

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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## AMERICAN BUDDHISM FACING UNCERTAIN FUTURE ?

While Buddhism is increasingly portrayed as a growing and celebrity-studded religion in the U.S., there are indications that this diverse faith may have serious problems surviving in the future. In an in-depth article in the Wilson Quarterly (Spring), Jan Nattier writes that not only is American Buddhism divided between different expressions [see October '95 RW], but that these movements have weaknesses particular to their traditions. Ethnic Buddhists suffer less stigma for their faith than they did in the past, but evidence continues to show that many Buddhist immigrants tend to leave their faith behind as they become more Americanized--and move increasingly into evangelical churches.

Such outreach-oriented (or "evangelical") Buddhists as Sokka Gakkai have built sturdy institutions and attracted a diverse membership, but they have had problems since its parent Japanese body, Nichiren Shoshu, excommunicated the group over financial and leadership issues. "While the American organization still seems viable, a serious decline in the number of subscribers to the organization's weekly newspaper (which in recent years has dropped below 40,000)

suggests that the schism may have dealt it a painful blow," Nattier writes. Judging by the publicity they have generated (through such publications as *Tricycle*), the "elite Buddhists," who emphasize meditation, might be thought to be in better shape. Yet virtually all of their communities now in existence were formed by people who came of age during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and members of succeeding age cohorts have joined in much smaller numbers. If such communities "do not succeed in attracting younger members (and in retaining the children of the first-generation converts), they will soon fade from the American religious scene."

The elite Buddhists have also attracted the least diverse membership of all the Buddhist movements, and thus will face the greatest challenges for survival. A key concern for all Buddhist groups is that they "must move beyond the concept of Buddhism as an 'individual religious preference,' grounding it instead in the everyday practice of families and larger social networks. Secondly, they must create sturdy institutions to take the place of today's informal associations." (Wilson Quarterly, 901 D Street, S.W., Suite 704, Washington, DC 20024)

## JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES' FUTURE BRIGHT AT HOME AND ABROAD

The Jehovah's Witnesses are likely to maintain steady growth and will likely be a "very large religious body" in the future, according to an article in the Journal of Contemporary Religion (May). Rodney Stark and Lawrence Iannaccone write that the Jehovah's Witnesses are becoming a global religious force that have not received much attention from scholars. Witnesses are more "globalized" than even the Mormons; while nearly half of all Mormons reside in the U.S., only 19 percent of Jehovah's Witnesses do so. The movement of the group into the former Soviet Union is also more extensive than their number of congregations (40 in 1995) might suggest; because of the lack of leadership, many JW congregations are much larger--double or triple the size--than their counterparts elsewhere. They are even in the Islamic world, meeting in secret "cells."

Stark and Iannaccone review Jehovah's Witnesses' statistics and then make the following forecasts and conclusions: The Witnesses will likely do best in cultures familiar with Christianity as opposed to Islamic or Buddhist cultures; since failed prophecies have hurt their growth in the past, the Witnesses current disinclination to make such predictions will likely spur their growth; maintaining strict standards will assist in religious expansion (creating commitment among members and filtering out less committed members), but the issue may be whether the Witnesses are too strict, as is evident in the many conflicts they have with governments (although they are at home with much of American culture; they even allow drinking).

Stark and Iannaccone continue that the

Witnesses' high fertility rate will assist further growth-- their many minority members in the U.S. may increase the appeal of the movement in the Third World; the Witnesses' practice of assigning important roles to young people as part-time missionaries give them a better chance of retaining their children. The writers conclude that "continued growth is the most plausible assumption" for the Witnesses, and project (on the conservative side) that they will show at least a four percent growth rate per year. (Journal of Contemporary Religion, Centre for New Religions, Dept. of Theology, King's College, Univ. of London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS UK)

## PRAYER SHAWL USE SIGNALING SHIFT TO SOLITARY SPIRITUALITY?

During the past two years, evangelical and charismatic pastors have been using Jewish prayer shawls as a means to foster private prayer among their members, according to the new book God-Talk in America (Crossroad, \$24.95), by Phyllis Tickle. In reporting on the Christian retailing and book trade, Tickle, the religion editor of Publisher's Weekly, found an unexpected interest among conservative Protestants in buying prayer shawls--called "talits" by Jews. It seems that the trend became visible by 1995 as talit sales started to show a strange sales pattern, peaking in the weeks before Easter, Pentecost and Christmas.

