

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

Volume 12 Number 10

September 1997

## INDIGENOUS AND ECLECTIC RELIGIOUS FAITHS FIND FOLLOWING IN RUSSIA

Over the course of the past year, liberal Russians and international observers alike have watched with growing concern as the government of the Russian Federation has taken an increasingly hard line with New Religious Movements (NRMs) of both domestic and foreign origin. A new law restricting such religious organizations that was recently passed by the Parliament but vetoed by President Yeltsin is only the latest manifestation of public concern over the spread of so-called "cults" and "sects." In the post-Soviet era, it is the foreign NRMs that continue to garner most of the publicity (and hostility), since their vast financial resources enable them to spread their word with capitalist efficiency. Moscow State University's Journalism School now has an "L. Ron Hubbard Reading Room," while the Unification Church has recently come under fire from the Russian Commission on Religious Organizations for sponsoring a public school course entitled "The World and I".

Despite the furor over the role of "imported" religious groups, the "problem" of NRMs in Russia would not be nearly so acute if it weren't for the tendency of people throughout Russia to create alternative belief systems of their own. The former Soviet Union has produced a number of "home-

grown" NRMs that vie with the Orthodox Church for followers. Though they cannot compete with foreign missionaries in terms of resources, they do have a "home team" advantage: they draw on local traditions to address the widespread anxiety over the nature and future of the Russian identity. Some, such as the Bazhov Academy of Secret Knowledge, look to folklore for the answer: much of the teaching of this group are based on their interpretation of fairy tales written by the Sverdlovsk author Pavel Bazhov (1879-1950), who is said to have encoded sacred truths in his seemingly innocuous children's stories. Steeped in folklore and national traditions, the Academy sponsors conferences and folklore festivals, and has close ties with the local government; a Bazhov festival in 1995 is said to have attracted 6000 participants.

Other, more successful post-Soviet NRMs have tapped into the emotional appeal that Orthodoxy has for many Russians; by stylizing themselves as the "one true" Orthodox Church, they make conflict with the Patriarchate inevitable. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, two new religious movements have been particularly consistent trespassers on Orthodox turf: the Great White Brotherhood and the Mother of God Center. On the surface, the two groups are similar enough that they have often been confused in the popular consciousness: members of the Great White Brotherhood wear white robes and

worship a woman who calls herself "the Mother of the World Lord Jesus-Maria, Maria Devi Khristos", while the Mother of God Center's clergy wear purple robes and look to Mary for the salvation of the world. Each appeals to the traditional Russian reverence for maternal symbols, although, ironically, the Brotherhood used to be run by a man, and the Center's hierarchy is exclusively male.

Perhaps because of this similarity, the groups are at great pains to distance themselves from each other; indeed, when I was researching the Mother of God Center in Moscow this June, a number of the Center's priests and deacons repeatedly told me that the Russian Orthodox Church deliberately encouraged the identification of their group with the Brotherhood in order to discredit the Center with the brotherhood's apocalyptic radicalism.

Of the two groups, the Great White Brotherhood has gained far more notoriety. Espousing an eclectic mix of Theosophy, Buddhism, and even music theory, the group gained notoriety when its leaders claimed that the world would come to an end in November 1993, and only the faithful would survive. The public panic that resulted from a misunderstanding of Maria Devi's apocalyptic teachings would end only after the Brotherhood's leaders were put behind bars. Today, the Great White Brotherhood is all but disbanded..

The Mother of God Center, though superficially similar to the Great White Brotherhood, has taken a decidedly different path. The Center was founded in the late 1980s by Ioann Bereslavsky, a defrocked Orthodox priest who claims to be Mary's prophet. Bereslavsky's early writings contain numerous allusions to the coming end of the world, but, perhaps in response to the fate of the White Brotherhood, he soon shifted his emphasis away from the apocalypse. In general, the history of the Mother of God Center traces the path from extremism to accommodation as the Center struggles for respectability: gone are Bereslavsky's early invectives against the evils of "earthly" parents (especially mothers, who distract their sons from worshipping the Mother of God); gone, too, are the harsh dietary rules and mandatory celibacy

for all followers.

