

# RELIGION WATCH

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## MONEY MATTERS STYMIE CLERGY AND LAITY

Whether it's about deciding between simple living or prosperity "gospels" or about how church members approach the matter of giving and financing, there is growing ambivalence about the relation of money to religion, according to recent reports. In his new book Crisis In The Churches (Oxford, \$30), sociologist Robert Wuthnow looks at the relation of clergy and laity to issues relating to money and finds a significant "disconnect" taking place on the issue. Wuthnow finds in surveys that virtually all church members (82 percent) admit to wishing they had more money. A substantive minority (43 percent) actually say that making a lot of money is a very important part of their personal identity.

In comparing more active with less active members, Wuthnow finds that such involvement does not make a strong difference in the financial aspects of most people's lives. Among church members and clergy there is a "burden of silence" when it comes to money; only three percent of church members ever discuss finances with fellow members and only four percent have ever discussed their finances with a member of the clergy. For their part, clergy often are unschooled in financial matters and feel that members don't want them intruding on such a private concern. In examining sermon content of the 60 churches in his sample, he found that finances are mainly discussed in

negative contexts--as a false hope, temptation or obstacle on the road to personal salvation. Yet Wuthnow finds that among those who had heard a sermon about personal finances and materialism in the past year, approximately a third said they had also thought a great deal about what the Bible teaches on such matters. Fewer than a fifth of those who had not heard such a sermon had thought this much about these issues.

The double-mindedness about the relation between money and faith is also evident in the alternative spirituality or New Age movement and in spirituality books in general. The New Age Journal (July-August) reports that "Right now there seems to be a growing debate between the 'God Wants You to Be Rich' school of thought, as defined by Paul Zane Pilzer, and those who join Elaine St. James in 'Living the Simple Life.'" Prosperity advocates "insist that the universe is abundant--a reflection of God's unfailing creative power--and that by aligning ourselves with its energy through positive thinking we can attract whatever we desire," writes Ann Kathleen Bradley. Recent examples of the prosperity consciousness include Deepak Chopra's best-selling books, "The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success" and "Creating Affluence."

The voluntary simplicity movement has spawned "almost an embarrassing wealth of new books," and has also inspired a growing number of "simplicity circles," particularly in the Pacific Northwest, where people gather to discuss environmental awareness, reduced consumption,

self-sufficiency, and mutual support and community. By consuming less, voluntary simplicity advocates say they are helping preserve the earth's limited resources, as well as our own. One example of this trend is the Ministry of Money, an outreach program of the Church of the Savior, which helps people realize that "our relationship to money is central to our spirituality," through recruiting people to work in developing countries. Increasingly, however, "prosperity" is being interpreted in non-material ways. For instance, the New Age-oriented practice of visualizing prosperity is being viewed as helping one to achieve such a state regardless of financial gain. (New Age Journal, 42 Pleasant St., Watertown, MA 02172)

### **SUPREME COURT DECISIONS OPEN NEW ERA IN CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS**

The late June decisions by the Supreme Court on church-state relations effectively open a new era in the potentially explosive world of religious freedom and judicial sovereignty. In the decision to allow publicly funded school teachers to offer instruction in parochial schools, and in the declaration that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act is unconstitutional, the nation's highest court retrieved its power to define and administer several extremely sensitive areas of America's religious life. According to reports in the Washington Post (June 24 and June 26) and New York Times, (June 24 and 26), the justices served notice that the Supreme Court, and not the Congress or state legislatures, was the final authority for protecting First Amendment freedom of religion liberties.

In the school case, the Court repudiated its own decision made in 1985 (*Aguilar v. Felton*) forbidding public funds to be used to provide mandated programs for special education needs in private schools. Justice Sandra O'Connor struck the 'new era' note when she said that the Court "no longer presume that public employees will inculcate religion simply because they happen to be in a sectarian environment." In a sharply worded dissent, Justice David H. Souter insisted that the result of the 1997 ruling would be to "authorize

direct state aid to religious institutions on an unparalleled scale." Any deviation would violate the prohibition against the "establishment" of religion.

