

RELIGION WATCH

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MISSIONARIES 'GOING NATIVE' IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

Missionaries and mission fields are changing to the point where it sometimes appears difficult to tell one from the other. Such challenges as the resurgence of Islam and the loss of Western missionary dominance is radically changing the traditional face of mission work, according to several reports.

A recent major missionary conference provided a vivid illustration of how much Third World Christians are coming to the forefront of world missions. The Australian evangelical magazine *On Being* (September) reports that the recent Global Consultation on World Evangelization was the largest gathering of mission agency leaders on a global level since Edinburgh in 1910. Out of nearly 4,000 delegates who met in Pretoria, South Africa in July, only 20 percent came from the USA, Western Europe, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, suggesting the new mission involvement of Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Africans accounted for 62 percent of the delegates, and 24 percent were women. Only 5 percent were over 60 years of age, and 10 percent were less than 30 years old.

In an in-depth article in the journal *Theology Today* (July), Stan Skreslet notes that the growth of short term missionaries (rather than

career missionaries) and megachurches are bringing their own changes to mission work. Megachurches are developing their own departments of missions, which means that resources for mission--both funding and personnel-- that "used to be channeled through denominational structures are now managed locally, although they may be applied anywhere in the world," Skreslet writes.

But beyond these current trends, he finds three areas where missions and missionaries will face their greatest challenges. 1) The explosive growth of economic refugees or what have been called the "nomadic poor" around the world will eventually stimulate new mission responses and theological reflection on the plight of poor migrants. 2) The rise of non-governmental organizations (NGO's) to handle such issues as human development and human rights (rather than governments) will put increasing pressure on mission organizations to broaden their agendas and identities. Already, the World Council of Churches views the new importance of NGO's (such as Amnesty International) as a sign of what will be the future shape of mission. All this may further blunt the theological and evangelistic edge of mission organizations that also want to function as NGOs.

3) The growth of Islam is emerging as the most pressing issue for missions, according to Skreslet. Evangelicals and other conservative missions have targeted Islam as its main target for evangelism and religious freedom concerns. Ecumenical Christians, on the other hand, have encouraged dialogue with Muslims on social issues (such as human rights in Israel), but have yet to deal with the dogmatic assertions of "normative Islam" that often surround such issues. Such an approach is "far too equivocal and nuanced for most parishioners, who would prefer to know from their leaders whether Islam en toto is friend or foe."

The attempt to reach Muslims to faith in Christ is posing challenges to Christian identity and to Christianity's place among the world's religions, according to Andrews University theologian Jon Dybdahl. In the Seventh Day Adventist journal *Spectrum* (May), Dybdahl writes that the task of evangelizing Muslims [who have traditionally not been receptive to the Christian message] has in effect created a Christian-Islamic hybrid in several Muslim countries (which he will not name).

"Unbeknown to many [church] members, a small group of Christian missiologists interested in evangelizing Muslims has started a movement in a certain Muslim country. This movement accepts many major Christian beliefs, but if members were asked their religious affiliation, they would answer, 'Muslim.'"

If someone further questions their specific identity, members of this movement would say they are the "true remnant of Islam" When they are "called to defend their beliefs, they are able to do so from the Koran." Dybdahl adds that this movement continues to grow at a high rate-- "winning literally hundreds yearly." This movement has strong Adventist representation (with about 1,500 members),

and some Adventist leaders have given the initiative their tentative support. "Adventist Islamicists have begun quietly to suggest that Adventism should not consider itself merely a remnant of the Christian church, but a true remnant in *all* world religions.

Dybdahl told *RW* in a telephone interview that Adventists are especially suited for such a ministry to Muslims because of similar strict moral codes, dietary regulations and worship patterns. But he adds that evangelicals and other Christian groups have also been involved in this movement. The movement has faced a good deal of criticism and misunderstandings from both sides. Many Muslims and Christians see this as "heresy and syncretism," Dybdahl says; one reason he refuses to name places and names is that such believers might suffer government repression.