One Israeli talit seller (who relocated to the U.S. for access to the Christian market) told Tickle that the shift to prayer shawls among Christians was due to a number of prominent preachers who had begun to suggest that their congregations begin the discipline of routinized, scheduled, deliberate prayer is the foundation of a spiritual life. Tickle finds it noteworthy that these pastors view the use of the prayer shawl as a way of carrying out

Jesus' call for his followers to "enter into their closets when they pray." The prayer shawl, in effect, acts as a "closet," encouraging the practice of solitary prayer. She concludes that these pastors may have caught the signals that such a solitary spirituality will have an important role to play as religious life becomes increasingly disestablished and decentralized.

### **CHRISTIAN DIET PROGRAMS SHED SIN-BASED APPROACH?**

Christian diet programs have existed since the early 1970s, but a growing body of evangelical weight control literature has shifted the focus from viewing weight gain as sin to taking a more medical-oriented approach, writes R. Marie Griffith in the Christian Century (May 7). Christian and Bible-based diet programs and literature have been among the most popular items in the evangelical Christian marketplace. Griffith notes that the evangelical concern with weight and dieting has focused on the sin of gluttony as the cause of being overweight and has sought to encourage secular ideals of beauty. At the same time, more "high-brow" Christian critics derided such efforts as being of questionable taste and importance.

The more recent literature by such authors as Gwen Shamblin makes more references to "scientific authority" rather than relying on inspirational testimonials. The stress is not so much on "fat" but on the problem of excessive overeating. "At the same time, increasingly thoughtful attention has begun to be paid to syndromes like anorexia and bulimia," and the pressure on women in modern America to look perfect, Griffith adds. Such fast-growing programs as First Place and Weigh Down Workshop particularly reflect such changes. First Place has programs in nearly 5,000 churches, while Weigh Down Workshop, the

largest such program, is now offered in as many as 10,000 churches in the U.S. and elsewhere. (Christian Century, 407 S. Dearborn Ave., Chicago, IL 60605)

### **RELIGIOUS-BASED COLLEGES RETOOLING FUND RAISING PROGRAMS**

As both public and private sources of revenue in higher education are being cut back and downsized, church related colleges are finding their survival depends on new, freshly designed programs. The Chronicle of Higher Education (May 9) reports that across the country, religious colleges are stepping up efforts to stay afloat in troubled economic times. Leaders recognize that their situations are unique in higher education. Some donors contribute only if the designated funds go toward secular programs and gifts, such as computers. Other contributors will open their checkbooks only for proposed new or existing religious education programs. Campus leaders find some potential donors point out that if everyone believes God truly provides, then God will provide without accelerated fund raising programs. (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1255 Twenty Third Street N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037) --By Erling Jorstad, RW contributing editor.

### **FENG SHUI FINDS 'PLACE' IN CANADA**

The growth of an ancient Chinese mixture of religion, philosophy, astrology and architecture is taking root in North America, especially Canada, reports the Canadian news weekly MacLean's (April 28). The phenomenon is known as feng shui, the Chinese "art of placement," which teaches that the arrangement of space and furniture can

bring either good or bad "energy" and fortunes. "Over the past few years, feng shui has taken on a life force of its own, circuiting the globe via thousands of Web sites, sparking a string of TV shows, videos, workshops and the publication of a dozen books... Venerable feng shui masters, long ignored outside the Chinese community, and even neophyte consultants are in demand, earning up to \$500 an hour for boosting the ch'i (vital energy) of high rise condos, suburban houses and airless office cubicles."

Sharon Doylee Dreidger continues that "Across Canada, the Roots clothing chain, [and] the Toronto-Dominion bank... are among the hundreds of businesses that have become newly attuned to feng shui, along with restaurants, legal offices, hospitals and at least one church congregation." Making such feng shui-inspired changes as keeping the front door away from the bedroom doors (thus preventing energy and good fortune from flowing out) promises clients an "easy offer of health, wealth and inner peace. "Feng shui packs the major trends of a decade--from cocooning and a concern for the environment, to a fascination with Eastern medicine and spirituality, and a yearning for a simpler stress-free life--into one neat package."