Observers pointed out that the new decision opened the door for those seeking to legislate the payment of vouchers to parents who send their children to private religious K-12 schools. Cases authorizing that major shift in church-state relations are now working their way through several state courts. The Supreme Court reclaimed its authority as the final arbiter in religious freedom cases by striking down the 1993 Restoration Act. That bill had been passed unanimously by the Senate, and had only three no votes in the House. The Court claimed that in such cases as protecting the right of native Americans to use peyote as a religious practice or granting immunity to a Catholic church in Boerne, Texas from compliance with local zoning laws, the final jurisdiction belonged with it, not with Congress or local law agencies.

Critics, along the spectrum from Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah to Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, denounced the ruling as a usurpation of established Constitutional powers for the legislative branch of government. Many religious freedom groups within the denominations, spreading from Mormon to Baptist, issued equally sharp criticisms. [A new coalition of conservative Christians organized by Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus is likely to lead the way in such protests, as it charges that the "constitutional order is in crisis" by the Court's usurpation of power.] Defending the Court's decision, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote that Congress does not have any 'substantive' power under the 14th Amendment. Federal authorities have only remedial authority to write laws aimed at protecting religious freedom.--By Erling Jorstad, *RW Contributing Editor*.

## **DARWINISM COMES UNDER INCREASING ATTACK FROM RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR CRITICS**

While Pope John Paul II recently endorsed much of Darwinism's biological underpinnings, the theory is drawing some sharp attacks from American neoconservative writers, academic anthropologists and social theorists. The libertarian Reason magazine (July) reports that such American neoconservatives as Irving Kristol are asserting that human society must rest on the permanent moral foundations found in religious faith. Darwinism's assumption of the lack of a permanent, God-given moral order, undermines the basis for civilization as we know it. The article notes that this position is a marked reversal from earlier forms of conservative thought that championed free enterprise and rugged individualism as part of "survival of the fittest."

Within the academy, postmodernist theorists point out that the foundation that scientific research, and particularly Darwinian biology, rests on is the brainchild of white Victorian males. Writing in the leftist magazine The Nation (June 9), Barbara Ehrenreich states that Darwinism is no more scientific than any other well known school of science. Since there are no grand explanatory theories that are permanently 'true', and since no innate human traits exist linking all people and that gender, class and race are determinative factors in reaching scientific interpretations, Darwinism is no longer a satisfactory way of understanding the origins of the planet.

As the debate continues, one Darwinian of considerable stature, Stephen Jay Gould of Harvard writes in the New York Review of Books (June 12) that research into evolutionism, and its social and religious consequences continues to unearth important new discoveries. Gould suggests that Darwin himself would be happy to see his ideas continuing to draw such attention. (Reason, 3415 Sepulveda Blvd., Suite 400, Los Angeles, CA 90034; The Nation, 72 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10011)—By Erling Jorstad

## **CATHOLIC GROWTH FOUND IN CONSERVATIVE OR LIBERAL DIOCESES?**

Some observers and scholars have speculated that conservative Catholic seminaries and dioceses—like their conservative Protestant counterparts—are more likely to draw in members and vocations than more liberal groups. In reporting on a conservative and liberal dioceses, writer Charles R. Morris found that there is something to this speculation, but not everything. Writing in the Catholic magazine Commonweal (June 6), Morris visited the strongly conservative Catholic diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska and came across some surprising figures. The ratio of active priests to Catholics in Lincoln is about 1:700, more than half higher than the rest of the country. From the diocesan directory, Morris calculated the median age of active priests to be about forty-three, "an astonishing twelve or thirteen years younger than the national median. About a third of the priests [in Lincoln] are under 35."