All the members of the Center's hierarchy whom I encountered were at great pains to portray themselves as part of a mainstream movement, and to explain that the Center has been defamed by the Orthodox Church and the press. Today, the Center is showing steady growth and has chapters all throughout Russia. Their ritual is a striking combination of the trappings of Russian Orthodoxy, a Catholic veneration of Mary, and the foot-stomping spirit of Evangelical Protestantism. At times the purple clad priests and deacons march across the stage carrying Russian Orthodox Banners, singing "Blessed be the Lord"; at others, members of the congregation embrace each other and express their love. Many of the Center's members whom I interviewed had come to Bereslavsky through Protestantism: the enthusiasm of the Baptists had initially appealed to them, but they missed the staid elegance of Orthodoxy. That the Center manages to combine both in a kind of "Evangelical Orthodoxy" explains much of the movement's appeal.

New NRMs crop up every day, and none of them seem particularly daunted by the threat of persecution. Even if Yeltsin does finally sign a modified version of the religion law, the Russian Orthodox Church will still find itself obliged to fight for the souls of the faithful on the open market of religious ideas.-- *By Eliot Borenstein, Professor of Slavic and Russian Studies at New York University.*

#### **MAINLINE DENOMINATIONS FACE ECUMENICAL, GENDER ISSUES IN SUMMER ASSEMBLIES.**

Over the past summer, several mainline Protestant denominations committed their constituencies to important ecumenical and gender-related policies, matters currently in the forefront of conflict in American religious institutions in general. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (2.7 million members) attempted to take a major step in reconciling the long-standing conflicts within its ranks over whether to ordain

homosexuals to the clergy. A year before, that assembly had passed a resolution stating church officers must live "in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman or chastity in singleness." In 1997 the national assembly changed the wording to read that church officers should "demonstrate fidelity and integrity in marriage or singleness, and in all relationships in life." The changing of the word 'chastity' to 'integrity' was hailed by pro-homosexual spokespersons in the PCUSA as a major step forward for opening the doors of ordination to gays and lesbians, reports Christianity Today (August 11).

The assembly also voted overwhelmingly to authorize the church to enter into full communion with three other mainline bodies, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church in Christ, and the Reformed Church in America. In early July the United Church in Christ in national assembly took a similar action, voting by a margin of some 700 to 10 to enter into "full communion" relations with the three denominations. The vote culminated a long process of planning with the other church bodies for extended cooperation. Also the UCC discussed but took no action on a resolution that would have "encouraged fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness" as a standard for its ordained ministers. The vote was considered a victory for pro-gay forces in the UCC, according to the Christian Century (July 16-23).

In mid-July the Episcopal Church overwhelmingly endorsed a proposal that would bring their church into full communion with the ELCA. Under the accord a clergy member of one denomination could serve a congregation in the other, both churches could pool resources for missions and social service, and Lutherans and Episcopalians could share the sacrament of Communion. The assembly also endorsed a resolution stating that no bishop could refuse ordination to a candidate for priesthood in her or his diocese solely "on account of sex," reports the New York Times, July 19, 1997). This motion is likely to cause considerable dissent among Anglo-Catholics and other conservative Episcopalians. Critics protest that making the acceptance of women priests required

goes against the diocese-by-diocese practice the denomination has practiced, in effect, doing away with the "individual diocesan latitude," says theologian John Ford in the National Catholic Register (August 17-23). Another resolution failed (though only by one vote) which would have prepared the way for a rite for same-sex marriages, according to reports in the Christian Century (July 30-August 7) and the Washington Post (July 26).

