

RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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SECULAR SPIRITUALITY FINDING EXPRESSION IN POPULAR CULTURE

American popular culture is not suffering from a lack of religious imagination or spiritual themes. If anything, the recent themes of current films and rock music suggest a supermarket of religious inspiration and teachings that defy easy labeling or brand names. The current issue of Values & Visions (Vol. 24, No. 6), a magazine examining spiritual messages and meanings in contemporary culture, finds that recent films carry a good deal of spiritual content, though usually of a non-institutional kind. The magazine reviews 50 movies and videos released in 1993, and they appear to fall into two broad categories. The films with explicit or semi-explicit religious themes and imagery are in the minority (about 10 to be more precise), and include: Oliver Stone's "Heaven and Earth," which tells the true story of a woman's struggle for survival during the Vietnam War within the "context of her Buddhist understanding of life"; "Schindler's List," about a Catholic businessman who saved many German Jews from Nazi concentration camps; "Household Saints," about a teenage girl called to Catholic sainthood; "Faraway, So Close!" concerns an angel at work in contemporary Berlin; and "Shadowlands," about the marriage of Christian writer C.S. Lewis.

The wide range of religious imagery and messages in these films is not surprising; for over a decade, Hollywood has released an increasing number of films with nontraditional and non-JudeoChristian religious themes-- from the New Age-oriented "Ghost" to "What's Love Got to Do With It," which is based on Tina Turner's life and her espousal of Buddhism [see June 1991 RW]. In fact, Buddhism is increasingly featured in films. Harper's Bazaar (November) notes this trend especially in the upcoming release of a movie called "Little Buddha," which intertwines the stories of Siddhartha and a Seattle boy who is said to be the reincarnation of a Tibetan holy man. But it is the second category of reviewed films that point to a less noticed trend-- those that depict an implicit or more secular "spirituality" removed from a specific religious context. These films include: "A River Runs Through It," which depicts a spirituality of fly fishing and the "interconnectedness" of humans with nature; "The Piano," where "sexual passion" is seen as an expression of "soul;" "Fearless," revolving around one man's near-death experience; and "Six Degrees of Separation," which teaches that imagination is "God's gift to make the act of self-examination bearable."

These films take ordinary or extraordinary natural events and put a spiritual or transcendental spin on them. That doesn't mean that these themes emerge in a vacuum. The plot of the movie "Groundhog Day," for instance, is said to be informed by the philosophy of esoteric spiritual philosopher George Gurdjieff as it shows the process of a man awakening

to his "true" self through continuous change. While diffuse New Age and Eastern religious currents run through such films, something else may also be at work. It has been noted that baby boomers in particular increasingly tend to apply such concepts as "soul," and "spirituality" to secular activities (such as sports, art, or sexual activity). Sociologist Wade Clark Roof has written that baby boomers often view self-expression ("finding one's true self") and empathy with others as spiritual values in themselves. Values & Visions is in the forefront of promoting such an secular spirituality, as it advises readers that movies can "be useful in the process of soulmaking...[encouraging] self-understanding, personal growth, engagement with others, and connection with the wider world...Think of the film as a spiritual teacher and yourself as a willing and enthusiastic student." The magazine is even organizing discussion "circles" where small groups can "engage in soulmaking using resources from contemporary culture."

Rock music is also increasingly taking up spiritual themes, but more often as a form of social criticism, reports the New York Times (January 2). The newspaper reports that "Recent albums and videos by acts as diverse as U2, Peter Gabriel, Matthew Sweet, Rickie Lee Jones, Concrete Blonde and Snoop Doggy Dogg express a spiritual yearning that harks back, consciously or not, to rock's gospel roots and a generational groping for more eternal values. Not since the peace and love era of the 60's, when spiritual transcendence was celebrated by the likes of Bob Dylan, the Beatles and Joni Mitchell have religious themes been so conspicuously prevalent in pop...The spiritual slant in today's music is anything but a Sunday school endorsement of organized religion. Instead of urging people to go back to church, or to pray, the message is resolutely iconoclastic. The songs seem to say that in a godless society the only recourse is to make a personal appeal to the divine."

