

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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## THE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF HEAVEN'S GATE--HOSTILITY OR SYMPATHY?

The media coverage of the Heaven's Gate suicides was either too critical or too soft--depending on which side of the conflict over "cults" one is located. In his column in the New York Times (April 17), Frank Rich writes that the "cult apologists" ruled the day in reporting and commentating on the Heaven's Gate story. After ruling out the "usual suspects--the Internet, repressed homosexuality, California," to explain the suicides, a "happy ending was manufactured, largely in the liberal press, to bring the desired closure: Heaven's Gate was a religion, however strange to outsiders, that was sincerely practiced by its benign faithful..."

Rich writes that this "sentimentalized" view of the group in the press papered over the "mind control" and psychological coercion techniques in Heaven's Gate that separates it from being an authentic religion. Even outside of the anti-cult camp, there was the view that Heaven's Gate received more respectful treatment than previous cult controversies, such as Waco, the Solar Temple suicides and the People's Temple. In a discussion of Heaven's Gate on NUREL, an Internet forum on new religious movements,

one scholar was "struck by something new in the popular media reaction to the San Diego deaths. The nation seemed sympathetic. The press viewed the event as tragic, and seemed to have more difficulty whipping the country up into the traditional anti-cult hysteria...[The members'] apparent authentic desire to [commit suicide] seemed to catch the general public off-guard, especially insofar as America is allergic to the notion that any individual action or belief is better or worse than any other... On the other hand, the mainstream media and the general populace did not seem to me to have the same sensitive and understanding tone regarding the Branch Davidians. This I think had much to do with the latter's relationship to guns."

In contrast, Ronald Steel in the New Republic (April 21) writes that the media showed "deep hostility" mixed with fascination with the group. He adds that the media sought to "distance themselves as far as possible from the group's professed beliefs, as if they feared contamination...they rarely understood, or even tried to investigate, why [the group took this action]...On '60 Minutes,' Lesley Stahl was openly disdainful as two former members of the group expressed sympathy for the teachings of their onetime leader." Many newspapers felt the need to print

editorials condemning the group's beliefs. But Steel adds that "As the state and mass culture become increasingly pervasive and demanding, so people, individually or in groups, are drawn to alternatives. That is why this story has such resonance among Americans, and why the mass media's hostility is not reflected in the millions who see something of their own unfulfilled longings in these searchers."

In the same issue of the New Republic, Leon Wieseltier also suggests that many media commentators overlooked the importance of the spiritual search for Heaven's Gate members, finding in the San Diego tragedy evidence of everything from America's failures in foreign policy to American society being overly materialistic and self satisfied. One conservative commentator suggested that the deaths were to be blamed on "the naked public square," as traditional religion in this country "has been suppressed for a generation." The NR editor notes that such analyses do not take seriously the spiritual "hunger" of the members, and claims that the deaths were the result of a misdirected spiritual quest.

Meanwhile, most of the religious press stressed that the spirituality and beliefs of Heaven's Gate was distinct from either "orthodox" or mainstream religion. For example, the Catholic magazine Commonweal (April 25) suggests that Heaven's Gate's teachings fell woefully short of the norms informing religious belief and reality. Longstanding faith honors universality and longevity, "two measures" of knowing the inner dynamics of religious faith. Contrary to those observers (such as the New Republic's Steel) who suggest that Heaven's Gate was just one more Christian aberration, the editors say that the bottom line message is that "Christianity has taught that the heavens speak

to us of life, life in this world and beyond." (Commonweal, 15 Dutch St., New York, NY 10038)--*This article was written with RW contributing editor Erling Jorstad.*

## **THE SEARCH IS ON FOR A NEW CENTER IN AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM**

Quietly but steadily, a new momentum is developing among Protestant theologians for building a new "center" that transcends traditional liberal versus conservative camps to carry out the theological agenda for the future. Starting at Messiah College (Pennsylvania), and headed by Professors Douglas Jacobsen and Bill Trollinger, a series of conferences have been identifying the fault lines in the status quo, and looking for common ground on which to revive the energies in American theology. The results are presented in a detailed analysis by Jacobsen in the journal Interpretation (April). The new focus appeals to leaders who no longer identify with the two existing camps, liberal and evangelical.