On August 18 the 5.2 million member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America stirred considerable controversy when it turned down the concordat for intercommunion with the Episcopal Church. At the same time, the agreement with the Reformed denominations was accepted. On the denomination's non-official computer discussion group ELCA-L, supporters claimed that the rejection of the Episcopal "Concordat" was due to the anti-hierarchical stance of many Midwestern Lutherans and others who did not believe that church unity should necessitate a change in the ELCA's structure (as in adopting the Episcopal Church's apostolic succession of bishops). The acceptance of the Reformed agreement is seen by some critics as diluting the sacramental nature of Lutheranism and propelling the ELCA further into the mainline Protestant orbit. Others viewed the decentralized nature of the Lutheran-Reformed agreement (requiring no changes in national structures) as signifying a more localized kind of ecumenism. (Christian Century, 407 S. Dearborn, Chicago, IL 60605; Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188; National Catholic Register, 33 Rosotto Dr., Hamden, CT 06514) --This article was written with RW contributing editor Erling Jorstad

## SPIRITUALITY SEEPING INTO WORLDS OF SALES AND ADVERTISING

As the boom of spirituality continues its course through church life and personal devotion, such a resurgence is also finding a growing presence in advertising and sales-- two areas of the business world long considered hostile or indifferent to such expression. According to writer Andy Cohen in

Sales and Marketing Management magazine (August, 1997), an increasing number of sales managers and promoters are turning to such practices as opening sales meetings with prayers, in closing their office doors during business hours for meditation, and attending programs which aim at blending spirituality and business success. For instance, the motivational program known as Peter Lowe's Success has already attracted over 400,000 attendees this year, rising sharply from 1996. Directors of programs for training of sales personnel are encouraging their staffs to know their own value systems so they can better understand those of their clients.

Believing that the rough and tumble world of competitive sales will not become "omnipotent in Corporate America," proponents of the new spirituality find reason to think that their convictions are now being given a new, more sympathetic hearing in the marketplace. Further evidence of the new trend is presented in American Demographics (June). Advertising simply has absorbed the new public interest in spirituality and turned it into new programs to promote sales.

IBM's Solutions for a Small Planet campaign has several religious themes. Nuns go to vespers while speaking of OS/2 computer networks. Eastern monks meditate telepathically about Lotus Notes. Nissan presents as a hero a wise, aging Asian guru, backed in the sound track by Eastern mystic music. Chevrolet uses spiritual themes for its "Confessions," as well as draw on eco-theology to promote its Chevy Tahoe products. The author suggests that the new public receptivity to spirituality has led to a greater acceptance of religious themes in ads. (Sales and Marketing Management, 355 Park Ave. South, New York, NY 10010; American Demographics, P.O. Box 68, Ithaca, NY 14851-0068)—By Erling Jorstad

### MARIAN MOVEMENT PRESSING FOR NEW DOCTRINE

In the past few months Catholic publications have been featuring reports on a possible new doctrine involving Mary as co-redeemer that may soon be

publicly proclaimed as an official doctrine of the church. Newsweek magazine (August 25) reports that there is an influential movement throughout the world that is petitioning Pope John Paul II to take such an action by collecting over 4,300,000 signatures from 157 countries. The movement has attracted nearly 500 bishops and 42 cardinals—including New York's John O'Connor and Joseph Glomp of Poland—as well as Mother Teresa of Calcutta. But propelling much of the the phenomenon are such American conservative Catholics as Mark Miravalle of Franciscan University of Steubenville and nun-broadcaster Mother Angelica. On her show, Mother Angelica has stated that the pope's proclaiming of such a doctrine would "save the world from great catastrophe."

Rumors of the potential new dogma "have triggered blistering criticism from other Christian denominations and ignited a battle within the church itself," writes Kenneth Woodward. The proposed doctrine would also cause a serious division among Catholic theologians; last June it was reported that a commission of 23 Mariologists unanimously advised against promulgating the new dogma.

### IS FUNDRAISING EQUAL TO SOUL WINNING FOR TELEVANGELISTS?

Despite numerous scandals involving finances, several leading televangelists continue to make fundraising a key part of their ministries, according to the Christian humor magazine The Door (July-August). Writer Doug Peterson conducted a unique experiment to test the degree to which televangelists ask for money. Letters were sent to 29 televangelists making a simple request for information on how to become a Christian. Every televangelist did make some attempt to answer Peterson's request and eight of the 29 answered the letter without placing him on their mailing lists for solicitation of funds.