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

● **There appears to be a growing disbelief in the Devil, according to a recent poll by the Barna Research Group.** The survey shows that nearly two out of three adults--62 percent-- agreed that Satan "is not a living being but is a symbol of evil." While this response has remained consistent throughout the decade, the number of evangelicals and particularly Catholics who hold this view is very high. Fifty two percent of born again

Christians deny Satan's existence (52 percent) and nearly three-quarters of Catholics say the devil is non-existent (72 percent). Women are more likely than men to reject Satan's existence (64 percent vs. 59 percent), reports a Barna news release (April 29).

Barna finds another "stunning" finding in the high rate of Americans (61 percent) who agreed that "the Holy Spirit is a symbol of God's presence or power, but is not a living entity." Traditional Christian theology teaches that the Holy Spirit is a member of the Trinity. Barna adds that "Amazingly, a majority of all born-again Christians also reject the existence of the Holy Spirit." (Barna Research Group, 2487 Ivory Way, Oxnard, CA 93030-6290)

● **The Assemblies of God continues to grow at a steady and impressive rate, most recently among Hispanics, according to denominational statistics.** Denominational figures report a record number of ministers and congregations in the church, showing a net increase of 562 over 1995 and the largest annual gain since 1984. There was a net growth of 61 congregations since 1995, making for a total of 11,884. During 1996, the Assemblies opened 244 churches and closed 183 in the U.S, reports Baptists Today (May 8). The highest number of new congregations were Hispanic churches in the West and South. (Baptists Today, 403 West Ponce de Leon Ave., Suite 119, Decatur, GA 30030)

● **A recent survey finds many similarities between "orthodox Catholics" and evangelicals and, less unexpectedly, strong divisions in American Catholic ranks.** Sociologists James Davison Hunter and Carl Bowman surveyed 2,047 Americans for a report called "State of Disunion," and found that most Catholics expressed "a great deal of confidence" in the church and a strong allegiance to their parishes. In dividing

Catholic respondents into "orthodox" and "progressive" camps (according to whether they labeled themselves as such, as well as by whether they had liberal or conservative views of the Bible, and if they regularly prayed), the researchers found that orthodox Catholics were similar to evangelicals in church attendance (65 percent said they attend weekly), reports the Catholic newspaper Our Sunday Visitor (May 18).

Orthodox Catholics--who made up 12 percent of the Catholic sample--were close to evangelicals on the importance of their religious beliefs. But on the death penalty, orthodox Catholics were less likely to favor the measure than progressive Catholics (63 percent compared to 70 percent). Only 37 percent of orthodox Catholics, however, and 39 percent of the progressives felt that marriage between two persons of the same sex was wrong for all and should be illegal. Evangelicals disagreed at the higher rate of 60 percent. (Our Sunday Visitor, 200 Noll Plaza, Huntington, IN 46750)

● The requirement of celibacy in becoming a Roman Catholic priest is not the major obstacle to young people entering the priesthood, reports a recent study. A lack of encouragement by church personnel and other clergy plays a larger factor in preventing interested young men from becoming priests, according to a report by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), a Catholic think tank at Georgetown University. "Those relatively uninterested in vocations are the most likely to think that celibacy presents the biggest obstacle. However, those who have seriously considered a vocation are more likely to cite reasons (other than celibacy), such as fear of parental reaction...or of peer reactions," according to the CARA report.

But the desire to have children does appear to

be a significant obstacle. Seventy seven percent of those who say they seriously considered the priesthood or sisterhood said they hesitated because "I want to have children." The CARA survey is the first nationwide study on attitudes toward vocations by Catholic teens in two decades, reports the Long Island Catholic. (May 28).

● **More than two-thirds of evangelical clergy say their families experience some tension about not having enough money, according to a survey conducted by Leadership magazine.** The poll of 594 subscribers, found that half of all ministers were worried enough about their finances to consider leaving the ministry for better-paying jobs in the past year. The Washington Times (May 3) reports that overall, pastors reported receiving a median base salary of \$25,000 per year. Adding housing allowances, the median compensation was around \$33,000, which is well below the median salaries of professionals in other fields.