Viewing the two-party model as oversimplified, the new center people find that constructive advances in theological understanding can no longer be achieved so long as everyone involved sees themselves associated with one or the other of the two camps. Several works by theologians and other thinkers, Jacobsen finds, have contributed to the stalemate that they find now exists; these include Martin E. Marty's "Righteous Empire," Robert Wuthnow's "The Restructuring Of American Religion," and James Davison Hunter's "Culture Wars." The world of liberal-evangelical dichotomy that they established now no longer can sustain the rapidly growing interest of Americans in relocating their energies in a centrist movement.

## JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS SERVING AS INTRODUCTION TO JUDAISM

Jewish community centers are playing a new role in fostering Jewish identification and belief, reports Moment magazine (April). Jewish community centers (JCCs), such as the YMHA and YWHA have primarily served as social and educational centers that offered American Jews a wide range of activities--from sports and camping to secular educational programs. In its 142 years of existence, JCCs have been a vehicle for Jews assimilating into American culture. Each year the nation's 265 JCCs serve at least 1.5 million Jews-- which is nearly as many Jews that are members of U.S. synagogues.

Since the mid-1980s, the JCC's have been increasingly adding programs to build stronger Jewish identification among its members, with a small but growing number offering courses on Judaism.. Increasingly synagogues and Jewish leaders are seeing JCC's as non-threatening "entry points" for non-affiliated Jews to return to the faith. (Moment, 4710 41st St., N.W., Washington, DC 20016)

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

● **Weekly attendance at churches, synagogues and other congregations has dropped to the lowest level in half a century, according to Emerging Trends (March).** An average of 38 percent attended worship services in 1996-- a decline of five points since last year, reports a recent Gallup poll. It is also the lowest figure recorded since 1940, which

was 37 percent. (Emerging Trends, 47 Hulfish St., Suite 215, P.O. Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542)

● **The growth of evangelical unity and the fading of denominational boundaries is evident in a recent study of evangelical schools in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion (March).** In a study of 34 evangelical schools, as well as 100 national organizations supporting Christian schools, anthropologist Melinda Bollar Wagner found a "new breeding ground" for an emerging "generic" panconservative Christianity." The schools Wagner studied--which were all located in the Southeastern U.S.--were of fundamentalist, evangelical and charismatic backgrounds, including Baptists, Holiness groups, Pentecostals and independent churches. However, they all tended to mute their doctrinal differences in their daily operations, rules and regulations, and curriculum.

The schools tended to leave the specific aspects of doctrine and rules of behavior to the students' families and their churches. In fact the schools were often more diverse than the national Christian school organizations, which promote evangelism (which the schools engage in) and discipleship into a Christian church. While financial and practical reasons dictate the concern of these schools to have wide appeal, Wagner concludes that the uniformity among a wide range of Christian schools may signal a decrease in ideological distinctions and lead to "enhanced organizational unity" among evangelicals. (Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1365 Stone Hall, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1365)

● **The proportion of scientists who believe in a God who hears and answers prayer has**

**stayed roughly the same since the last poll was taken in 1916.** In that year, 41.8 percent of scientists expressed a belief in a personal God; in 1996 that total was 39.3 percent, according to a study in the journal Nature (April 3). According to the director of the poll, Dr. Edward J. Larson, the continuity in beliefs is all the more impressive when the enormous strides in scientific methodology and achievement over the last 80 years are taken into consideration.--By *Erling Jorstad*

● **Protestant seminaries have a growing number of Catholic students, but they have not made many strides toward hiring faculty who have graduated from Catholic schools, according to a recent report in the magazine Ecumenical Trends (April).** In a study of faculty listings of 12-top-ranked theological faculties in the 1994 Directory of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion, William Ribando found that such leading divinity schools as Harvard, Yale, University of Chicago, Vanderbilt, Emory and Duke had few if any graduates of Catholic theological programs in their faculty. For example, of the 37 faculty members in the religion and theological faculties at Duke University and Divinity School, only three are graduates of Catholic theological programs.