These religiously inspired songs invoke angels, God, and Jesus to judge racism, the danger of guns, and more generally, a society heading toward destruction. Singer Peter Garrett warns that "Truth and fiction must collide some day/ God knows, God knows, God knows it's been fun." While positive religious themes in rock music went into virtual eclipse during much of the 1970s and 80s, the first signs of spiritual interest was evidenced in 1987 songs of the Irish rock quartet U2. In the 90s religious devotion became more "fashionable" (also seen in the new clothes styles based on religious dress, such as monks' robes) and alternative rock bands embraced religious images "as symbols of a thirst for values that transcend the fast-buck ethos of a corrupt commercial culture." Often the songs are as much about religious doubt as about faith and embrace the same kind of secular spirituality as mentioned above. Several of the performers are "inspired by a God that transcends specific religions and cultures," or use non-Western themes, such as Peter Gabriel's rendition of African and Middle Eastern devotional music. While some critics think the spiritual emphasis is a trend that will soon pass away, others see the current soul searching as leading to a new spiritual consciousness shorn of conventional religious forms. (Values & Visions, Cultural Information Service, 15 W. 24th St., 10th Fl., New York, NY 10010)

JEWISH FAMILY VALUES IN DECLINE AND GETTING LITTLE SUPPORT?

The Jewish family is in trouble and the synagogues are not offering it much help, writes Jack Wertheimer in the neoconservative Jewish magazine

Commentary (January). Wertheimer, a professor at Jewish Theological Seminary, writes that "apart from the high incidence of intermarriage, survey research provides ample evidence of rising rates of divorce and/or deferred marriage among Jews; of massive geographical dislocation which affects family cohesion; and of other symptoms, mainly stemming from the sexual revolution, that severely affect the Jewish family's ability to nurture a strong Jewish identity in its youth." Today no more than a third of Jewish households consist of two parents and their children. The growing incidence of divorce--especially among the young and more secular-- "on Jewish identification is devastating. For one thing, Jews who remarry after divorce are far more likely to intermarry," he writes. One study shows that after each successive divorce a Jewish person undergoes, the likelihood of intermarriage grows almost by 20 percent. As "Jews have increasingly joined the highly mobile American population in quest of new economic and occupational goals," the intergenerational family ties important for transmission of the faith have been severed.

Those moving to new areas are often less likely to join organized Jewish life; during the 1980s, only one-quarter of the Jews in Los Angeles and Atlanta, and one-third in Phoenix were synagogue members. Yet Jewish groups have hardly made any statements concerning such trends for fear that it would exclude Jews from the community. "Outside of Orthodoxy, individuals and families struggling with questions of sexual morality have largely been left to fend for themselves." He cites a study showing that young women joining Orthodox communities find these groups' "wholesome, family-oriented environment" more attractive than their belief in God. "In the struggle to shore up the crumbling Jewish family, [rabbis] either feel powerless to influence Jews at large or seem fearful of saying anything that might drive away the minority who actually join their synagogues. Instead of acting as interpreters and teachers of a normative tradition, they have recast themselves as therapists to a dysfunctional community." He concludes that the current drive in the Jewish community to reach out to diverse groups, especially the children of intermarried couples, is only further diluting Jewish family tradition. Wertheimer cites the example of Reform synagogues changing their services to be more inclusive of non-Jewish parents; some Reform leaders "publicly worry that worship services will become increasingly syncretistic." (Commentary, 165 E. 56th St., New York, NY 10022)

WOMEN TAKING ON PASTOR ROLE IN PRIESTLESS PARISHES

As the number of American Catholic parishes without priests increase, women are increasingly playing roles similar to that of a pastor, according to the Catholic newsletter Overview (January). The newsletter interviews sociologist Ruth Doyle [author of the book, "They Call Her Pastor: A New Role For Catholic Women (SUNY)], who finds that 241 parishes are headed by nonpriests. Most are in the rural Midwest, deep South, far West and Alaska. Seventy four percent of the leaders of priestless parishes are women, according to Wallace. Women heading parishes (whom Wallace calls "pastors," although Canon Law reserves this title only for men) average 50 years of age, and are in small-town, rural areas. Wallace studied 20 of these parishes led by women and finds that they are making out well, especially after the first year when they gain more acceptance from parishioners. But the downside is that hiring a lay leader usually places greater financial strain on parishes that also have to pay priests to conduct the Mass and perform other sacraments. While most women parish leaders do not want to be priests in the current

hierarchical church structure, Wallace says they are opening a door to women in leadership positions in parishes that "can never be closed up again." (Overview, 205 West Monroe St., Sixth Fl., Chicago, IL 60606-5097)

CURRENT RESEARCH: Recent Findings On Religious Behavior & Attitudes

* Among religious activists there is a significant connection between theological perspectives and attitudes toward environmental policies and priorities, with Protestant fundamentalism having the greatest negative effect on such views, according to a recent study. The study, appearing in the December issue of the Journal For The Scientific Study of Religion, compared support for environmental concern among religious activists from organizations spanning the left to right spectrum (such as liberal Bread for the World and Evangelicals for Social Action, and conservative Concerned Women for America) and found that those respondents most influenced by fundamentalism (encompassing such beliefs as literal interpretation of the Bible, premillennialism and the imminence of the "end times," and pessimism about social reform) were the least likely (from 3 to 10 percent) to see concern about the environment as a pressing problem.