But when it comes to Mass attendance and other indicators among the laity, the picture is somewhat different. In researching the liberal diocese of Saginaw, Michigan, Morris found that Mass attendance there ranks in the top third in the country, with a 31.5 percent weekly average compared to a nationwide median of 26.7 percent. Although there were no similar figures for Lincoln, Morris estimated from one large parish that the weekly attendance might be about a third, or about the same as in Saginaw. When comparing the "liberal" dioceses—such as Milwaukee and Seattle—against conservative ones—such as Denver, New York and Portland, Ore.—there is no "consistent relationship between theological outlook and lay church attachment."

For instance, Milwaukee—home to the liberal Archbishop Raymond Weakland ranks eighth out of forty-eight dioceses in Mass attendance, while the above conservative dioceses rank near the bottom along with very liberal Seattle. Such a lack of correlations merely shows the limited influence

that bishops—whether conservative or liberal—have on the daily workings of parishes, according to Fr. Ron Lewinski, who has studied effective parishes across the U.S. But that would not seem to apply to the Lincoln and Saginaw dioceses that Morris studied. Bishops of both dioceses are models of hands-on leaders, forging "pastorates in their own images." But that has not made much difference. Although all the diocesan priests have preached on the sinfulness of contraception for years, Lincoln's Catholics use birth control at almost the same rate as everyone else. "And despite the fact that Saginaw's Catholics are not being forced to go to the sacraments, their Mass attendance turns out to be higher than average." (Commonweal, 15 Dutch St., New York, NY 10038)

#### **SUFISM RECONCILING WITH ISLAM AFTER LONG DIVORCE**

Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, is reviving its ties to the Muslim faith after a long period of divorce from the tradition and syncretism among many of its Western, especially American, practitioners. Gnosis magazine (Summer), a quarterly on esoteric spirituality, reports that the closing of such a gap between sufi "gurus" and practitioners and traditional Islam was in evidence at the recent International Sufism Symposium held outside San Francisco. Sufism teaches diverse mystical traditions and practices, though perhaps is best known for its "whirling dervish" ceremonies. The strongly anti-Islamic climate in the West is the main reason why Sufi orders tended to disassociate themselves from Islam, although the inner circles of such groups acknowledged the movement's Muslim identity, writes Rashid Raymond Patch.

The diminishment of persecution and the burgeoning Muslim communities in the West have made claiming an Islamic identity for Sufi groups easier. "At the same time a serious change has occurred in the Muslim community worldwide which has led to a reacceptance of the spiritual disciplines of Sufism...as an essential part of Islamic identity and education," writes Patch. He adds that tensions still persist. "There are some Western teachers whose own practice has been so

separate from Islam that they resist any identification with the Muslim faith. The adoption of a fashionable eclecticism or syncretism as group policy has also locked groups into rejecting any traditional faith. But the number of such teachers and students is steadily dwindling, as more and more teachers of traditional explicitly Islamic, forms of Sufism emerge." [The realignment of Sufism with Islam may have an effect upon the widespread popularity of Sufism in the spiritual marketplace. On the other hand, the interest in Sufism could serve as a new entry point into the Islamic faith for American seekers.] (Gnosis, P.O. Box 14217, San Francisco, CA 94114-0217)

#### **AMERICAN MUSLIMS CREATE OWN BUSINESS NETWORK**

American Muslims are turning to Islamic law to help them run their businesses, according to an Associated Press report (June 22). The cornerstone of Islamic business transactions is the religion's ban on interest payments, or usury. The Koran is specific in requiring Muslims to share the risk of an investment while sharing the profits from it and prohibits contracts which might involve taking unfair advantage of one partner over the other. As one might expect, starting Muslim-owned businesses has been difficult.

• "Entrepreneurs say they faced the problem of reaching a widely dispersed Muslim population and finding money to finance transactions in a system driven by interest. That's why they started small. In the early 1980s most of the businesses were investment companies that bought stocks considered halal, or legal under the Sharia [Islamic law]. Then came leasing companies and housing cooperatives," writes Donna Abu-Nasr. So today, a growing number of Muslims can and are turning to these Sharia-based financial institutions for making major purchases. Muslim investment houses operate as regular companies do, except that executives examine each stock to make sure it is halal, excluding stocks involved in banking, gambling, alcohol and pornography.

