



# RELIGION WATCH

---

**A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion**

---

VOLUME 12 NUMBER 6

APRIL 1997

## **TOMORROW'S ECUMENISM-- DIVERSE AND DECENTRALIZED? AN ANALYSIS**

The ecumenical movement has often been described as moribund and out of touch with the concerns of most laity. But it appears that ecumenism can no longer be defined by one movement, as the drive for the unity of Christians is increasingly taking diverse expressions. This emphasis on pluralism is evident in a recent article on ecumenism in the journal Theology Today (January), where writer Patrick Henry defines four arenas where ecumenical activity is thriving. 1) Jewish-Christian relations may not be what most people mean by ecumenism, but Henry writes that the "relation of Christian truth to the truth of other religions...is at the front of the minds of many lay Christians and will become more insistent as our society becomes rapidly more pluralistic."

The recent development of a "two-covenant understanding of the relation between Judaism and Christianity," where God is viewed as

working in both religions, has brought Jews and Christians together to study scripture and discuss their traditions.

2) A trend toward "local ecumenism" is being fed by the growing "multitraditional character of many congregations." With congregations now having members from many traditions and with denominational identity on the wane, many are not waiting for high-level ecumenical agencies to bring about unity, according to Henry. While theologians and church officials may disapprove of Christians taking communion in other's churches, "millions" of churchgoers are now doing so. 3) The new involvement of evangelicals and especially Pentecostals in ecumenical activities has introduced a new emphasis on spiritual experience as well as doctrine in unifying Christians. Although Henry does not mention it, such a movement as Promise Keepers is a leader in this evangelical ecumenism. 4) The "feminist revolution" is creating a "seismic shift" in ecumenical thinking.

Henry also mentions the more official actions promoting church unity, such as the Catholics

and Lutherans removing their historic condemnations of one another; new Catholic-Orthodox relations; and the Consultation on Church Union's (COCU) plan to bring nine mainline Protestant denominations into fellowship with each other, as they recognize each other's communion tables and ministries.

The argument against mainline ecumenical activities of previous years is that they were orchestrated from high level denominational bureaucracies and received little support from the laity. That appears to be changing, as mainline churches are joining together under more congregation-based church unity schemes. This can be seen in the plans for "full communion" between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Reformed denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ (UCC), and the Reformed Church in America (RCA).

Full communion would involve sharing communion, joint worship, and exchanges of clergy among the different bodies. But unlike earlier plans that entailed a merging of ministries and unity from the highest levels of the denomination to the lowest, the proposals (which will likely be accepted this summer) will make few top-down changes or demands upon congregations.

Timothy Boeve writes in the RCA's Church Herald (January) that under such proposals "Change will occur only if RCA congregations or classes initiate change. RCA and Lutheran congregations can remain as separate as they now are if they choose." A more traditional and liturgical-minded Lutheran parish will not tolerate a liberal UCC minister who is also affiliated with the Unitarians at its altar--and under such a proposal, the parish does not have to. Yet there is strong liturgical and

confessional movement in the UCC which would naturally gravitate toward fellow "evangelical catholics" in the ELCA.

In a different way, the full communion plan will make it easier for an evangelical Lutheran megachurch to cooperate and join forces with a Presbyterian megachurch of like views. The full communion proposal and other similar arrangements (such as the COCU plan) are likely to be duplicated in the future because they are modest and decentralized, mirroring the American religious situation. The larger church structures are only approving and facilitating relationships that have first taken shape at the local level. (Theology Today, P.O. Box 29, Princeton, NJ 08542; Church Herald, 4500 60th St., SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49512)

## **STATES TURN TO CHURCHES FOR PARTICIPATION IN WELFARE REFORMS**

As the overhaul of the nation's welfare system unfolds across the country, several state governments are turning directly to organized church groups for participation. According to The Wall Street Journal (March 17, 1997) some "blurring of the rigid separation between church and state" is occurring in a number of states as they authorize, with public funds, churches to help people get off welfare, retrain for employment, and provide halfway houses for clients.

In Texas, a Christian ministry is starting a program for the state to run its prerelease prison program. In Maryland, a county government is taking the public assistance it would otherwise pay to a welfare recipient and giving it to churches who have agreed to provide care for the recipients. And, according to the journal, the most extensive involvement of all is unfolding in Michigan. The state has

established a mentoring program with two contractors, the Salvation Army in Detroit, (which receives \$375,000) and Good Samaritan Ministries in Ottawa County, receiving \$100,000. Both use church-related agencies to provide counseling for enhancing self-esteem, personal health, retraining programs for the job market, and similar services. In all cases, the journal reports, public safeguards to avoid proselytizing have been written into the programs. While some criticism has emerged, the journal reports that the new alliance between church and state is proving to be very successful, and could serve as a model for other states facing the new retrenchment in welfare funding.--By Erling Jorstad, RW contributing editor.

