

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

Volume 13 Number 2

## SCHOLARS FIND GAP BETWEEN BELONGING AND BELIEVING GROWING

The theme of "Borders and Boundaries" of the recent joint conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) and Religious Research Association (RRA) was borne out in the many sessions exploring the ways traditional religious boundaries are being breached by believers. Approximately 550 social scientists specializing in religion gathered together in San Diego in early November to discuss such topics as the impact of liberation theology on religion and culture, as well as the new lines being drawn between church and state and science and religion. The boundaries and gaps between religious "belonging," such as church membership, and religious "believing," which involves spirituality and individual beliefs, received a good deal of attention.

A number of sessions dealt with the implications of changes in religious affiliation and membership, a common theme at past SSSR/RRA meetings. Jay Demerath of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst pointed out that it is by no means clear that religious "switching" is actually increasing among believers. It seems likely, he says, that

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a higher number of conservative church dropouts are moving to more liberal churches than the reverse. In his research, he found that religion is increasingly becoming a marketable commodity, and that churches continue to recruit members by publicizing their secular offerings, such as day care, convenient locations, and social activities. He found that often the primary motivation for switching churches centered on life events, such as marriage or job transfers.

Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge in Alberta confirmed these trends, but added that in Canada at least, religious changes seemed to result from the continuing move by Canadians from a mood of "deference to defiance" in relation to the churches, with individualism and relativism dominating society. He suggested that churches should concentrate their efforts on "stayers," rather than expend all their efforts on evangelization of non-believers or non-members of their church. Churches should remember that believers often circulate among "the religious families" of their parents, and that believers are looking for appealing congregations rather than denominations.

In one session, Penny Marler and Kirk Hadaway of the United Church Board for

Homeland Ministries reported on their continuing research into church attendance patterns. They presented research that showed that the reality of church attendance is lower than the numbers usually presented. Using poll data from 1972 through 1996, they showed that the gap between believer claims of attendance and actual church attendance has increased dramatically. They attribute this to a rise in religious individualism, in which believers are creating less formal but more personal forms of worship that do not need a church for validation. One noteworthy observation concerned the continuing hold that the Roman Catholic Church has over its people, in the sense that many believers continue to consider themselves devout Catholics although they may not regularly attend Mass.

Other researchers confirm that actual church attendance is much less than that claimed. Robert Miller of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia discussed a nine-year renewal project in which parishes conducted extensive self-studies via questionnaires distributed to parishioners, a process so far completed by 259 of 287 parishes. In a study of all parishes participating in the program, he noted that while reported church attendance averaged 75%, observed attendance was actually 33%. In parishes with a 75% or better return rate for surveys, the gap was only slightly less--74% reported attendance, 44% observed. Reasons for non-attendance were varied; some of the more common were time demands/ schedule (22.4%), health problems (15.3%), family situations (10.9%), and lack of transportation or weather problems (5.6%). He said that many non-attendees expressed guilt about their inactivity. In his opinion, the Archdiocese could do little to alleviate the problems cited of non-attendance, and that it was the parishes' responsibility to bring their parishioners back into the fold. Other

highlights from the conference include:

◆ Several sessions focused on the media, including one in which religion reporters Adele Banks (Religious News Service) and Sandy Dolbee (San Diego Union Tribune) presented their views on how media coverage of religion is showing signs of both promise and problems. The steady increase in qualified religion reporters in print and broadcast media can only help public understanding of religion. However, panelists added that inexperienced reporters all too often miss the "real stories" about religion, and go for sensationalized coverage that sheds more heat than light on the subject. Dolbee pointed to the necessity of religion scholars to get involved with the media in order to present a more accurate picture of religion to the public.

