

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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## GRADUAL MOVE TO POLITICAL RIGHT AMONG AMERICAN JEWS?

New patterns in Jewish immigration, as well as ideological changes among Jewish intellectuals and professionals are likely to accelerate the trend of American Jews moving to the political right, according to two reports.

Moment magazine (October) reports that the large number of Russian, Syrian and Iranian and even Israeli Jews are already changing American Jewish voting patterns. The once strongly liberal Jewish culture in New York and the West coast are feeling these demographic effects, since many of these newcomers are Republicans or conservative Democrats (particularly the Russians). This trend can be seen in the greater tendency of Jews to vote Republican in New York's mayoral and senatorial races. The "world view based on liberal political and religious views" shared by the organized Jewish community--such as the federations and pro-Israel lobby--is no longer intact, as the Jewish community is facing increasing "democratization" from within.

The growth of Orthodox Judaism--particularly the right-wing branch--is also creating a "new breed of Jewish political populists," such as Noach Dear, a conservative Democratic City Councilman. "Perhaps the most important factor shaping a Jewish move to the right is the rise of a new crop of younger Jewish intellectuals," writes Murray Friedman. Such

younger writers and thinkers as Dennis Praeger, Michael Medved, David Frum, Lisa Schiffren (a former speechwriter for Dan Quayle) have been influenced by the older generation of neoconservatives (such as Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz) but are more religiously observant than their elders (many are active in their synagogues). Also, Jewish academics such as Alan Mittleman at Muhlenberg College and Jonathan Sarna at Brandeis have been in the forefront of questioning the strict church-state separation position held by many American Jews. Friedman concludes that a widespread Jewish move to the right is not certain and will meet resistance, ultimately depending on whether conservatives will accept the more moderating and pluralistic element that Jews may bring to the movement.

Another often overlooked dimension of this trend is the influence of Jews who have converted to Christianity as well as conservative Jews within the Christian right movement. The Washington Post (October 21) reports that both Jews and Jewish converts play a leading role in many leading Christian conservative organizations--"from the Christian Coalition to the Council for National Policy, the movement's nerve center." Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. says there has "been a real transition in the Jewish view of working with conservative Christians, from real disdain to something more like ambivalence."

Such converts as Jay Sekulow of the American Center for Law and Justice (founded by Pat Robertson) say they bring a different, more aggressive style to evangelical politics. Yet the strong presence of Jewish converts in the Christian right may ultimately be a divisive force in the new Jewish-Christian conservative alliance. Eliot Abrams of the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center says that the tendency of converts to insist that they are still Jewish may make the new cooperation between conservative Jews and Christians more difficult. "Converts have chosen a new faith; it's a free country. But converts who claim to still be Jews, that's a matter of deceit," he says. (Moment, 4710 41st St., N.W., Washington, DC 20016)

#### **BIBLE TRANSLATION DEBATE DIVIDES EVANGELICAL COMMUNITY**

More than such headline grabbers as the Pensacola revival, the Disney boycott, or China's most favored nation status, the most controversial issue among evangelicals continues to center on new translations of the Bible and whether they should adjust pronoun references and other gender issues to harmonize with current usage in mainline translations and with new evangelical scholarship. Christianity Today magazine (October 27) reports that on the one side, scholars are reaffirming that translations must adhere always to the original text, leaving the matter of understanding up to the pastors, laity, and teachers. The other camp insists that the translators must themselves make the changes or reword traditional passages to make the non-sexist meanings of the scriptures understandable to the readers. Editor David Neff suggests that most translators do not want to eliminate gender differences in family life and church or promote women's

ordination. Further, some translators continue to be influenced by the traditional evangelical missionary impulse to present the Bible in terms and words that non-Christians can understand. More conservative translators believe the scriptures must be preserved against contemporary fads and current vernacular speech.

To further develop these two perspectives, Professors Wayne Grudem and Grant R. Osborne of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, Illinois) present extended arguments, and reply to each other's positions. Grudem asserts that the generic use of he-him-his, or man is not sexist but clearly reflects the Biblical authors' common understanding of humanity by these terms. By using these words, the authors are not being exclusivist as critics charge. The original authors did not intend to exclude women. To bow to today's fad for gender-inclusive language is simply to ignore the explicit intent of the authors of the Bible.