### **SUNDAY SCHOOLS SHOW SIGNS OF REVIVAL AMONG SBC, UNITED METHODISTS**

Sunday school programs are undergoing a revival in America's two largest Protestant churches, according to a report in the Scottsdale Tribune newspaper (March 22) of Arizona. From the 8.6 million member United Methodist Church comes new evidence that its 10-year-old Disciple Bible study program has "exploded" in popularity, reaching "hundreds of thousands" of members in America and worldwide. Among Southern Baptists, with 15.6 million members, leaders state they are soon approaching their goal of 100,000 new classes.

Both groups find such increases heartening, since the Sunday school remains the best single tool to revitalize congregational life. Statistics show that 65 percent of all members still enter their churches through Sunday school classrooms. While the reasons for the boom are not fully clear, leaders find that the use of more

down-to-earth, attractively packaged materials, as well as better trained teachers, may help explain the new surge. Classes focusing on Christian parenting, marriage enrichment, and everyday morality are enhanced with revamped graphics, non-denominational-based teaching, and explicit directions on such activities as prayer and fasting. Leaders believe the boom may well be the forerunner of a new growth in membership in their churches and others.-- By Erling Jorstad

### **GAY ISSUES OCCUPYING RELIGIOUS RIGHT AGENDA**

Homosexuality is increasingly becoming a major issue for the religious right and other conservative Christians-- a concern that is impinging on everything from the practices of corporations to those of psychotherapy, according to two reports. The use of corporate protests on a number of moral issues has been recently growing among evangelicals [see **November '96 RW**], but conservative evangelical activists are especially targeting gay rights policies. The Dallas Morning News (March 15) reports that a coalition of such conservative religious groups as the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America and Donald Wildmon's American Family Association have embarked on a letter writing protest to companies they believe promote homosexuality through diversity training programs, domestic partner benefits, and marketing to gays and lesbians.

This is a "new tactic by many conservative Christians who say they feel embattled by a society that values acceptance of various kinds of people. How, they ask, can they be told to tolerate homosexuality if that acceptance compromises their faith?" writes Deborah

Kovach Caldwell. Targeted corporations include American Airlines, IBM, Tandy Corporation and AT&T for their policies on discrimination against gays, especially the latter company for their establishment of gay and lesbian support groups and sponsorship of the Gay Olympic Games. Another area of conflict for evangelical has been over their use of "conversion therapy" for homosexuals wishing to overcome their sexual orientation and the opposition it is drawing from the U.S. mental health community. The World & I magazine (April) reports that a battle is underway between those who want to prohibit such therapy in the name of protecting the right of adults to practice their specific orientation and conservative religionists who believe that such behavior is immoral, often mentally damaging, and should be corrected.

In recent months several professional psychological associations in several states, including Washington, have passed resolutions calling for the prohibition of the practice of conversion therapy. On the national level, similar resolutions are now under consideration by the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association. The immediate impetus for the pro-conversion school comes from the leadership of the Christian right, such as Jerry Falwell, and evangelical ex-gay groups including EXIT and Homosexuals Anonymous, which conduct such therapy.

Adding new energy to the debate are reports of "adolescents being coerced into involuntary conversion therapies by parents or religious leaders," according to the article. Anti-conversionists point out that as long as conversion is viewed as a viable option, homosexuals will be considered deviant and subject to organized and private discrimination. Pro-conversionists insist that clients should

have the right to decide on their own therapy and their own psyche. Once the resolutions in the professional associations become better known to the general public, this article suggests that the debate will take on a new dimension of urgency and scope. (The World & I, 3600 New York Ave., N.E., Washington, DC 20002)-- *This article was written with Erling Jorstad*

### **CURRENT RESEARCH: RECENT FINDINGS ON RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES**

● **Organized religious faith made very little difference in the Presidential and Congressional elections of 1996, according to four experts on the role of religion in American political life.** In an analysis of the recent campaign in the March/April issue of the evangelical review Books & Culture, Lyman Kellstedt, John Green, James Guth, and Corwin Smidt state that such groups as the Christian Coalition, as well as its liberal counterpart Interfaith Alliance hardly made a dent on American voting behavior. Drawing on statistics from the University of Akron-based National Survey of Religion and Politics, the researchers conclude that the "election results were essentially inconclusive, a wash..."