◆ Yeager Hudson of Colby College presented his research, based on archival research and interviews, which compared the ways that the Episcopal, Southern Baptist, and United Methodist Churches have dealt with homosexuality. He compared the discrimination against gays in all three denominations to prevailing attitudes against women and blacks. He ended his presentation by speculating that the continued growth of conservative movements within all three denominations will probably lead to increased strictures against the ordination of women and gays, but that societal changes may eventually force all three to adapt to changing mores.--By

◆ Jean Rosenfeld of UCLA presented preliminary research that showed the importance of California in the history of the white supremacist Christian Identity movement. She traced the history of Identity's growth in southern California, finding that most of its major theorists, such as Wesley Swift, Richard Butler, and William Gale, came from or worked in the area at one time and

influenced each other's thinking. Using archival sources, she discovered that Butler and Gale, both members of Swift's congregation, fought bitterly over control of the church upon Swift's death. The loser, Butler, moved to Idaho where he created the Church of Jesus Christ Christian--Aryan Nations.-- *By Lin Collette, a freelance researcher and writer based in Pawtucket, R.I.*

### FEMINIZATION OF SYNAGOGUES DRIVING OUT MEN?

Are Jewish men pulling away from attending synagogues because of the growing influence of women in them? That is the view of many inactive Jewish men, according to leaders of men's groups in Conservative and Reform Judaism. Just as the men in Christian churches have increasingly formed their own groups and movements, such as Promise Keepers, a similar trend is developing among Jewish men, reports Moment magazine (December). Conservative and Reform Jewish leaders and administrators are currently developing workshops and publications aimed at addressing men's concerns. Such workshop topics include men's health, improving family relations, as well as the more specific concerns of how to find "blessings in being a Jewish man today," and "a man's place in an egalitarian synagogue--how do we fit in?"

Leaders of the men's groups say that men have become more inactive in synagogues, particularly those in the suburbs, as women have become more active in them, viewing such synagogues as feminized (an argument made by many in the Christian men's movements). In examining the literature from these Jewish men's workshops and talking with participants, writer Francine Klagsbrun believes that "men have pulled away from synagogue life because they don't want to

compete with women and risk being 'shamed.'" When men took for granted their control and dominance in the synagogue, they felt no need for proficiency in Hebrew or other rituals. Now that women have become highly involved and educated in Jewish prayer and study, "men can no longer simply hang on to these positions. They too need skills and may be embarrassed when they lack them." (Moment, 4710 41st St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20016)

### OVERSEAS MISSIONARIES TO AMERICA INCREASE IN SIZE AND MINISTRY

There is an increasing number of ministers, nuns, and other church workers from overseas churches who are starting ministry programs in the United States. While not a new development, the numbers of such clergy and workers and the scope of their programs have been growing lately, according to an in-depth report in USA Today (Nov. 19).

Acknowledging that "no one knows the new missionaries' overall numbers", observers find the new representatives are making a significant impact on urban parishes in all parts of the country.

Many nuns from South American countries are involved in hands on ministry in poor, declining neighborhoods, such as in Brooklyn and Los Angeles. Wearing their traditional habits, they are attracting considerable enthusiasm for their work among the underclass, as they recognize the dangers of such work. Missionaries from Mother Teresa's Calcutta-based Missionaries of Charity work and live with the poor in many U.S. cities. A large number of evangelical Protestant ministers born and educated in Africa are spreading their programs to large cities across the nation. Besides their witness of faith in desolate ghettos, the language and

crosscultural skills of the new missionaries help churches in offering services to immigrants from a wide range of backgrounds. Some minister also to Protestant areas such as United Church of Christ parishes in Massachusetts, and first generation residents in Columbia, Maryland, among other locations. Observers note the irony involved here: as the number of priests, nuns, and ministers for many American denominations continues to decline foreign churches are sending missionaries to America, once the most active of all suppliers of church workers for overseas programs. To date, the ministries have been enthusiastically and often gratefully received by American church people strapped for leadership and resources. --By Erling Jorstad, RW contributing editor

### **NEW ORGANIZATIONS EMERGE TO BRIDGE RELIGION-MEDIA CHASM**

Programs and organizations that attempt to serve as bridges between religion and the worlds of the media and public service have recently been proliferating. The program of Religion Newswriters Association (RNA), entitled Body & Soul: Trends in Spirituality and Health reports that several of these programs seek to foster interaction between journalists and religion scholars, while others strive to "generate a deeper public awareness of the role of religion in American history, life, politics and culture." In Chicago, church historians Martin E. Marty and Edith Blumhoefer are spearheading the Public Religion Project, which is designed to connect religious leaders and scholars with educators, the media and business leaders.

Columbia University School of Journalism is planning a center for religion and journalism, which will assist students who intend to cover religion. In Wheaton, a center relating religion

to contemporary culture is being started, while in nearby Evanston, Ill the recently founded Garrett-Medill Center for Religion and the News Media has become a center for interchange and continuing education for scholars and religion journalists.