### **PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS TO INTENSIFY?**

The persecution of Christians around the world may become increasingly worse in the near future, although those suffering from such actions may have difficulties convincing immigration officials of their plight, reports Faith Today (May/June), a Canadian evangelical magazine. The persecution of Christians has become a matter of increasing concern for American evangelicals (and, increasingly, Catholics), as well as becoming an issue for the U.S government and some of the media [see October '96 RW]. In an interview, Canadian human rights scholar Paul Marshall says that the issue has not registered with many immigration officials.

Marshall says that especially in Canada, "Immigration officials are not aware of religious persecution in general and they are skeptical of persecution of Christians in particular. If you are a Tibetan Buddhist, immigration officers are usually aware of the religious persecution you have faced. but the idea of Christians being persecuted simply doesn't compute for them. and officials may not take religion or examples of religious persecution seriously. they assume that a person would not be persecuted just for their religion and that they must have done something else to bring on the persecution they faced."

Marshall sees the persecution of Christians increasing in the next century. Two reasons are that "Islamic radicalism" and ethnic religious nationalism are still on the upswing. Also, in the remaining communist world --China, North Korea, Vietnam, and Laos --"governments are feeling increasingly threatened by the realization that communism doesn't work as an economic system. So their major claim to legitimacy is gone. Furthermore, nearly all of them are having to move towards much more open markets. They don't know whether they can loosen economic controls and still maintain political controls. So these governments tend to crack down on anybody who has loyalties to something other than the government." (Faith Today, M.I.P. Box 3745, Markham, ON L3R 0Y4 Canada)

### **HOW MUCH OF A CHRISTIAN FACTOR IN BRITISH POLITICS?**

Is there a "Christianization" of British politics taking place? Commentators have cited new Prime Minister's Tony Blair's speeches, which draw on Christian terminology, and the success of a large number of strongly Christian

candidates of all parties, including the victorious Labour Party in recent elections, including the victorious Labour Party, as evidence of such a trend. The British Catholic magazine The Tablet (May 17) reports that there are conflicting signs about the new Christian presence in British politics. Members of the Christian Socialist Movement were said to have gained influential cabinet positions because of their membership in the group.

Yet Stephen Timms, a Labour leader, writes that five members of the new cabinet do belong to the Christian Socialists, but "none of them owes their place to their CSM membership." Timms does note that "Christians in all parties have been quietly encouraging and supporting one another for many years and this will continue." He adds, however, that it is difficult to detect much of an effect that single issue pressure groups, such as on pornography or abortion, had on the election outcome. An examination of the lists of the defeated politicians, shows that "many members of the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship are among them." But where Timms does see signs of new religious political influence is in the way in which "Christian ideas, concepts and language are informing the new thinking." By Blair setting forth rhetoric emphasizing the role of servanthood in politics, and by Labour consulting church and voluntary sector representatives in its campaign, Christians have been permitted to participate politically "with much less difficulty than was the case in the past." (The Tablet, 1 King St., Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London, W6 0Q2 England)

### **CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CHILE STILL CARRIES PUBLIC WEIGHT**

While Catholicism has been reported to be losing influence in many Latin American

countries due to the rise of secularism and evangelicalism, Chile seems to be an exception. The influence of Catholicism in Chilean society, and particularly in the media, was recently demonstrated in a conflict between Catholic-based media and the government, reports the Economist (May 10). President Eduardo Frei recently publicly criticized Catholic-based television channels for refusing to broadcast government educational publicity about AIDS. Frei claimed they were showing hypocrisy, since these channels feature soap operas with the same kind of wide-spread pre- and extra-marital sex as the others. The incident showed the weight of the Catholic church in the media. These stations have as many viewers as the state-owned channel.

The church also has a nationwide network of radio stations and a strong indirect influence among journalists in such leading newspapers as *El Mercurio*. Abortion and birth control are taboo issues in most of the mainstream press. The church's influence appears to be growing among the elite of Chile. A society magazine recently reported on a "new aristocracy," where belonging to such conservative orders as Opus Dei or the Legionnaires for Christ is viewed as being "in" among the wealthy, as is being seen at Mass on Sunday and being married by the right priest. "It's a sine qua non of good manners and social respectability to appear fanatically Catholic," says essayist David Gallagher. He writes that such social pressure to adopt a lofty moral tone produces a high level of hypocrisy, stifling public debate on moral issues. Yet it also makes for an orderly society which is the envy of such neighbors as Argentina, Gallagher adds.