An example of the way doctrinal differences are handled by these believers could be seen in their approach to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. These Muslim-Christian believers would "re-state the doctrine in a way that would stress the oneness rather than the threeness of God." Dybdahl adds that the attempt to put Christian belief in a Muslim context is only one example of how some theologians and missionaries are seeking to redraw the boundaries between Christianity and the world religions. There are similar communities of Christian missionaries working with Hindus and Buddhists to graft belief in Christ within the framework of their faiths. (On Being, P.O. Box 434, Hawthorn Vic. 3122, Australia; Theology Today, P.O. Box 29, Princeton, NJ 08542; Spectrum, P.O. Box 5330, Tacoma Park, MD 20913)

PARISH NURSES BECOMING COMMON IN U.S. CONGREGATIONS

Parish nurses are becoming a fixture in American congregations, serving members medical and spiritual needs, according to Policy Review magazine (September/October). Nurses providing medical care in congregations emerged under Lutheran auspices in the mid-1980s, and since then the number of such practitioners has swelled to more than 3,000. Most parish nurses do not provide hands-on "invasive" treatments, and instead focus on preventative care (such as offering blood pressure tests after church services). They also refer parishioners with medical crises to physicians in the parish who might volunteer their medical services.

Many such nurses see themselves as involved in a "wellness ministry" that brings a pastoral and spiritual dimension to the treatment of members, writes Kristine Napier. Parish-nurse initiatives follow diverse models. Some congregations hire their own nurses while other nurses are sponsored through a foundation or non-profit arm of a hospital network. One such network is the Parish Nurse Program at Trinity Regional Healthy System in Moline Illinois, which serves both rural and urban congregations. (Policy Review, 214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002)

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

● The phenomena of people seeing visions of Jesus have taken place throughout history and are more complex than scientific and psychological explanations, according to a recent study. The new book

Visions of Jesus (Oxford University Press, \$30) by Phillip H. Wiebe, examines apparitions of Jesus throughout history and in contemporary times and finds as much diversity as similarities in such experiences. Wiebe, a religion professor at Trinity Western University in Canada, interviewed 30 individuals who reported seeing Jesus while they were awake, as well as examined historical records (including from the New Testament) of similar reports. He found such visions range from fleeting encounters that resemble dreams to experiences that are indistinguishable from those that mark the everyday perception of public objects. Such "Christic visions" often occur spontaneously, rather than being generated by deliberate attempts to produce them (such as through fasting and meditation). Often the phenomena were not confined to the visual dimension, since there was an interplay between several of the senses.

These visions seem to occur to people "who are unlikely to be classified as 'saints' and who would resist being described that way," Wiebe writes. Wiebe examines these occurrences through the lens of psychological, theological and neurophysiological theories and finds they do not explain all of them. In one of the more dramatic accounts, a whole Pentecostal congregation in Oakland, Calif., claimed they saw a figure resembling Jesus materialize in front of them; one of the members even filmed the event. Although the film was later stolen, Wiebe saw it early in the 1960s (though he does not recollect all of it) and members still stand by their experience. Wiebe does not come to any final conclusion about these occurrences. He adds, however, that the neurophysiological explanations cannot fully account for such phenomena as mass apparitions nor do the psychological theories (concerning delusions) explain them, since subjects showed few signs of mental

disturbance.

● **Far from signifying mental illness, the charismatic Christian experience and practice may be associated with emotional stability and sociability, according to recent research.** In a study of 222 male clergy from the Anglican Church in Wales, T. Hugh Thomas of Trinity College in Carmarthen measured their attitudes against such standard diagnostic scales of personality and emotional well-being as the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire. In the Review of Religious Research (September), Thomas writes that the Anglican clergy that responded to the charismatic movement, while diverse among themselves, scored higher on the extroversion scale and lower on the neuroticism scale, with no significant relationship between the charismatic experience and psychoticism.