They could find no evidence of an organized or concerted concentration on issues or candidates on the basis of voters' church alliances. They found "low commitment" evangelicals gave 49 percent of their vote to Dole, while "high commitment" evangelicals gave 75 percent to Dole. The other patterns were mostly expected: mainline and black Protestants and Jews voted heavily Democratic, with Catholics "badly divided" between the two parties. The researchers did find that high commitment religious believers turned out at markedly higher rates than low-

commitment co-religionists. (Books & Religion, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188)— *By Erling Jorstad*

● **Most Catholics oppose inclusive language translations of the liturgy, even though they may dissent from church teachings on abortion, women's ordination, and contraception, according to a recent Roper Center poll.** The poll, which surveyed 1,000 Catholics, found a general disapproval of efforts to introduce inclusive language in biblical and liturgical texts. On whether a new biblical translation should be used that has inclusive language, such as using "people" instead of "man" or "mankind," 69 percent were against such a measure, compared to a 21 percent approval rate. The Catholic World Report (March) notes that the responses of women were only marginally different from those of men; women rejected such changes by margins of 69-22.

On the question of whether terms such as "man" and "mankind" exclude women, 69 percent of women disagreed while 26 percent agreed. Even those hardly ever attending Mass and dissenting against Catholic teachings were only slightly less unenthusiastic about such changes than practicing Catholics. The survey also showed a high rate of dissent against the church's teachings on abortion. Almost 60 percent "strongly disagreed" (39 percent) or "mildly disagreed" (20 percent) that abortion is never justified (Catholic World Report, P.O. Box 367, Dedham, MA 02027).

● **College students are more conservative on religious as well as social issues, according to a survey conducted by the University of California.** The survey found that beer drinking has declined to a record low among students, with only 53 percent claiming they drink, compared to 75 percent in 1981. Only

41 percent of today's students favor sex outside of marriage, compared to 50 percent in 1975. The UCLA survey found that 30 percent of today's students claim to be "born-again Christians;" in black colleges and universities, that figure is 52.6 percent. Support for abortion has dropped from 65 percent of students in 1992 to 56.3 in 1996.

**Preliminary research on the effects of healing prayer on patients with rheumatoid arthritis show positive results, reports Newsweek (March 31).** The study involves 60 patients at the Arthritis Treatment Center in Clearwater, Fla., who are being prayed over with the "laying on of hands" by Christian healers. Half of this group will receive an additional six months of long-distance intercessory prayer. A videotape of the early phase of the study, which is under the direction of Dr. Dale Matthews of Georgetown University School of Medicine, shows that some patients have experienced "extraordinary short-term results from the prayer."

One patient at the beginning of the experiment had 49 tender joints. After four sessions with a hands-on praying minister, he had only eight tender joints. Six months later, he said there was no pain at all and had no need of medication. The study, which will be completed by the end of this year, is mainly interested in the long-term benefits of prayer, according to Matthews

● **American medical schools are continuing to add on courses relating medicine to spirituality, according to a report in the Chronicle of Higher Education (March 7).** The National Institute for Healthcare Research reports that nearly one-third of the country's 126 medical schools are now offering a course

or program in spirituality and healing. These courses focus on the role of spirituality in the lives of patients and their families. They also aim at helping medical students feel more sensitive to patients' inner needs, while avoiding proselytism. The article suggests that these courses now in place are being studied by other accredited medical schools for possible future adoption.-- *By Erling Jorstad*

● **In about a year's time, American Christianity has rebounded from a period of decline, according to a survey from the Barna Research Group. The Barna Report** (March-April) the newsletter of pollster George Barna, cites a recent nationwide survey showing significant increases in church attendance, Sunday school attendance and born again Christians. In 1997, the proportion of born again adults has increased to 43 percent from 36 percent in 1994. The increase was attributed to the "rapid expansion" of born again Christians within the Catholic Church. In 1995, only one-fifth of all Catholic adults (22 percent) claimed to be born again. Today, almost one-third (31 percent) say they are born again-- a 41 percent increase in two years.

In 1996, Barna found that average weekly church attendance reached its lowest point in the past 15 years. However, church attendance has increased from 37 percent in 1996 to 43 percent by January of this year. The increase is partly attributed to the increase of male baby boomers attending church, Barna writes. Sunday school attendance has increased significantly for the first time this decade. After reaching a low point in 1996, attendance has risen to 23 percent, up from 17 percent the prior January. (The Barna Report, 647 West Broadway, Glendale, CA 91204-1007)

● **A study of 35 gay and lesbian pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in**