However, of the six Catholic theological faculties studied, most of the schools had a high number of faculty from non-Catholic theological programs. Notre Dame lists 43 faculty members which include 25 from non-Catholic programs. In responses to this study from faculties involved in the study, some said that anti-Catholic bias still exists in the Protestant-related ecumenical faculties. Others say it is more a matter of a prejudice against hiring graduates from Catholic institutions in state and non-denominational schools. Even Catholic colleges often seem to have a

preference for hiring graduates from prestigious non-denominational institutions. (Ecumenical Trends, P.O. Box 306 Garrison, NY 10524-0306)

● **A majority of television viewers would like to watch more religious programming, reports a survey featured in TV Guide (March 29).** Sixty-one percent of those polled say they would like to see a greater number of references to God, church-going and other spiritual activities on television. Eighty-two percent of respondents are eager for more discussion on moral issues. Yet almost three-quarters of those polled claim that prime time has become less religious in recent years. This would seem to contradict findings in a poll conducted last month by the Media Research Council. The survey found that in 1996, the ratio of positive to negative portrayals of religion on prime time was two to one.

By contrast, in 1993 the figure was three negative to two positive. Simple expressions of faith, such as prayer, were treated positively in 1996 by an almost ten to one margin. The magazine also reports that its survey of viewer preferences finds the drama "Touched by an Angel," second in national choice only to "ER." The show's moral and (non-sectarian) spiritual nature is cited for its popularity.--*Erling Jorstad contributed to this article.*

● **There has been a three-fold increase of incidents of anti-Muslim violence, discrimination and harassment, according to a recent study by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR).** While 80 cases of anti-Muslim "incidents and experiences" were reported in 1995, 240 such instances were cited in the CAIR report "The Status of Muslim Civil Rights in the U.S.: 1997," according to the National Catholic Register (May 4-10). (National Catholic Register, 33 Rosotto Dr., Hamden, CT 06514)

Such centrism, Jacobsen writes, must be based on inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness. Its net must be spread as widely as possible, to as many people as possible. It should be a meeting place of many varieties of Protestants. He adds that the movement is not based on any new churchly organizations, nor on any mega-mergers. Finally, it should be a "center of friends," that contrasts with the more centralized agendas of the left and right. It values improved personal relationships, and is thus idealistic. It is also realistic in that it accepts limitations; one cannot be friends with everyone. Over the next few years, Jacobsen believes, the power of such a centrist movement will continue to attract new followers. (Interpretation, 3401 Brook Rd., Richmond, VA 23227)-- *By Erling Jorstad*

## **RELIGIOUS GROUPS SEEK NEW INFLUENCE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Religious groups are seeking to influence public schools in the wake of mounting disenchantment and conflicts over American public education. One response to reinvigorate religious and moral education in the nation's schools is being made by the National Association of Evangelicals (a national association of some 50 evangelical bodies). It is attempting to convince Congress to pass a constitutional amendment to reinstate audible prayer in schools. A parallel proposal, entitled "a religious freedom' amendment, is also being promoted in Congress. Sponsored by Rep. Ernest Istook (R.--Okla), it calls for Constitutional approval of allowing local communities to determine their own religious practices in the schools, reports Christianity Today (April 28).

Supported by many evangelicals, the Istook amendment is being resisted by other

conservatives, who suggest it lacks proper safeguards for religious minority groups. The evangelical response is based, according to its leaders, on the importance of restoring the character-building qualities of the free exercise of religion among the future citizens of the country.