The largest professional organization for journalism educators, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications last year approved the formation of a "Religion and Media" interest group. The recently founded Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn. was founded by religion and media specialist Mark Silk and takes a look at such broader issues as the role of religion and religious conflict in the world. The greater involvement of religious groups in community development in urban areas has led to another kind of bridge-building. The University of Southern California has started the Center for Religion and Civic Culture, which facilitates relationships between faith-based human services and other community-organizing programs and public officials. (RNA, 88 W. Plum St., Westerville, OH 43081)

### **JOURNALISTIC AND CHRISTIAN BLIND SPOTS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?**

Does the press have a blind spot when it comes to persecution of evangelical Christians and Catholics by non-Christian governments? That is the view of Christian human rights activist Nina Shea after speaking with reporters and monitoring coverage of the persecution of Christians in the past year. In First Things magazine (November), Shea writes that the movement to publicize and protest the persecution of Christians around the world has gained momentum in the last

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year without much help of the mainstream press. International reporters and foreign correspondents have barely covered the issue even though the editorials and op-ed sections of the same newspapers have regularly featured this issue. Of the over one thousand articles on China published by the four major newspapers in the U.S.--New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today and the Wall Street Journal--there was "little or no foreign coverage" of the crackdown on evangelicals and Catholics in the country. Those that did appear tended to minimize such persecution, particularly of the evangelicals, she writes.

The same blind spot goes on when reporting Islamic repression of Christians, such as in the Sudan and in Egypt, according to Shea. She lays the blame for such weak coverage at the media's "difficulty of reporting on underground and marginalized communities in situations of persecution." She also sees a general ignorance of religion among foreign reporters, as well as a prejudice against Christianity, as they still view it as a "white man's religion and a tool for Western imperialism." Other journalists she has spoken to take a position put forward by the Beijing authorities--"that Christian worship uncontrolled by a government is likely to produce dangerous cults, like Aum Shinro Kyo...The tone of the journalists as they argued this issue suggests an underlying fear that evangelicals and Catholics...are dangerous fanatics."

In response to a new wave of criticism and protest in the U.S. against Islamic countries for persecuting and restricting Christians, American Muslims are firing back with their own claims of persecution. The current issue of The Minaret (November), an American Muslim magazine, reports that the new movement focusing on mainly Muslim persecution of Christians, is "creating an atmosphere of mistrust and hatred against the

adherents of Islam...To identify Islam as a source of persecution is nothing but an attempt to serve religious and political interests," according to an editorial. The persecution against Christians in Middle Eastern countries are more often by secular governments, since the same authorities seek to control and restrict Muslims, the article adds.

This issue of the magazine focuses on the persecution of Muslims in Europe. A recent commission in the United Kingdom reported on the "growing phenomenon of Islamophobia-dread or hatred of Muslims" in Britain. The same currents are taking place throughout Europe, writes Laila Al-Marayati. The "traumatization" of Bosnian Muslims continues, as they are being forcibly repatriated from countries such as Germany even when conditions in Bosnia-Herzegovina are not favorable for resettlement. Muslims are subject to increasing hate crimes and prejudice in Greece, France, Turkey and Germany, where police intentionally under-report such incidents, according to Al-Marayati. (First Things, 156 Fifth Ave., Suite 400, New York, NY 10010; The Minaret, 434 South Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90020)

#### **COMPUTER CONCORDANCES LIKELY TO CHANGE BIBLE READING**

The often tedious work of searching the Bible for sermon preparation, personal meditation, Bible study references, and the like has been immensely simplified with the appearance of several electronic concordance products now on the market. In the Christian Century magazine (November 12), Ralph W. Klein of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago surveys the new materials available for parish ministers and others and suggests four specific areas where these programs might change how readers approach the biblical texts. He writes

that they will allow for fresh word studies, and avoid the repetitive older method of word searches; it will be easier to access and learn the Hebrew and Greek roots of texts; they allow leaders to prepare "impressive handouts" for adult forums and other educational programs; and they "may become your dog-eared Bible," allowing as they do for additions, deletions and frequent reediting in such programs. (Christian Century, 407 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60605)--By Erling Jorstad