Osborne rejects these arguments and insists that translations that are aimed at general audiences (as opposed to scholarly) should indeed reflect inclusiveness for clarity and accuracy in passages that refer to men and women together. "They" or its equivalent is closer to the intentions of the writers of scripture than "he" and its equivalent. Osborne argues this is not a surrender to a feminist agenda but an implementation of the desire to communicate accurately and clearly. (Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188).-- *By Erling Jorstad, RW contributing editor.*

## **IMMIGRATION BRINGS CHANGES AND TENSIONS TO SOUTHERN CHURCHES**

New immigrants arriving in the U.S. South are changing and in some cases challenging traditional practices of churches in this region, reports the Wall Street Journal (October 21). Jennifer Lee writes that "A flood of immigrants--Jamaicans, Vietnamese, Hispanics and others--are forcing new compromises in the South's traditionally white, conservative churches. The arrivals are part of an immigration boom sparked by strong economies in states like Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee. In metropolitan Atlanta alone, one of every 10 residents is foreign born, according to a recent study by Georgia State University." Unlike earlier waves of immigration where newcomers arrived in enclaves with other immigrants from the same home countries, this new influx is largely in suburban areas where the different groups mingle and sometimes collide.

Such heterogeneous populations often means that different immigrant groups have to share congregations, sometimes clashing on differing worship styles. While some churches try to adjust to the newcomers--such as by creating several services--hoping that they will pump life into congregations affected by white flight, others see the dissolving of decades-old traditions. Immigrants' transient lifestyles test Southern churches that are home to several generations of families. Some immigrants find it difficult to make a commitment to congregations, since they are not sure of their legal status or employment opportunities, Lee adds.

## **EASTERN RITE NOW AN OPTION FOR DISAFFECTED CATHOLICS**

American Catholics dissatisfied with the post-Vatican II modern liturgy are increasingly moving to Eastern-Rite parishes where the liturgy closely resembles Eastern Orthodoxy, reports the New Oxford Review magazine (October). Eastern Rite Catholic parishes originated in Eastern European and other non-Western countries that kept their own cultural traditions and liturgies, such as icon veneration, while maintaining loyalty to the pope. There are approximately 500,000 Eastern Rite or Byzantine Catholics in the U.S. Most of the Catholics moving over to the Eastern Rite churches complain that the "Roman Rite" has become too secularized, deemphasizing traditional practices, such as confession and the Rosary.

Yet such Catholics don't want to convert to Eastern Orthodoxy or take the anti-Vatican II position of many traditionalists who have gravitated to the Latin Masses now permitted in many dioceses. Patrick Madrid writes that the "Eastern Rite's ancient expression of the Catholic faith is attractive to Catholics who hunger for contact with the holy mysteries of the faith. Many, perhaps most, of the Roman Rite Catholics I know who attend a Byzantine Rite parish do not seek to change rites canonically. Rather, they register at a Byzantine parish and remain in the Roman Rite. The numbers are still small, considering the Catholic population in the U.S., but the trend seems to be growing." (New Oxford Review, 1069 Kains Ave., Berkeley, CA 94706)

## **GROWING MILLENNIAL INTEREST IS FOUND ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES**

What once was considered a fad among religious extremists has now become the

subject of serious, extended study on American campuses. Across the country scholars and publishers are expanding their investigations of what the appearance of the year 2000 means for the present and future of American religion. At least two major anthologies have already appeared on this subject. The Chronicle of Higher Education (Oct.24) reports that at least 10 well known colleges are offering courses on 2000 and millennium themes. These include Notre Dame, the University of Illinois and California State University, Long Beach.