"In other words, among male Anglican clergy the charismatic experience is associated with stable extroversion," Thomas writes. Such a finding conflicts with past research which has linked charismatic activity with neurotic behavior. (Review of Religious Research, 108 Marist Hall, Catholic University in America, Washington, DC 20004)

● **Sexual abuse is committed more often by volunteers and other non-clergy in religious organizations than by clergy, according to a new report.** In a survey of 1,700 congregations by the Church Law and Tax Report newsletter, it was found that volunteer workers are the most frequent abusers, making up half of all sexual misconduct offenses in churches. In citing the study, Christianity Today magazine (October 6) adds that 30 percent of such offenses are committed by paid staff and another 20 percent are committed by another child.

The number of allegations of sexual

molestation against children was found to have grown in the 1,700 congregations--from 0.8 in 1995 to two percent last year. While screening of staff and volunteers is said to help in handling the abuse (although only a minority of congregations do so), the rise of peer counseling among adults in churches presents a new challenge. In the growing number of small groups within congregations, members who have little training in counseling are involved in discussing intimate matters with other participants. (Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188)

ORTHODOX "FUNDAMENTALISM" FINDING PLACE IN GEORGIA?

The recent withdrawal of the Georgian Orthodox Church from the World Council of Churches has shown new faultlines in Eastern Orthodoxy, this time involving "Orthodox fundamentalism." In an interview in the Russian Orthodox Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate's Office of External Affairs (July 19), Georgian Orthodox official Vassily Kobahidze says that the decision to withdraw from the WCC was an effort to keep peace in a church body that is experiencing schism. **Historic and influential monasteries in the Georgian Orthodox Church have been "taken over" by "fundamentalists" who condemn any ecumenical involvement as a heresy,** according to Kobahidze. Five of these monasteries presented an open letter last spring to the Georgian Patriarch informing him they were refusing eucharistic communion with the church because of its participation in such ecumenical organizations as the WCC.

Political leaders and the press are said to have joined the bandwagon, taking the side of the monasteries against the church and even instigating violence and attacks against priests. Kobahidze says that these political forces have supported the former President

PROMISE KEEPERS' RACIAL UNITY THEME HURTING GROWTH?

The Christian men's organization Promise Keepers has been hailed as the most vibrant expression of evangelical Christianity today, but there are indications that the movement may be peaking in its influence, according to observers. At the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Toronto last summer, Wheaton College sociologist James Mathieson noted that attendance has been down at recent Promise Keepers conventions around the U.S. The "in-house" explanation for this is that the recent emphasis on racial reconciliation is "not selling well among the white middle-class participants," Mathieson says. He cited one recent conference where the announced topic was racial reconciliation. While the original expectation was for 3,000 attendees, only 700 attended.

A report in Christianity Today magazine (September 1) confirms Mathieson's observations. While from 1990 to 96, PK experienced an explosive growth rate, in 1997, the group's budget has "come down to earth." Declining attendance by as much as 25 percent at its 19 major stadium events, the organization's main income source, has played a role in "streamlining its office staff and moving to a system of regional offices rather than offices in every state." PK has decreased its 1997 budget by around \$30 million. Another reason attendance may be down is that many who might have attended the convention were planning to go to Stand in the Gap, a national meeting in Washington at which no attendance fee was charged. It is not yet clear whether the high attendance reported at the Washington event will signal a rebounding of the movement.

The drive for reconciliation in Promise

Keepers is even meeting obstacles among minorities, reports the Washington Post (September 25). There is wariness among black churches about how sensitive the organization is to African-Americans and how it may affect the black church community. Black pastors have criticized PK for viewing their presence as tokens, avoiding social and community issues and for not working with such popular leaders as Jesse Jackson. Other minorities, such as Asians and Messianic Jews, have complained that their presence has been ignored in PK's call for racial reconciliation--a complaint that is now being addressed by the organization's leadership.

UNIFICATION CHURCH SHARING THE BLESSING OR PHASING ITSELF OUT?