Bob Tilton sent out 16 mailings with a series of prayer cloths and other items that would bring prosperity along with regular pitches for

contributions. Such evangelists as Pat Robertson, Jack Van Impe and D. James Kennedy also rated high in mailings that asked for money. Those that refrained from answering Peterson's request with financial solicitations included Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Mother Angelica and New Covenant Ministries run by Jim Bakker's daughter Tammy Sue (who even sent Peterson a hand-written note and a free Bible). (The Door, 5634 Columbia Ave., Dallas, TX 75214)

### **NEW AFRICAN CHURCHES ATTRACTING INTERRACIAL FOLLOWING IN U.S.**

African missionaries are increasingly planting churches in the U.S., and are attracting a multicultural following in the process, reports the Christian Century magazine (August 13-20). The movement of African churches to the African nationals (and Caribbean residents) in Europe, especially in Britain [see January RW], but the trend in the U.S. seems to be less about race and nationality than evangelism and missions. Such African-based denominations and networks as the Nigerian-based Redeemed Christian Church of God and the Deeper Life Bible Fellowship (many of these networks of congregations seem to be from Nigeria) are finding a growing following in the U.S.

Estimates of these groups' membership in the U.S. range from hundreds to thousands, according to the article. These African congregations share an emphasis on exuberant worship, a heavy emphasis on prayer and a strong missionary, church-planting thrust. Such evangelistic fervor is directed to both African and non-African. These congregations often include whites, blacks, and Asians, as well as Africans. Obstacles for further expansion are these churches' hesitance to cooperate with other churches; they do not even interact with other African churches from different ethnic groups and nations. Because of the uncertain immigration status of many African church leaders in the U.S., there is also a lack of stability in leadership in these congregations.

### **IMMIGRANT CHURCHES GROW IN CANADA WHILE STAYING IN OWN ORBIT**

At the early August meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion meeting in Toronto that RW attended, there was a special session on the differences between religion in Canada and the U.S. Specialists documented how the mainline churches have decreased faster and the evangelicals have grown slower in Canada than in the U.S. Sociologist Reginald Bibby suggested that the one source of future growth in Canada will be in the new ethnic immigrants who are largely Christian. An in-depth report on the Chinese and other new immigrants in Canada's evangelical magazine Faith Today (July/August) suggests that the new ethnic Christians may have a limited impact on Canadian Christianity. The tendency of these immigrants and even their children is to form their own churches with little contact with other Christians.

There are more than 1,200 "ethnic" churches in Canada, and "denominations across the board are reporting a steady rise in numbers of ethnic member congregations," writes Rob Clements. Even when most members speak English, the trend is to establish, for instance, Chinese English-speaking congregations rather than to join existing white congregations. These churches, unintentionally or intentionally, are following the "homogenous" growth principle -- that congregations grow best when their members are culturally alike. These ethnic churches are growing in evangelical as well as mainline denominations. In fact, 27 percent of the evangelical Christian and Missionary Alliance's (C&MA) membership are non-anglophone, non-Caucasian congregations spanning 14 different languages. It is almost the case that for every Caucasian church that is planted, two ethnic churches are started in the C&MA. Canadian church leaders are not happy with this situation, claiming that it reflects the balkanization and conflict based on ethnicity in wider Canadian society. Immigrant church leaders, however, say that their churches help distinguish Christianity from "white culture." (Faith Today, M.I.P. Box 3745, Markham, ON L3R 0Y4 Canada)

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

● The college years are often viewed as a period when many young adults lose or minimize their faith, but college can also serve to strengthen religious life, particularly for evangelicals and Catholics, according to recent research. At the recent annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Toronto, M. Richard Cramer of the University of North Carolina (UNC) presented findings from a survey he conducted of 600 students on Christian commitment at the UNC in 1996 and in the spring of 1997. He found that Catholic and evangelical Protestant students displayed a common pattern in their faith lives: Both groups of Christians tended to move into two polarized camps of low and high commitment as they made their way through their college careers.

Among Catholics, 36.4 percent expressed a high religious commitment during their first year of college. Yet by their senior year, 52.9 percent showed a high commitment. On the low commitment end of the spectrum, 17.1 percent of first year Catholics showed such a tendency; by their senior year this low level of commitment had grown to 41 percent. Meanwhile, mainline Protestants became significantly less committed as a group during their college years. While 61.1 percent showed a high level of commitment in their first year, that rate dropped down to 22.9 percent by their senior year. "The mainline Protestants were the most vulnerable to higher education. But the reaction of many of the other [students to college education] is to reinforce their faiths," especially for Catholics who are a minority on campus (representing 12 percent of the student body), Cramer said.