## **DEVOTIONAL PROMOTING GENERIC SPIRITUALITY, HEALING STILL GOING STRONG**

While many devotional publications have appeared and disappeared over the last several decades, the 75-year-old *Daily Word* continues to reach new readers. Sponsored by the Unity Church for Christianity, it is now being sent to 1.2 million readers, with another 6.5 million connected through pass-along. According to the report in the *Washington Post* (June 21), the appeal of its 365 daily meditations lies in its messages of its universal spiritual teachings that transcend religious boundaries. They include themes of stewardship, miracles, healing, relaxation techniques, and other non-denominational themes. The most popular messages, the editors report, are those concerning physical healing and peace of mind. Its editors also report they receive about one million letters and one million phone calls annually from grateful readers who find daily encouragement in the themes of inner renewal and spirituality. —By Erling Jorstad

## **GROWING MOMENTUM IN HEALING PENTECOSTAL RIFT**

The younger generations in Pentecostalism are making progress in mending an 80-year split between "oneness" Pentecostals and the majority of trinitarian believers, although they are receiving little encouragement from denominational officials, reports *Charisma* magazine (June). Oneness or "Jesus only" Pentecostals, representing approximately 17 million believers in the world, broke off from other Pentecostals in their refusal to use and baptize members with trinitarian language (although they acknowledge that God is manifested as Father, Son and Holy Spirit). From such a doctrinal difference, the oneness Pentecostals have created their own subculture, particularly in the 700,000-member United Pentecostal Church. But now the church is experiencing increasing strife over its prohibitions of fellowship with trinitarian Pentecostals (such as the Assemblies of God) and its strict membership rules outlawing television and

jewelry.

While the UPC is growing (with a record number of ministers ordained in 1996), a "steady stream of pastors are leaving through the back door" over such issues, writes J. Lee Grady. A network of about 430 dissident UPC pastors (who still use oneness language, although they don't require new members to be rebaptized in Jesus' name alone) has emerged. Independent oneness churches have also split off from the UPC, and many popular preachers in the black community, such as T.D. Jakes, have roots in the movement. There is also more interchange between the two Pentecostal movements, particularly in the distinctive emotional "praise music" the UPC has produced. But most denominational officials from both camps still resist making any overtures. Many UPC leaders expect a "gradual changing of the guard as older, more hard-line leaders relinquish control," writes Grady. (Charisma, 600 Rinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746)

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

● Recent sociological and attitudinal research shows that in at least three areas of religious life, American fundamentalists are continuing their commitment to traditional teachings despite major society changes creating pressures for adaption and compromise. In their attitude towards pornography, sexually explicit materials, in their beliefs about premarital sexual intercourse, and in their suspicion of secular higher educational attainment, fundamentalists hold fast to the views inherited from their past. On pornography, Professors Darren E. Sherkat of Vanderbilt University and Christopher G. Ellison of the University of Texas-Austin, found that the fundamentalists' resistance to sexually explicit materials stems directly from two historic commitments, moral absolutism and beliefs in the threat of social contamination within their ranks from involvement in the non-fundamentalist society.

The researchers write in the journal Social Forces (March) that their commitments to biblical inerrancy and comparatively high attendance records at church service, the fundamentalists have been able to oppose the generally liberalizing tendency of the larger society in allowing greater sexual freedom of expression through the various media. As for premarital sex, Professors Larry K. Peterson and Gregory V. Donnenwerth of the University of Memphis present a cross-denominational study showing fundamentalists, in contrast to mainline Protestant and Catholic bodies, have continued to promote their historic antagonism to any form of sexual activity outside of marriage. In the same issue of Social Forces, the authors write that religious privatization has in fact come to dominate the beliefs of Protestants and Catholics as to personal choice of sexual activity before marriage, the authors show that fundamentalists continue to reject such individual preferences because they run contrary to absolutist morality commitments. The authors suggest that the gap over premarital sex between these two groupings is "large" and will continue to grow larger. As long as the fundamentalists and conservatives continue to stress strict adherence to church doctrine and a literal understanding of the bible, they will hold to an absolutist position for their members.