The Unification Church is downplaying membership in its church and is upholding a more broadly based movement that focuses on giving "blessings" to families and recognizing Sun Myung Moon and Mrs. Moon as "true parents," according to recent articles. Yoshihiko Joshua Masuda, a theologian from the Unification Church's Sun Moon University in South Korea, sees a de-emphasis on church membership in the UC's recent practice of holding Blessing services for couples who are not members but are part of the more broadly based Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU). In fact, the institutional names of the Unification Church and the HSA-UWC have been in "disuse" since last April, said Masuda, who delivered a paper on the subject at the Association for the Sociology of Religion meetings in Toronto last August. Moon has claimed in 1994 that the UC was supposed to wither away after completing its mission of inviting people to the Blessing.

Organizers of the Blessing have claimed that

7,000 Christian ministers have attended seminars sponsored by the Family Federation in the U.S., according to Faith Today (July/August), a Canadian evangelical magazine. Evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell and Ralph Reed have participated in such activities. In promotional literature sent to churches from the federation, there is little mention made of the group's connection to Moon, writes David Dawes.

Moon's establishment of the FFWPU still remains a puzzle to new religion and anti-cult specialists. In the Danish magazine Spirituality in East and West (Number 1), an article says that "It is possible that no one really knows what will happen [to the UC]. Maybe Moon once again has been dreaming that all other churches will follow his example and drop their special organizations in order to unite and unify all believers worldwide, [including] the Moonies." Moon is said to be "on the wane" and fervently attempting to bring about the kingdom of God before he dies. This accounts for Moon's increasing preaching on the importance of marriage and his universal parenthood, as well as his ever-growing blessing services (he plans to bless 3 billion marriages in 2000). Unificationists, however, still continue their proselytism. Recently they have been doing home visitations and sprinkling people with holy water. "In this way they perform a purification blessing which will be announced with gigantic numbers in order to express the border-breaking ability of the community which was once called the Unification Church." (Faith Today, M.I.P. Box 3745, Markham, Ont., L3R 0Y4, Canada; Spirituality in East and West, The Dialog Center, 46, Katrinebjergvej, DK 8200 Arhus N, Denmark)

COVENANT MARRIAGE FINDS RELIGIOUS SUPPORT

Several U.S. states' experiments with "covenant marriages" and other measures to decrease divorce are finding support and reinforcement from religious groups. The Weekly Standard magazine (September 29) reports that Louisiana's recent covenant marriage act offers married couples the choice of a "high test" version of marriage; counseling is required both before marriage and divorce, and no-fault divorce is available only after a two-year separation, as opposed to six months under the existing state law. Although the results are not yet evident, "friends and foes of Louisiana's innovation believe it is portentous. Indeed, similar legislation is pending in Indiana and California, not to mention bills in half a dozen other states to either restrict no-fault divorce or add counseling requirements before marriage or divorce," writes Christopher Caldwell.

There is "huge sympathy" for covenant marriages among the religious. "One of the best indicators is the announced willingness of clergymen to use the state law as a test of the seriousness of affiliated couples. Several Episcopal and Baptist ministers have already gone on the record as saying they will grant church marriages only to those who are serious enough to undertake a covenant-marriage commitment," Caldwell writes. Although there is a secular dimension to these measures, seen in such supporters as Amitai Etzioni of the Communitarian movement, the sponsor of the Louisiana law is 34-year-old Tony Perkins, a Republican legislator who is active in the evangelical Promise Keepers movement. (The Weekly Standard, 1150 17th St., N.W., Suite 505, Washington, DC 20036-4617)

Gamsahudri and have an interest in fomenting instability. "Ultra-Orthodox" groups from Greece (such as those supporting traditionalist Bishop Cyprian) and Bulgaria have distributed their own literature to win over Georgian clergy-- successfully, in many cases, because of the lack of theological literature in the Georgian language. Orthodox traditionalists (or "fundamentalists," according to Kobahidze) in other parts of the world are cheered by the impact the Georgian monks had on their church. In *Orthodox Life* (No. 4), a journal of the traditionalist Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, an article states that what has transpired in Georgia "has demonstrated that serious opposition to the heresy of ecumenism can bear fruit."