● A mainline church movement pressing for the full involvement of gays and lesbians in congregations and leadership is steadily gaining members. Second Stone (July-August), an ecumenical gay and lesbian newspaper, reports that

the Reconciling Congregation Program, a movement that has emerged within mainline Protestant denominations over the past 20 years, has grown by 25 percent over the past year. As of February 1, 1997, 735 congregations, 36 campus ministries, and 29 regional associations in ten denominations have publicly stated that they support the full involvement of gays and lesbians. The "welcoming church movement" is growing at a pace of two new congregations every week. The expansion of the movement has taken place due to the beginning of new welcoming programs in more denominations. (Second Stone, P.O. Box 8340, New Orleans, LA 70182)

● Home-schooling continues to grow among Americans, although the movement has remained largely white and Christian, according to a recent study. Christianity Today magazine (July 14) reports that the growth rate of those being schooled at home is 15 percent, with a total of 1.2 million home-schooled children during 1996-97. The study, issued by the National Home Education Research Institute, found that 95 percent of those who participate in the home schooling movement are white and 90 percent are Christian. The religious affiliations included: independent fundamentalist or evangelical--23 percent (down from 26 percent in 1990); Baptist--19 percent (up from 18 percent) and nine percent independent charismatic (down from 14 percent).

● Results just coming in from a comprehensive survey of Australian church life shows similar conservative patterns of laity on many sexual issues to that of America. The Australian evangelical magazine On Being (August) reports that the 1996 National Survey of Church Life--which covers attendees from 23 Protestant denominations--found that 57 percent of respondents feel sexual relations are always wrong before marriage. Around 56 percent of Uniting Church attendees believe it is always or almost always wrong compared to 48 percent of Anglicans. Across the churches there is little support given for accepting homosexuals into leadership positions on the same basis as heterosexuals; in no denomination did support rise above 20 percent. The survey, which polled 2,000

persons, also found that 43 percent of Uniting Church attendees feel that gays should be accepted on the same basis as heterosexuals. A greater percentage (45 percent) do not give unconditional acceptance, saying that homosexuals should not be accepted on such a basis or stipulating that they should be non-practicing.

The Uniting Church--consisting of most former Presbyterian and Methodist churches--has taken a strongly liberal position on gay rights and, as with the mainline in U.S. and Canada, is meeting increasing protests and threats of leaving the denomination by conservatives. The recent denominational assembly gave a high profile to the gay caucus in the church, with the director of mission publicly "coming out" during the gathering. Actions taken locally that were critical of the ordination of gays and gay marriage were never brought to the floor, causing the Aboriginal delegates (along with evangelicals) to declare they may leave the denomination should it endorse homosexual relations. Critics claim that unrepresentative nature of the denomination was demonstrated at the assembly. It was found that 143 out of 261 voting members represented the bureaucracy. (On Being, P.O. Box 434, Hawthorn, Victoria, 3122 Australia)

### CEASE FIRE DOESN'T STOP RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

Despite the end of the war in Bosnia, nationalism continues to be an influential force among the religions in the former Yugoslavia, reports the New York Times (July 20). During the beginning of the conflict, nationalism "came from the top down," as leaders generated nationalistic fervor among the Croats, Serbs and Bosnians. After four years of war and propaganda, nationalism and ethnic hatred has "finally seeped down into the public's consciousness," writes Chris Hedges. Most acts of reconciliation and tolerance now come from individuals rather than the institutions charged with providing such a moral voice.

"The Serbian Orthodox Church, which remains closely linked to the Bosnian Serb leadership,

recently held a conference in Belgrade on the "genocide" against Serbs in the war. Although perhaps 90 percent of all victims in the war were Muslim and Croat, they were not mentioned." Hedges adds that the "Catholic church in Croatia has never denounced the egregious crimes committed by Croats against the Serb minority in this war. And Islamic leaders in Sarajevo have also readily given their blessing to the state."