Finally, the Supreme Court is showing signs of reconsidering its previous rulings on religion in the schools. In April it heard a challenge to its 1985 decision forbidding public school teachers from being paid with public moneys to tutor underprivileged children in private schools. The decision, expected in July, could remake the debate about religious involvement in American public education. (Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188)--*By Erling Jorstad*

## **POCKETS OF MAINLINE STABILITY APPEARING?**

Some mainline bodies have recently shown more stable patterns of membership, if not growth, leading one sociologist to speculate if they may signal a trend that is more than a blip on the religious screen. In an interview in Congregation magazine (March/April), sociologist Kenneth Bedell notes that the American Baptist Churches and Episcopal Church are showing less decline in numbers than in previous years. Bedell, who has been editor of the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, says that a change in one year's time does not constitute a trend, but he notes that both bodies have increased their outreach in recent years.

The ABC, which grew from 1,507,934 members in 1994 to 1,517,400 in 1995, has conducted a "very intentional outreach to minorities," particularly encouraging minority

Baptist congregations to affiliate with the moderate denomination. This thrust has led to increased general outreach toward minorities as well. The Episcopal Church, which increased from 2,504,682 members in 1993 to 2,536,550 in 1995, has "done development of urban congregations" that has resulted in some slowing of decline. Bedell adds that a factor in the Episcopal slowdown can be that the denomination may have more downtown churches and have had the resources "not to abandon them, but to keep nurturing them." (Congregation, The Alban Institute, Suite 433 North, 4550 Montgomery Ave., Bethesda, MD 20814-3341)

### **ALTERNATIVE ROCK MAKING ROOM FOR CHRISTIAN THEMES**

Christianity is finding a more positive role among alternative rock artists, reports the Utne Reader (May/June). Secular humanism and even sacrilege has found a home in the world of alternative music since the 1960s, but it has now become increasingly commonplace for such artists to invoke biblical themes and even Christianity positively in song, while maintaining their raw edge, writes Keith Goetzman. Such groups and performers include techno artist Moby, who has professed his faith to his audiences, and Sixteen Horsepower, which draws on biblical imagery, even including the old revivalistic hymn, "There's Power in the Blood of the Lamb."

The magazine finds that one of the factors behind the phenomenon is the backgrounds of the performers. Jim White and David Eugene Edwards were brought up Pentecostal and "instead of shedding their religiosity they have put their own idiosyncratic stamp on it." Goetzman notes that secular rock is picking up on such themes just at the time when

contemporary Christian rock sales are slipping, a sign that "Maybe listeners are just tired of the genre: parentally correct, musically derivative bands propagating a pat version of Christianity." (Utne Reader, 1624 Harmon Pl., Suite 330, Minneapolis, MN 55403)

### **RELIGIOUS BOOKS AND THEIR AUDIENCES SOPHISTICATED, DIVERSIFIED**

The ranking interpreter of Americans' reading habits, Publishers Weekly (March 10) finds that "today's religion audience is far more sophisticated" than in previous years. There is growing interest in books and research on the historical Jesus, introducing readers to "fairly complicated material." PW also finds an increasing number of "novice buyers," people outside the mainstream of denominational life but now interested due to programs and research such as the Jesus Seminar.

According to the editor of Harper San Francisco, Mark Chimsky, the new readers are "taking control over the way they view their religion, and they're looking for books to help them do that." Interestingly, some major themes of the early 90s have virtually disappeared from the best-seller list. Gone is the strong interest in angels, in 12-step self help programs, and in pop psychology. PW finds three categories prevailing. Still at the top are books on spirituality, but with a new twist. An increased interest in Buddhism and Sufism is emerging among religious bookstores' clients. Beyond that, strong customer demand for books on Jewish and Islamic subjects is evident. These books are not just on religious themes as such but, according to book sellers, on Jewish and Islamic culture; language, music, and social relations, among other themes. --By Erling Jorstad

## **GREGORIAN CHANT MUSIC DRAWS LARGE FOLLOWING IN HUNGARY**

Gregorian chant music has been attracting wide audiences in Europe and America, and is now finding a popular hearing among Hungarians, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education (April 11). World renowned musician Laszlo Dobszay is at the head of a national revival in both Protestant and Catholic circles of preserving and advancing the rich religious inspiration in this form of expression.