The Georgian monks were said to be "inspired" by a protest in the city of Tbilisi, when two traditionalist priests organized a public burning of "one ton of sectarian literature." [by sectarian, they mean foreign religious groups now active in Georgia]. The burning was done with the permission of the Tbilisi authorities, according to the journal. **[Such "fundamentalists" or, more accurately, traditionalists are often in opposition to state support of Orthodox churches. This can be seen in the recent legislation against foreign religions in Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church was instrumental in passing such a bill, but traditionalist Orthodox groups in Russia and in the diaspora have protested the bill, believing it could easily be used to restrict their activities.]** (*Orthodox Life*, Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordansville, NY 13361)

COLLECTIVE SPIRITUALITY BEHIND YOUTH CROWDS FOR POPE?

The massive turnout for a world youth day with Pope John Paul II signaled to many

observers an unexpected and growing religious hunger among French young adults for religious faith. But such yearnings appear to be far from strictly Catholic devotion, writes Alain Woodrow in *The Tablet* (August 30), a British Catholic magazine. **More than one million young people attended the final meeting of the event, far exceeding the expectations of church officials as well as secular critics.**

Woodrow writes that behind the extraordinary success of such collective forms of worship is a "diffuse religiosity, often bordering on superstition.... Whereas few teenagers set foot in their parish church to attend Sunday Mass, they will happily spend Easter at the Protestant ecumenical monastery at Taiz , Whitsun at Paray-le-Monial to pray with the charismatics, or their summer holidays in Lourdes tending the sick. **They prefer emotional mass meetings to individual devotion; they identify more readily with charismatic figures like Mother Teresa, Abb  Pierre of John Paul II than with priests or theologians, and they are more at home with the school chaplains, whom they know and admire, than parish priests or local bishops, representatives of an institutional Church they have rejected.**"

The pope's "courage and sincerity make him a role model for a young generation who are disillusioned by politicians, teachers and parents and who have coined the slogan 'no future.'" But Woodrow sees an undercurrent of conflict between the organizers and many of the attendees of such events (which have taken place around the world). **The world youth days are part of the pope's strategy for the re-evangelization of Europe.** "The pope believes in a powerful, visible and obedient Church. The large assemblies of Catholics who congregate during his pastoral visits are the best expression of this muscular Christianity...It is interesting to note that those

who organize the youth days are the trusted 'Pope's legions': Opus Dei, the Focolare, Comunione e Liberazione, charismatics and the rest, while those who attend are often the vast mass of drifters, of semi-believers, those who seek the warmth and emotion of a mass meeting, whether it be Woodstock, a Billy Graham rally or St. Peter's Square." (The Tablet, 1 King St., Clifton Walk, London, W6 0Q2 England).

FINDINGS & FOOTNOTES

❑ Over the summer, the number one best-selling book in religion on the list of **Publisher's Weekly** has been Michael Drosnin's **The Bible Code** (Simon & Schuster, \$25.00). Endorsed by some eminent scholars such as two members of the Israeli Academy of Arts and Sciences and members of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, the work claims to have found in the Hebrew Bible an intentional code which when deciphered would deliver accurate prophecies of forthcoming major world events.

The August issue of the **Bible Review** features articles that directly challenge the authenticity of the work. Ronald Hendel of

Southern Methodist University states the Bible Code is a "hoax". Rabbi Shlomo Sternberg, a specialist of computerized mathematics at Harvard, likens "The Bible Code" to current interest in "UFO sightings, astrology, psychic counseling and the like". Both scholars agree Drosnin misuses Hebrew texts inexcusably, brings a late twentieth century mindset to writings several millennia old, and utilizes a computer mathematics form of logic which falls short of being as scientific as the author claims. They conclude that nowhere in Old Testament writings is there evidence of interest in encoding predictions of future events into the text of the scriptures. For more information on this issue of the Bible Review, write: 4710 41st St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20016--By Erling Jorstad, RW contributing editor.

CORRECTION: The article on Darwinism in the July-August issue of RW may have given the impression that writer Barbara Ehrenreich held to the critical positions of this school of thought as represented by postmodernism. Ehrenreich was actually criticizing such views.

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Inside This Issue:

- *Muslim-Christian Hybrids?*
- *The Unification Non-Church?; Examining V.*