**America found that such clergy have not remained celibate, even though that is official denominational policy, according to a recent study.** The study, conducted by sociologist Carolyn Riehl of the University of Michigan, found that all the clergy had been sexually active and 21 lived in long-term homosexual relationships, despite a church rule requiring gay clergy to remain celibate. Christian News (March 17) reports that Riehl also found that none of these pastors have been accused of misconduct or involved in scandals. Most of them also revealed their sexual orientation to some members of their congregations, an indication that laypeople are also willing to overlook church law. (Christian News, 3277 Boeuf Lutheran Rd., New Haven, MO 63068)

● **A recent continent-wide poll of Latin Americans found that more have retained their commitment to Catholicism than has generally been believed.** The poll, known as the Latin American Barometer, is an annual study of Latin Americans' social attitudes in 17 countries. The survey found that the number of people who define themselves as "highly committed" or "committed" is "surprisingly high and on the rise." The National Catholic Register (February 23-March 1) reports that the poll found that 42 percent of the respondents said they are committed or highly committed to the church, especially in Peru, Mexico, Bolivia and Ecuador.

The Catholic Church was also rated to be the most respected institution in almost every country, except Ecuador, where the army is more respected. Despite observers predicting an increasingly Protestant Latin America, the poll found that the number of Protestants, after a growth spurt, has stabilized at between five percent and seven percent of the population. It

is only in Guatemala, Puerto Rico, and Chile where Protestants have reached above 14 percent of the population. At the same time, the phenomenon of "non-believers" has increased, growing from five to seven percent in the last two years (slightly higher in Brazil and Chile). (National Catholic Register, 33 Rosotto Dr., Hamden, CT 06514)

## **YOUTH CHURCHES GROW IN EUROPE**

Alienation among youth from established Christian churches in Western European countries is leading to the establishment of magnet congregations designed for youth, reports Christianity Today magazine (March 3). At a youth ministry conference in Oxford in January, Colin Bennett of Moorlands College noted that "Due to the state church's insensitivity to making youth feel welcome in its worship and communal life, churches composed entirely of youth" are emerging. (Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188)

## **MUSLIMS USE ARABIC AS WEAPON AGAINST SECULARISTS IN MIDDLE EAST**

The use of Arabic and Muslim symbols are becoming a new battleground between Islamic revivalists and Arab nationalists in Middle Eastern nations, reports the Wall Street Journal (March 13). Nationalists and more secular Middle Easterners want to modernize the Arabic language, as well as use English. But most of the regions governments are fearful of being portrayed as tampering with the holy language of the Koran and therefore questioning Islam. Muslim activists who are seeking to replace Arab governments with religious ones are leading a linguistic revival.

"In Egypt and Gaza, the slogans and expressions of radical Islam have become part of the every day vocabulary. Islamic groups in Algeria use the government's failure to make Arabic the only official language a rallying point among the unemployed and the vehicle for promoting a wider political agenda," writes Amy Dockser Marcus.

Some Arab leaders are now using Arabic language and expressions to appeal to the growing Muslim sentiment in the region. For instance, where Yasir Arafat once used the Arab word for "armed struggle" to describe the Palestinians fight for a state, he is now more likely to use the Islamist term "jihad," or holy war, with its connotations of religious rather than nationalist conflict.

## **ULTRA-ORTHODOX WOMEN FINDING JOBS OUTSIDE HOMES**

Ultra-orthodox Jewish women in Israel are moving into the labor force, breaking a long tradition of staying at home to care for their children and husbands, according to the Jerusalem Report (February 20). Out of financial necessity due to the meager government supplements (as well as social security) brought in by their yeshivah-student husbands, ultra-orthodox women are starting their own businesses as well as finding employment as social workers, teachers, and other secular work. Israel's Small Business Centers, which helps people start their own firms, are now branching into ultra-orthodox enclaves in Jerusalem, Ashdod and, soon, Tel Aviv and Haifa.

While the women are only given permission by their rabbis to work if they promise they are only supplementing their husbands income, there is a "growing interest in obtaining

business skills" among such women, writes Margo Sugarman. One business leader says that many of the ultra-orthodox families "are almost starving, and with their birth rate triple the secular Israeli rate, it's vital that the secular community teach them to go out and make a living, and not live off the backs of secular Israelis..." **[The ultra-orthodox women may be part of a trend of traditionalist religious women entering the job market. See the July-August '94 RW on Amish women increasingly starting their own businesses]** (Jerusalem Report, 22 Rehov Yosef Rivlin, P.O. Box 1805, Jerusalem Israel 91017)

**Religion Watch**

P.O. Box 652  
North Bellmore, N.Y. 11710



**Inside This Issue:**

- *How Many Ecumenical Movements Are There?*
- *Faith-Based Welfare Gains Clout; Arabic and Islamic Revivalregational Life?*