with a spiritual hunger that was met through giving money to religious orders, temples and charities--making such organizations a tempting target for fund-raising. The Taiwanese increasingly view religion as an "exchange of benefits," where they give money to Buddhist groups in this life and then reap the benefits in the next life.

Politicians actively seek the support of temples around election time, and, in turn, Buddhists use politicians to drum up publicity for their groups. The fastest-growing Buddhist groups (known as "humanistic Buddhists") preach community involvement, and in fact, "resemble business enterprises in many ways," writes Leslie Chang. Leaders boast of disciples with graduate degrees from foreign universities, and "expansion overseas is happening at a rapid clip..." One such growing export is the group surrounding Ching Hai, according to the Washington Post (December 19). "Operating from her headquarters in Taiwan, she has organized what one expert describes as one of the fastest growing religious cults, stretching from the Far East to the [U.S.] and claiming 100,000 followers in the United States and millions worldwide. The centerpiece of her 40-nation network of spiritual centers is her 'inner sound' method of meditation, called Quan Yin.

The rapid growth of Taiwanese Buddhism at home and abroad, however, has led to increasing criticism and alienation from these groups in Taiwan, reports the current issue of The Torch of Wisdom (November), a Taiwanese Buddhist publication. The need to recruit nuns and monks to fill the ever-expanding temples and monasteries has created competition among the Buddhist groups, with parents protesting that their children are being enticed away from their studies and homes to these orders. A number of scandals by these new Buddhist groups, including Ching Hai's disappearing allegedly with \$20 million, is also feeding the "loss of confidence" of many Taiwanese with Buddhism, writes Phelim Kyne. (The Torch of Wisdom, 10, Lane 270, Chien-kuo South Road, Section 1, Taipei, Taiwan 106, ROC)

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**SPAIN NOT  
LIKELY TO  
RESTORE CATHOLIC  
STATE**

The election of the conservative People's Party in Spain last year has led to speculation that the country's new rulers will return the Catholic Church to its former pre-eminence in government and in reinforcing "family values," reports the Economist (January 4). There had been charges--both from critics and Spanish Protestants--that the new government was reinvigorating the Catholic presence in government; at least two members of the conservative Catholic lay order Opus Dei were appointed to the cabinet and another member has become speaker of parliament's more powerful lower house. "Catholic traditionalists" also favor the party. When a divorced deputy minister remarried in a lavish wedding, the Spanish bishops publicly called for "more discretion." In a poll, the majority of Spaniards "reckoned the bishops were carping too much." But the article adds that the prime minister has been "characteristically cautious," as he has declined to tighten the country's abortion laws (allowing the practice in cases of rape and danger to the mother's mental or physical health). The head of the bishop council has taken care not to criticize politicians and to welcome a "clear



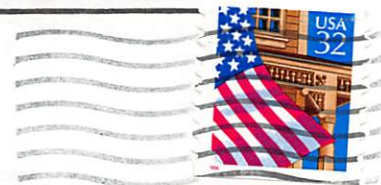
distinction between church and state."

**UGANDA'S  
GUERRILLA  
GROUP PRACTICES  
SYNCRETISTIC  
RELIGION**

The Lord's Resistance (LRA) has been a shadowy terrorist group waging war against the Ugandan government for 10 years, but the group's religious beliefs, mixing Islam, Christianity and animism, has more recently come to light, according to a report in the National Catholic Register (January 5-11). The insurgency of the LRA is steeped in the complex ethnic battles and politics that have long marked Uganda and other African nations (such as Burundi and Zaire) seeking to overthrow one-party governments. In recent years, the LRA has been raiding villages and kidnapping youths to add to the ranks of their movement. Some who have managed to escape have revealed more about the group's beliefs and its mysterious leader Joseph Kony. The LRA practices ceremonies that are "vaguely Christian," although "everyone kneels down like a Muslim most of the time," according to one observer. One leader walks among the guerillas sprinkling holy water and smearing oil on their chests with the sign of the cross. Kony's messages are peppered with Islamic teachings. "There is no doubt that Kony is a great admirer of Islam, but he knows he can't force that on predominantly Christian people like the Acholi. He seems to have created a kind of hyper-charismatic movement I would actually call closer to a cult."

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