Regarding educational attainment, Professors Alfred Darnell and Darren E. Sherkat of Vanderbilt University, show in a study published in the American Sociological Review (April), that Protestant fundamentalism has a decided, measurable effect on high school students' educational aspirations. Using data from the Youth Parent Socialization Panel Study of the University of Michigan, they developed an six equations-model that looked at educational attainment, college preparatory work in high school, aspirations to continue education, high school grade point average, belief the Bible is the inerrant word of God, parents' belief in Biblical inerrancy.

The authors conclude that the Biblical inerrantists have significantly lower educational aspirations than other high school students, and they are less likely to have taken college-preparatory courses.

The researchers suggest that parents' belief in Biblical inerrancy lead them to teach their children that educational attainment by non-fundamentalist standards are simply of little value. (Social Forces, Univ. of North Carolina Press, Hamilton Hall 070A, CB #3210, Chapel Hill, NC 27599; American Sociological Review, 1722 N St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036)--By Erling Jorstad

### HONG KONG CHRISTIANS CAUTIOUS ON CHINA RULE

As Hong Kong comes under Chinese control, Christian leaders are preparing for a changed environment for religious freedom, despite the assurances by China that they will continue to enjoy independence of state control, according to several reports. Chinese officials have recently told Catholic church leaders that they will not set up offices of the Religious Affairs Bureau and United Front department in the city-- two agencies that have regulated religious life in China, reports the Washington Post (June 26). "Nonetheless, potential conflicts loom over a host of issues, including visas for foreign missionaries in Hong Kong, local church groups' links with underground and house churches in China proper, the curricula of Hong Kong religious schools, the content of religious magazines and newspapers, and rental costs of church lands that were essentially free under British rule," writes Steven Mufson.

A key concern for Hong Kong Catholic churches will be to keep their role as a bridge between the the church in the West and Catholics in China, many of whom have faced government repression. Bishop Joseph Zen says that if the Hong Kong church complains about the repression of China's Catholics to authorities, they will have their protected status thrown back at them. "Because if you insist on 'one country, two systems,' they will tell you, 'Come on, we respect your system; you must respect our system..'"

## INDIGENOUS FOLK RELIGION FINDS PUBLIC AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

A syncretistic folk religion is finding revival and new public recognition in Vietnam, according to an Associated Press report (June 28). The once banned Caodai religious sect is a hybrid of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Vietnamese spiritism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. The movement, started in the 1920s, has more than 3 million followers despite the Vietnamese government's religious regulation. In addition to calling on spirits, Caodai believers practice priestly celibacy, vegetarianism and the worship of ancestors. The religion emphasizes morality and frowns on material luxuries. Its pantheon of saints include modern China's patriarch Sun Yat-Sen and Vietnam's first poet-laureate, Nguyen Binh Khiem, and adherents also commune with the spirits of historical figures, including Joan of Arc, Vladimir Lenin and even Charlie Chaplin, writes Dao Thu Hien.

Last month, Caodai followers were helped considerably when their religion received official approval from the government, legitimizing its existence in the eyes of the communist leadership. It's a considerable change for a religious movement that raised an army to fight against the communists during the Vietnam War. But today, the government says Caodism fills a void for many people. "We find the Caodai existence meets a legitimate spiritual demand of the people here," said Muoi Thuong, a spokesman for the government's Religious Affairs Committee. "These people are religious followers, but they are also good citizens and patriots."