In early November, the Center for Millennial Studies at Boston University offered in early November an extended open seminar for scholars exploring "The Apocalyptic Views of Unbelievers Among Christians, Jews, and Muslims." Well-known scholars such as Harvard University zoologist Stephen Jay Gould are contributing to a discussion once looked at as the domain for fringe doomsday sayers. A leading writer on the subject, Daniel Wojcik of the University of Oregon, offers an explanation for this surge of interest. "It's how people project hopes and fear on the date that's important. Somehow there's been an acknowledgment of this as an important American phenomenon."--*By Erling Jorstad*

### **MARIANNE WILLIAMSON IS RATED THE HIGH PRIESTESS OF POP RELIGION**

From a tradition which has produced the likes of Aimee Semple McPherson and Kathryn Kuhlman, today's new high priestess of popular religion has become Marianne Williamson. Starting in the early 1990s with best selling books, "A Course in Miracles" (39 weeks on the New York Times best seller list) and "A Woman's Wrath" (19 weeks on the same list), Williamson continues to find a

hugely enthusiastic audience for her many lectures, seminars, workshops and media appearances. In fact, a profile in Mother Jones (Nov./Dec.) magazine suggests that she is the most influential female personality on the American spirituality scene today.

Observers find that beyond her highly professional stage presence her appeal lies with her ability to affirm the obvious human longings for peace, joy, and fulfillment in the here and now. She draws on traditional faith and gives it a contemporary self-help accessibility. Not denigrating intellectual questions, she relates her own struggles for peace of soul to the needs she understands are facing her listeners. Beyond that, observers say, she has tapped into the non-denominational character of today's audiences, teaching that the particulars of doctrine and church life are not as important as the intent of the human spirit to find fulfillment. Besides having a thoroughly professional public relations staff, she is finding strong support for her teaching that the spiritual seeker can find gratification without undue sacrifice or compromise with established faith communities.

Recently, Williamson's messages have included more references to helping the poor and stressing that some societal problems can and must be addressed by public policy makers. She says that "spiritual seeking without service is self-indulgent" She even plans to lead tours of the Washington, DC 's "halls of power" next spring, including famous senators' offices, reports the Utne Reader (Nov./Dec.). Williamson has a name for party faithful who hold to her view of "holistic politics (although she said she is not running for office)--the American Renaissance Alliance.(Mother Jones, 731 Market St., Suite 600, San Francisco, CA 94103; Utne Reader, 1624 Harmon Place,



Suite 330, Minneapolis, MN 55403) --By  
Erling Jorstad

### **TIBETAN BUDDHISTS EXPERIENCING GROWING INTERNAL DIVISIONS**

Many observers were shocked last year when a group of Tibetan Buddhist monks in Britain waged a public campaign against their leader, the Dalai Lama. But this conflict revealed simmering yet sharp differences between more traditional and "modern" Buddhists. In the Journal of Contemporary Religion (October), David Kay writes that Tibetan Buddhism has long been divided between an "inclusive orientation," meaning an openness to the world and other faiths--personified by the current Dalai Lama--and exclusivist groups who stress the purity of the faith. This division among the exiled Tibetan Buddhist community is expressed in a controversy over the status and nature of deities (known as "rDo rje shugs Idan") whose purpose is to protect the Buddha's teachings and its practitioners.

The traditionalists would claim to worship this deity as a Buddha while more modern Tibetan Buddhists say such reverence should not be shown to such a "worldly deity." This dispute is far from an esoteric one. The Dalai Lama has criticized the traditionalist's position for dividing the Tibetan community and hurting the Tibetan cause, playing into the hands of its Chinese opponents. The Dalai Lama is speaking out against a faction "who are opposed to his modern, ecumenical and democratic political vision and who believe that the Tibetan government should champion a fundamentalist version of Tibetan Buddhism as a state religion in which the dogmas "of the more modern schools in the tradition are discredited. The controversy has also brought to the surface new divisions between Western Buddhist groups, some of whom have taught

such controversial doctrines while being unaware of their divisive nature. (Journal of Contemporary Religion, Centre for New Religions, Dept. of Theology, King's College, University of London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS UK)

### **THE FAMILY'S UFO TEACHINGS COME OUT OF CLOSET**

While the Family, formerly the Children of God, has drawn a lot of controversy in its short existence, the group's increasing emphasis on the importance of UFOs in their theology is likely to generate new criticism and controversy, according to a recent report. The Family has been reportedly moving away from its unorthodox beginnings, which included allegations of authoritarian leadership and polygamy and free love among members, to a more mainstream, evangelical identity. In the Journal of Contemporary Religion (October), Mikael Rothstein writes that such teachings were originally introduced by the founder of the movement David "Mo" Berg.