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

● **Although the Southern Baptist Convention has strongly opposed the ordination of women, the number of ordained women has been growing in the denomination in recent years, according to recently published statistics.** The Fall edition of *Folio*, the newsletter of Baptist Women in Ministry, reports that the ranks of Southern Baptist ordained women has grown to about 1,225, with a quarter of them serving as chaplains. Sociologist Sarah Frances Anders writes that 35 percent of the women serve in church staff positions. Almost 200 are either pastors or associate pastors. North Carolina has the largest number of women pastors. It is difficult to keep tabs on the growth of women pastors in the SBC because denominational statistics do not cite gender. But the number appears to be rising. In 1979, there were only 58 SBC clergywomen recorded. This growth has taken place even as the national and state conventions of the SBC have condemned the ordination of women as unscriptural.

● **While often considered a fringe and speculative area of brain research, recent research supports the theory that the brain and neurological processes may play a**

**significant role in religious experience.**

Researchers at the University of California at San Diego's brain and perception laboratory studied patients suffering from an unusual form of epilepsy and concluded that parts of the brain's temporal lobe region may influence how intensely a person responds to religious beliefs. People suffering from temporal lobe seizures have long reported intense mystical experiences as part of their attacks and are often preoccupied by religious thoughts between seizures. The *Washington Post* (November 8) reports that this study, which was presented at the Society for Neuroscience in New Orleans, focused on three such epileptic patients who experienced mystical experiences--such as feeling one with God--during their seizures.

They were tested on their involuntary responses to a series of words about sex, violence and religion and the results were compared with a group of more normally religious people and a neutral control group. It was found that the patients had an unusually strong reaction to religious terms, such as the word "god," compared with the other people tested. V.S. Ramachandran of UC-San Diego says, "We like to suggest that there may be neural circuits in the temporal lobe that may be part of the machinery of the brain that is involved in mystical experiences and God." The researchers pointed out that such studies do not negate the validity of God, but rather "merely provide an explanation in terms of brain regions that may be involved [in such experiences]" and that humans may be "hard-wired" for such experiences.

**LATIN AMERICAN EVANGELICAL BROADCASTING FINDS AUDIENCE**

Latin American evangelicals are increasingly taking to the air waves and other forms of

media to preach their message, reports Christianity Today magazine (November 17). After years of self-restraint due to financial limitations, "evangelical television has exploded on the Latin American scene in recent years," writes Kenneth MacHarg. Today there are 600 Christian-format radio stations in Latin America, around 100 television stations, nearly 15 satellite radio networks, two satellite TV networks, 500 publications, and nearly 5,000 independent producers.

The Ibero-American Confederation of Christian Communicators and Mass Media--the Latin American equivalent to the U.S.' National Religious Broadcasters, is planning a 1,000-day media blitz designed to place professional quality spots and programs in the secular media. The television, video and radio formats are being plugged by evangelical media specialists as they allow evangelism to be presented in a non-religious context, especially in a region where radio and television soap operas are very popular. Christian music from Latin America is also said to be growing in popularity, even reaching a North American market. (Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188)

### **ISLAMIC POPULISM--THE TALIBAN'S SECRET INGREDIENT**

More than its military prowess, it is the ideology of Afghanistan's Taliban party, mixing Islamic fervor with "people power," that is commanding the attention of nations around the world. In a Pacific News Service report (October 6) sociologist Franz Schurman writes that the Taliban's hold throughout Afghanistan will soon usher this upstart Islamist party into a seat at the United Nations and international recognition. This prospect is frightening to Muslim and non-Muslim countries. The

prospect of the Taliban's control of oil and threat to Western-style democracy has alarmed the U.S. while Muslim nations such as Iran and Pakistan see Afghanistan's brand of strict Islam and populism as a new rival.

Schurman writes that "Saudi Arabia is as Muslim fundamentalist as the Taliban. But what scares the Saudis--who have one of the biggest wealth gaps in the world--is the Taliban's commitment to income equality and justice. Wherever the Taliban rule prevails, economic equality prevails. No more posh-living princes, no more fat cats." The Taliban has won Afghanistan with few casualties among their troops and even fewer among civilians. "They win battles by getting enemy soldiers to go over to them. And when generals see that happening, they panic, suddenly acknowledge God and go over to the Taliban."