## FINDINGS & FOOTNOTES

○ **Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism** (Oxford, \$27.50) by Michael W. Cuneo, provides an interesting look at the subcultures of the Catholic right. Cuneo, a Fordham University sociologist, examines such movements as conservative Catholicism; prolife activism; traditionalism (which emphasizes a return to pre-Vatican II Catholicism); and radical

Marian-apocalyptic movements, such as the one gathered around Veronica Lueken in Queens, N.Y., and the Apostles of Infinite Love, a Canadian group that claims the true papacy. Through interviews and vivid descriptions, Cuneo puts flesh and bones on these renegade priests and others rebelling against the modern church, as well as showing how they are influenced by the individualism and utopianism of American religion. (It should be noted that **RW's** editor helped in researching the book)

○ Anyone interested in a relatively brief but thorough and clear discussion of new religious movements is advised to read **New Religions as Global Cultures** (Westview Press, \$18.95) by Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe. The authors look at new religions in the perspective of the world religions, tracking how popular Western movements, such as the charismatic momenta and Unificationism, were shaped by traditional religious insights and practices. In other words, the controversial features of many new religions, such as radical conversion experiences, are also found in primitive and other forms of religion around the world. The book, which carries a helpful glossary of terms, presents a critical look at the anti-cult movement while also examining the abusive elements of some new religious movements.

## ON FILE/ A Continuing Survey of People, Groups and Movements Impacting Today's Religious Scene

1) The **American Hindu Defamation League** (AHDL) is already making itself known as a protector of Hindus in America after only recently getting off the ground. The organization was recently started by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America organization. Last spring the AHDL led a protest campaign against the rock group Aerosmith for making a sacrilegious portrayal of Lord Krishna. After the group's CD cover showing Lord Krishna with a cat's head and a women's torso was released, the organization sprang into action. It launched an "all-out" offensive against the CD, through its World Wide Web site, encouraging visitors to bombard its producer and distributor Sony and its subsidiary Columbia as well as Aerosmith with letters, e-mail, and phone calls. Although Aerosmith apologized, the AHDLC is still pursuing the issue, pressing for a recall of the CDs and focusing on other sacrilege toward



Hinduism on the CD, including an obscene depiction of the god Ganesha. (Source: **Hinduism Today, July**)

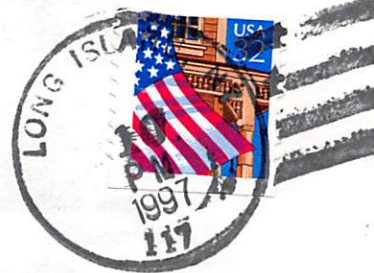
2) Those on the far right have often been viewed as the bearers of conspiracy theories. But author **David Icke** demonstrates that conspiracy can thrive in the New Age movement as well as the far right. On the lecture circuit and through his books, Icke has made a name for himself as he claims to find conspiracies in many of the familiar places: among the Rothschilds, and Rockefellers and in the Illuminati and the Trilateral Commission. Icke is also said to have anti-Semitic tendencies, "without ever quite getting there." He often refers to the centerpiece of anti-Semitic literature, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, though he substitutes UFOs and the Illuminati for Jews as the main conspirators. The New Age element comes into the picture with Icke's vision of a collective spiritual awakening, where humans would break out of a herd mentality and celebrate a diversity of lifestyles. (Source: **Gnosis, Summer, 1997**)

**CORRECTION:** Last issue's review of Jeffrey Kaplan's Book, **Radical Religion in America**, equated Asatru with Odinism and the Church of the Creator with Christian Identity. While the Asatru faith and Odinism have some similar beliefs, they are distinct religious communities with very real differences. The Church of the Creator does share some of Christian Identity's theology, but positions itself in bitter opposition to that belief system.

**SUMMER OFFER:** With the arrival of summer, RW can face a financial dry spell, particularly as we plan for the new publishing year starting in September. We would appreciate any gift subscriptions during this season. We are offering gift subscriptions for the discount of \$22. With each gift, we will extend the giver's subscription by two issues. If a subscriber gives three gift subscriptions, we will send the giver a free copy of the book *Against The Stream: The Adoption of Traditional Christian Faiths By Young Adults*. Remember to include your address and name when sending in gift subscriptions.

## Religion Watch

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