Berg viewed UFOs as carrying visitors of superior intelligence and even claimed in other writings that they were angels. The UFOs were viewed as biblical "signs in the sky" to unbelievers. Rothstein writes that although members have in the past downplayed these teachings in their attempt to be seen in the Christian mainstream, since Berg's death they have become more outspoken on UFOs. Viewing the death of their leader as a sign of Christ's impending return, members now also identify such "signs" as UFOs and the approach of the year 2000 as newly relevant end-time teachings. Rothstein concludes that the negative views of UFOs among evangelicals and other anti-cultists antagonistic to the Family may have actually compelled the



Family to respond to such phenomena in a more positive vein.

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

● **Over a quarter of American Mormons claim an evangelical, "born-again" experience, according to a Barna Poll.** Pollster George Barna has recently been finding large groups of believers outside of the evangelical mainstream--such as Roman Catholics. Now he finds that 26 percent of Mormons surveyed say they are born again by the following definition: they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus as their savior, thus assuring them of heaven. While conservative Christians see Mormons as holding to heterodox beliefs, Barna explains in an article in Christian News (October 13) that most Mormons, Catholics and Protestants are "unable to describe the basic doctrinal views of their church. Consequently, it is quite possible for people from any of these groups to possess theological perspectives which are inherently contradictory." Christian News, 3277 Boeuf Lutheran Rd., New Haven, MO 63068-2213).

● **Promise Keepers, the evangelical men's ministry, may be more socially liberal than many critics have claimed.** In a Washington Post (October 11) poll of 882 participants of the recent Promise Keepers gathering in Washington, DC., many of the demographics assumed for those involved were confirmed: largely white, evangelical, middle-class with Republican leanings. Forty six percent of the Promise Keepers were Republican, 28 percent were Independent and only 15 percent were Democrat. But the stereotype of Promise Keepers as front-runners for the Christian Right and reflexive political conservatives was not always backed up by the poll.

When asked about the future of PK, respondents mainly agreed that there should continue to be stadium assemblies, but only 28 percent wanted the organization to become more politically involved. Ninety five percent wanted to expand efforts to help inner city neighborhoods and churches. Asked if they have favorable or unfavorable impressions of certain public figures, 32 percent said they had favorable impression of Bill Clinton, compared to 59 percent who had an unfavorable attitude toward the President.

Forty three percent had a favorable position on Newt Gingrich, compared to 38 percent unfavorable, and 19 percent who did not know or refused to answer. When asked who should make the big decisions in the family, 95 percent said they should be shared by both spouses. Opinion was about evenly divided (44 percent) about whether the men preferred their wives not to work outside the home.

● **The number of evangelical Christian schools is slowly but steadily growing in Germany, according to the news service Idea (October 8).** During the past 10 years, private evangelical schools have become increasingly popular, even among those from a non-Christian background, says Gottfried Meskemper of the Christian School Association in Bremen. There are only 46 evangelical schools in Germany, but 10 years ago there were only eight such institutions. For many parents these schools "better social atmosphere and the low level of violence" are important factors in sending their children there, according to the article. (Idea, e.V., Postfach 18 20, D-35528 Wetzlar, Germany)



## AUM MAKES COMEBACK DESPITE RESTRICTIONS

After being outlawed with its leader imprisoned, Aum Supreme Truth has survived and is proselytizing and even drawing new members, reports the Washington Post (September 28). Two-and-a-half years after being charged with carrying out gas attacks in Tokyo's subways, Aum's leader Shoko Ashara is in jail and facing a probable death sentence. Authorities say that of the 427 Aum members arrested following the gas attack, 138 have rejoined the group, many after serving jail time. There may be as many as 2,000, or at least 1,000 current members in Aum--down from 10,000 at its peak. But members continue their devotion to Ashara, living in communal dormitories, meditating to recordings of his voice and studying his writings.

Although Aum is now bankrupt (through government action) and tries to keep quiet in the midst of widespread hostility directed toward the group, they are also busy again operating businesses (such as selling computers). Most Aum members deny that Ashara preached violence. Araki, the Aum spokesman, said the group no longer adheres to such teachings that include the doctrine of killing someone to enhance one's status in the next world. This doctrine, however, is "still clearly highlighted on the Aum Internet home page," reports Kevin Sullivan.