Specialists are finding texts and librettos from the 16th and 17th centuries, unknown until now. Both lay and professional groups of musicians are carrying the chant music to enthusiastic congregations and public audiences. The first major recording of Dobszay's group has sold over 100,000, long before the monks at the Abbey of Solesmes in France started reaching international audiences. Perhaps, most importantly, this music is attracting widespread enthusiasm among young adults, many of whom have shown little interest in the music of the existing churches.--  
*By Erling Jorstad*

## **GROWTH IN CELL CHURCHES RESHAPING CHURCH STRUCTURES**

The growth in cell churches, house churches and other small group-based congregations continue to take on increasing importance and complexity, especially among countries in the Third World and Southern Hemisphere. The Australian evangelical magazine On Being (April) reports that even big, megachurches around the world are "experiencing the rapid downsizing of the church...From being addenda to the 'real' business of church (the gathered congregational meeting on Sunday), small groups are coming to be seen, not just as

essential, but as the most fundamental form of body life." In such a new vision of church life, everything that happens in an ordinary congregation--baptism, communion, teaching--takes place in the "cell."

A dramatic example of a denomination "going small" is the Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa. This largest Pentecostal body in the nation--with 1050 local churches--is planning to transform itself into cell-based structures. The Faith Community Baptist Church in Singapore boasted 7,000 members in 1996, all of whom are in cell churches. In the U.S., the Willow Creek Community Church denomination, known for its seeker-sensitive services, recently completed a five-year process to place its members in 2,000 cells. The Catholic dioceses of Melbourne and Adelaide are planning to organize their parishes along the lines of small "base communities."

Leadership in these cell churches is usually shared rather than vested in particular individuals, and although some are denominational most are independent. Other groups are linked together through a larger organizational structure. For instance, the Ruach Neighbourhood Churches is a grouping of 22 cell churches around Sydney, Australia. Often each cell is required to plant other cells. "As new leaders are trained, and as more people become Christians, new groups are formed. The aim is to never run out of space because the structure is continually expanding."  
(On Being, P.O. Box 434, Hawthorn, VIC 3122 Australia)

## Findings & Footnotes...

□ The **New York Review of Books** (April 24) carries an in-depth and fair-minded report on the conflict between Scientology and the German government. The article, written by Josef Joffe, looks at how the established churches (Catholic and Lutheran) have pressed the state to clamp down on Scientologists (and other new religious movements), particularly in regions where the church has been particularly influential, such as Bavaria. Yet Scientologists have often exaggerated the discrimination against them to gain world sympathy; the recent laws against them have rarely been enforced. Joffe notes how both the Scientologists and anti-Scientologists accuse each other of trying to revive the nation's Nazi past.

□ In the wake of the Heaven's Gate incident, reporters scrambled to find material on the group. Eventually most came across the research of Robert Balch of the University of Montana. For those interested in the history of the group, Balch's article, "Waiting for the Ships," in the current issue of the new religious movements journal **Syzygy** (Winter-Fall, 94) is recommended. The article provides an interesting first-hand account of the group's beginnings and development. Balch views the group as exhibiting a form of social control that belies both the theories of anti-cultists (brainwashing) and many scholars who emphasize the voluntary nature of such involvement. For information on obtaining this issue, write: **Syzygy**, Stanford University Branch Box 5097, Stanford, CA 94309-5097.

□ The March/April issue of **Congregations**, the journal of the Alban Institute, is devoted to trends shaping ministry and congregations. The issue features a "Trend Scan" of general social trends and then applies such developments to the general religious scene. Another article draws together an ecumenical round table to discuss these developments. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow is also interviewed on his ongoing research on congregations and money. For information on this issue, write: The Alban Institute, Suite 433 North, 4550 Montgomery Ave., Bethesda, MD 20814-3341

□ We hope readers find the new style of **RW** an improvement, particularly the use of two columns of text throughout most of the issue (and, most importantly, relieving the editor of pasting in--and mixing up--headlines). Given the greater space and flexibility permitted by the new style, we are merging the bi-monthly supplement into each issue.

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### Inside This Issue:

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