## FINDINGS & FOOTNOTES...

□ **Millennium Rage: Survivalists, White Supremacists, and the Doomsday Prophecy** (Plenum, \$25.95) is an absorbing look at the current wave of militias, white supremacists, and other similar groups. Author Philip Lamy attempts to show how so-called "hate groups" have manufactured an apocalyptic ideology that fits in with their racist ideologies. Millennium Rage is useful for those with an interest in stopping hate groups and their activities, it will be of limited use for the scholar with expertise in this field as it doesn't really say anything new and is primarily a compendium of Lamy's opinions on the far right.

□ Vincent Coppola is a former correspondent for *Newsweek* who has long been interested in paramilitary culture. That interest and knowledge serves him well in retelling of his forays into understanding those involved with far right religious and political groups in **Dragons of God: A Journey Through Far Right America**. (Longstreet Press, \$20). He is most interested in Christian Identity and its impact on the far right's ideology, and does a competent job of explaining its complicated theology and its appeal to whites who feel disinherited from the American Dream. Coppola's writing style brings the reader right into the story; at times it seems as if one is eavesdropping on his interviews and conversations with his subjects. Dragons is not an academically oriented book and does not present much new information that might be of use to scholars, but it is an entertaining and sobering look at the far right.

□ Jeffrey Kaplan's **Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements From the Far Right to the Children of Noah**. (Syracuse University Press, \$16.95) is an outstanding overview of contemporary American millenarianism that thoroughly explores the religious ferment that so dominates American culture. Kaplan focuses on three movements: Asatru/Odinism, a racist variant of ancient Norse paganism; the Church of the Creator, a branch of Christian Identity; and B'Nai Noah, comprising former fundamentalist Christians who have developed a sect based on philosemitism and the seven Noahide Commandments. He capably illustrates how millennial thinking and apocalypticism play major roles in each movement's theology. Kaplan also shows how

each sect has been heavily influenced by American millenarianism. He makes excellent use of recent scholarship in the field and the book is well written and would be enjoyed by both the general reader interested in religion and the scholar.-- *Books reviewed by Lin Collette, a writer and researcher who specializes in the far right.*

□The new book by RW's editor **Against The Stream: The Adoption of Traditional Christian Faiths by Young Adults** is still available at a discount rate. RW subscribers can obtain the book for \$24.50, including postage and handling. The list price for the book is \$26-- *not* including postage and handling (which is an additional \$3.75). Be sure to make out payments to Religion Watch when ordering a copy.

**On File: A Continuing Survey of People, Groups, Events, and Movements Influencing Today's Religious Scene**

1) Most of the new charismatic Christian networks and denominations active in the U.S. are home-grown. So the establishment of **Christian Outreach Centres** in the U.S. imported from Australia is something of a novelty. The Brisbane-based group has 10 newly affiliated congregations in the U.S., reversing a "trend in

which several church groups from America--such as the Assemblies of God--have traversed the Pacific to launch congregations in Australia." Most of the approximately 600 congregations affiliated with the COC are in Asia and Australia. U.S. congregations have chosen to affiliate with the COC because of the group's strong evangelistic and training programs, as well as its emphasis on miracles. **(Source: Charisma, June)**

2) Evangelical leaders have put into motion several programs to combat the anti-intellectualism that has "limited the evangelical movement," according to one observer. At a conference of the Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities, representing some 30 denominations and related groups, last February, evangelical leaders planned a three-fold initiative that attempts to bridge the gap between the campus and the local parish. The initiative includes the formation of small campus-based groups embracing Christian intellectuals and the maintenance of a data base and other means of communication. Colleges and participating congregational leaders are planning new courses offering overviews on Christian thought for religious studies students not bound for the ministry. The evangelical InterVarsity Press is also planning to produce a 27-volume series of exegetical work from the first eight centuries of Christianity. **(Source: Chronicle of Higher Education, February 28)--By Erling Jorstad.**

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