### **FINDINGS & FOOTNOTES**

Forget about liberal dissent or conservative renewal, the main social force in American Catholicism is the drift to a managerial, corporate culture. That is the thesis of historian Eugene McCarragher in an article in the September 12 issue of Commonweal magazine. McCarragher claims, with mainly anecdotal evidence, that as the laity becomes more influential in the church they are replacing the working class values of parishes with the corporate mind-set of late 20th century America (for instance, evident in the managerial style of parish council meetings).

The November 21 issue of Commonweal brings together 15 writers to respond to McCarragher. They range in their opinions from enthusiasm to sharp criticism about his article, but most agree with its concern about the unforeseen implications of the "revolution of the laity" in American Catholicism. For more information on these issues, write: Commonweal, 475 Riverside Dr., Rm. 405, New York, NY 10115

The December issue of the Jewish magazine Moment devotes a section to a series of forecasts

on Jews in the year 2100. The symposium brings together such thinkers and specialists as Alan Dershowitz, Julius Lester, Nathan Glazer and Senator Daniel P. Moynihan. There is a pessimistic tone to most of the contributions, especially as they touch on the threats of intermarriage and divisions between different Jewish groups. But the writers also forecast a number of provocative and often humorous scenarios: the emergence of the suburban kibbutz; the growth of a hybrid "Reconservadoxy;" the large synagogues of today replaced by small ones, "sometimes five on a block" catering to an increasingly diverse American Jewry; and the death of denominational Judaism (a forecast made by many in the symposium). The issue costs \$4.50 and is available from: Moment, 4710 41st St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20016

□ Every few years the **Christian Challenge**, a conservative independent Anglican magazine, surveys the world of traditionalist Anglicanism and has broken away from the Episcopal Church. The November issue provides profiles of such denominations as the Anglican Catholic Church and the Episcopal Missionary Church. Such churches report only modest growth (although the Charismatic Episcopal Church has grown to almost 400 parishes since its founding in 1992). Although these churches are divided among each other, they have a growing international reach. There is also a trend of disaffected Anglican parishes remaining independent of any larger structure. For information on this issue, write: Christian Challenge, 1215 Independence Ave., S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003

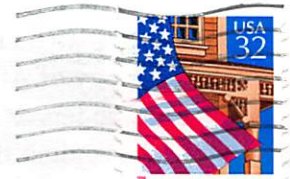
□ The recent founding of the journal **Nova Religio** appears to signal a new stage in the study of new religious movements (NRM's). The premier issue (October) of the bi-annual journal draws together a wide range of scholars from different disciplines and, more significantly, from different perspectives on the controversial issues

surrounding "cults" or NRMs. In the past, most journals and organizations were either located strictly in the "anti-cult" or what has been called the "anti-anti-cult" movement consisting mainly of academics. The October issue includes a controversial critique by Rutgers sociologist Benjamin Zablocki on how sociologists of religion have not taken brainwashing theories seriously in their work, failing to prove or falsify them, and an interchange between scholars on violence in new religious movements. A subscription is \$25. Write: Nova Religio, Seven Bridges Press, LLC, P.O. Box 958, Chappaqua, NY 10514-0958

□ Seen as either a major threat to denominational loyalty and identity or as a great window of opportunity to extend freedom of religion choice in America, the matter of interfaith marriage is of central importance. **Stranger to the Tribe: Portraits of Interfaith Marriage.** (Houghton Mifflin, \$24) by journalist Gabrielle Glaser, offers twelve factually based case studies of such marriages. Avoiding professional jargon and number crunching, she presents telling detail on both the problems and the rewards of those who marry into other faiths. She finds little difference in the degree of tension between Jewish-Christian marriages and in Christian-Muslim ones. The strong marriages are the result of dedication and fidelity rather than working out details over doctrinal differences. Glaser clearly favors interfaith marriages, offering here documented evidence of their rewards. This book is not only a good read, but an eye-opener into where the future of faith in America is probably headed.--By Erling Jorstad

**CORRECTION:** Last month's article about Marianne Williamson erroneously stated that she wrote the "Course on Miracles." Williamson was not the author of this work, but rather adapted its teachings to her own spiritual movement.

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- *Competition In The Synagogue; Finding The Brain-Soul Connection?*