### ISLAM INCREASINGLY ATTRACTING FORMER MARXIST INTELLECTUALS

A new breed of "intellectual convert is helping to reshape Islam across the Arab and Muslim world. An Associated Press report (July 7) notes that a new generation of Muslims have turned to the faith from Marxism, who are "more adept at post-modernism than the sayings of the prophet Mohammed. They speak English and French, are versed in the literature and history of the West, and follow the latest trends in Western thought." While these thinkers were once the target of Islamicists' criticisms, today they provide the public face of Islam, presenting their ideas in the media and finding support among Muslims as they seek to rethink Islam's relationship to the West, democracy and minorities.

These thinkers find continuity between their former positions as Marxists and those they hold today, writes Anthony Shadid. Adel Hussein, one of Egypt's leading Islamic thinkers, for instance, still believes in social justice and Third World development, but now sees Islam as the best way to persuade and mobilize the public on these issues. The phenomenon is especially strong in Egypt, but it has angered Arab intellectuals around the world. In a recent issue of the journal "Literature and Criticism," a reviewer criticized one such convert, saying that "he was neither an asset to the Marxists nor is he to the fundamentalists."

### FINDINGS & FOOTNOTES

☐ The emergence of new charismatic and evangelical networks of congregations and



seeker-sensitive worship is given in-depth treatment in Donald E. Miller's book **Reinventing American Protestantism** (University of California Press). Through survey research and case studies, Miller profiles three movements which he sees as being in the vanguard of change in the shape of American Protestantism: the Vineyard churches, Hope Chapel (a movement within the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel), and Calvary Chapel. These "new paradigm" churches are flexible in worship, decentralized, and experienced-based. Miller shows how many of the converts (many of whom were formerly Catholic) have been strongly influenced by the cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s, even as they seek conservative alternatives to mainline churches.

□ Two recent books demonstrate how computer technology and communications has created a fertile field for spiritual seeking and theological speculation. **The Soul of Cyberspace** (Harper San Francisco, \$22) by Jeff Zaleski may be the most comprehensive book to date on the effect that computers, and especially the Internet, is having on organized religion, as well as pondering the spiritual nature and functions of this medium. The book is organized around interviews that Zaleski conducted with a wide range of specialists and religious leaders--from the head of the Catholic Information Center on the Internet to Jaron Lanier, one of the founders of virtual reality. As might be expected, most religious leaders do not see the Internet replacing "real" religious communities in the future, but Zaleski suggests that institutional religion will be changed by the technology: He forecasts that hierarchical religions will have a difficult time in the anarchic and decentralized world of the Internet (although

the more orthodox religions will be the most interested in using it for proselytism); he thinks religions with less emphasis on the sacredness of physical reality (such as Buddhism and Hinduism) will be especially adept in cyberspace.

The contributors to the book **Virtual Gods** (Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, OR 97402 \$10.99) agree with Zaleski that cyberspace lends itself to Eastern and New Age faiths-- which, they claim, is one of the problems with the technology. The book, edited by Tal Brooke of the evangelical counter-cult Spiritual Counterfeits Project, shows the growing concern a segment of religious conservatives display about the Internet and other forms of computer technology. In one essay, [redacted] who has written on conspiracy themes [redacted] writes that this technology will foster a [redacted] like disavowal of God's creation with a "computer elite" dominating society.

□ **Millennium, Messiahs and Mayhem** (Routledge, \$18.95), edited by Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer, draws together an interesting group of essays on how apocalyptic and millennial thinking and practices are driving both religious and secular culture and subcultures. The authors find millennialism and an apocalyptic view of the world in far right religion, the environmentalism of Earth First!, technological faiths and philosophies (from eugenics to computers), as well as in Catholic Marian movements, Christian Reconstructionism, Mormonism and other new religious movements. Surrounding these contributions are essays that look at the broader questions of millennialism --the growing specter of violence in some of these groups, and what Palmer calls the "feminization of the millennium," as feminine imagery is gaining currency in such end-time visions.

## Religion Watch

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