## FINDINGS & FOOTNOTES

○ Religious involvement in the environmental movement receives in-depth treatment in the current issue of **Social Compass** (September) an international journal of the sociology of religion. Articles in this issue focus on interfaith environmental work, the emergence of environmental concern among evangelicals, the New Age

center of Sedona, Arizona (said to be a "vortex" of spiritual energy) and environmental attitudes among Australian Christians. Particularly noteworthy is Mark Shibley's and Jonathon Wiggins' study on the loose coalition of churches and denominations involved in the interfaith National Religious Partnership for the Environment. They find that clashing models of environmental activism and theology emerge among the different members of the coalition. The National Council of Churches espouses eco-justice themes (linking environmentalism with social justice concerns), while the Catholic, evangelical and Jewish groups in the NRPE take a "stewardship" approach that concentrates more strictly on an individual's responsibility for the environment. Despite charges of New Age, pantheistic influences in the new religious concern for the environment, there is little sympathy for the such "creation spirituality" views among NRPE members. For information on obtaining this issue, write: Social Compass, Sage Publications, 6 Bonhill St., London, EC2A 4PU, UK

○ **God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission.** (University of California Press, \$24.95) by R. Marie Griffith. joins the burgeoning collection of studies of evangelical and fundamentalist Christian women, and it is a worthy addition. Dr. Griffith explores the roles women play within Pentecostalism, using history and ethnography to trace the importance of the Women's Aglow Fellowship within that movement. The author skillfully deconstructs the various meanings the doctrine of female submission has had for Pentecostal women, and shows how women are achieving power and liberation, both in their personal spiritual lives and in more visible leadership roles.

At the same time, Griffith is unafraid to explore the mixed feelings her subjects have regarding their status in relation to men. Her subjects seem to freely express their resentment at the doctrine of submission,



while yet choosing to live with that doctrine. This is a candid, yet celebratory look at one of the most vital movements within modern Christianity. It will be of interest to anyone interested in American religious culture, women's studies, or religion in general. --By Lin Collette, a freelance writer and researcher based in Pawtucket, R.I.

○The new book **Search for Common Ground** (Our Sunday Visitor Books, \$24.95) is one of the most comprehensive studies of American Catholics to be undertaken in recent years. The book, by James Davidson, Andrea Williams, Richard Lamanna, Jan Stenftenagel, Kathleen Maas Wighert, William Whalen and Patricia Wittberg, finds that the most significant differences among American Catholics are based on their generations and their proximity to the Second Vatican Council. The study, based on surveys, case studies and focus groups, finds that those born after Vatican II (both baby boomers and busters) are more alienated from many church teachings than older generations (despite reports to the contrary, there are few signs of a rebound to more traditional faith among younger generations). In translating their findings into practical advice in the concluding chapter, the co-authors argue that the pluralism in the church on many issues (such as involving sexuality and gender) does not mean that common ground can't be

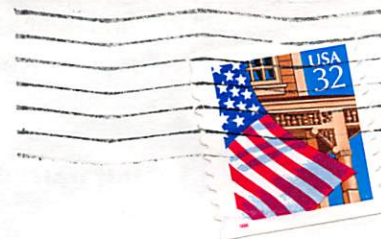
reached among members. Their surveys show that there is a common belief in many Catholic basic teachings among all age groups.

### On/File: An Ongoing Survey of People, Groups and Movements Impacting Today's Religious Scene

1) **Partners for Sacred Places** is a new organization that attempts to save old and overlooked congregation buildings not so much as architectural treasures as social resources for neighborhoods and communities. Researchers assembled by the project studied six cities and found that congregations "provide, on average, four programs serving people in need from the greater community" and that these programs are at risk because the deteriorating buildings that house them are at risk. Partners for Sacred Places finds that most of the served people are not members of the congregations in question. Thus if these congregations die, their surrounding neighborhoods will likewise suffer. The Brookings Institution recently sponsored an event that brought together William J. Bennett, former Secretary of Education, and Senator Joseph Lieberman, a Democrat from Connecticut, as well as congregation members and social scientific researchers. (Source: **Sightings**, October 30)

## Religion Watch

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