Those activists associated with the Christian left and "pro-life liberals," (mainly Catholics and evangelicals) scored the highest (47 and 40 percent respectively) on environmental concern. Researchers James Guth, Lyman Kellstedt, Corwin Smidt, and John C. Green conclude that the "religious and political perspectives of conservative Protestants are certainly a barrier to the development of environmental consciousness in large sectors of American Protestantism, despite the strong generalized support for environmental action exhibited by the American public." They note, however, that fundamentalists located in mainline denominations and congregations are more likely to have stronger environmental sympathies. (Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1365 Stone Hall, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-1365)

* As shown in the above study, it is often the case that theological conservatism is linked to social and political conservatism. But there are studies that question such a linkage on some points. In the journal Sociology of Religion (Winter), an analysis of statistics from the General Social Survey on religious beliefs and social issues finds "no support for a connection between fundamentalist views of the Bible and conservative attitudes about economic restructuring. In fact, biblical literalism serves to promote a pro-spending [for government services] orientation." [It should be noted that the study separated black Protestants from whites, since the former usually scores very high in liberal attitudes on economic and political matters.] The study notes that there are divisions among conservative Protestants on economic matters: Baptists-fundamentalists showed more opposition to spending than Pentecostal-Holiness members. Such differences may not show up in some studies because only one segment of conservative Protestantism is used to represent the whole movement. (Sociology of Religion, Marist Hall, Rm. 108, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. 20064)

* Evidence continues to surface showing that the Republican Party is increasingly becoming the home of active religious believers, while the Democrats are attracting more secular voters. Research has shown that

evangelicals make up the largest constituency in the Republican Party, while the Democrats are attracting a mixed constituency, including mainline Protestant and secular voters. [see October RW]. In a recent analysis of polling data, David Leege of the University of Notre Dame found sharp differences between the voting patterns of those who are regular churchgoers and those of the same denomination who do not attend church. A report in the Washington Post (January 6) cites Leege's study of the 1992 election as showing that among church-attending mainline Protestants, Republican George Bush beat Democrat Clinton 44 percent to 32 percent, with 24 percent for Ross Perot. White mainliners who did not go to church backed Clinton over Bush 43 percent to 28 percent, with Perot also getting 28 percent. Evangelical church attenders backed Bush over Clinton 69 percent to 21 percent, with 9 percent for Perot; evangelical non-attenders backed Clinton over Bush 51 percent to 30 percent, with 19 percent for Perot. White church-going Catholics backed Clinton by a 43-to-38 percent ratio over Bush; Clinton got support from 61 percent of the white Catholic voters who do not go to church.

* Only a small minority of mainline Protestant youth report life-transforming spiritual experiences, and those young people who claim to have a stronger faith were most likely influenced at home, according to a recent study. Youth In Protestant Churches, a 148-page special report from the Search Institute, a group researching youth issues, finds that while almost all the teenagers in the study claim that faith influences their life, most (66 percent) say that other factors are just as important. The study, consisting of 2,365 youth in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church, United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church, showed a serious gender gap on most questions of faith: girls show higher levels of faith maturity, commitment and involvement than boys. The role of the family, especially the mothers, is the most positive influence in forming faith for both boys and girls. A more unexpected finding is that the smallest (under 200 members) and largest (over 1,000) congregations exhibit the most strength in impacting young peoples' faith. (Youth In Protestant Churches, Search Institute, 700 South Third St., Suite 210, Minneapolis, MN 55414)

* Since the early 1980s, the mushrooming of independent charismatic churches and fellowships (often going by such names as "New Testament Church," "Peace Fellowship" and other biblical or "generic" terms) have become one of the most significant yet undocumented trends in American Christianity. Now Charisma magazine (January) provides some figures to show the strength of this disorganized movement. "If independent charismatic churches in the United States were lumped into one group, they would be considered the fifth largest denomination in the country," according to the magazine in citing statistics in the missionary handbook "Operation World," (Zondervan). Charismatic fellowships claim a combined membership of 2.5 million adherents. (Charisma, 600 Rhinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746)

* It is generally assumed that the younger members of congregations are more liberal than the older ones. While there is some truth to this stereotype when looking at the baby boomers as compared to older generations, things are more complicated than that, especially on the matter of interfaith relations. The Presbyterian Panel, a regular survey of members and clergy of the mainline Presbyterian Church (USA), found in a poll (conducted in November, 1992) on interfaith and ecumenical

relations that respondents under the age of 40 were more likely than those in older groups to relate to other religions by "seeking to evangelize" their followers. While the most respondents (80 percent) chose the response "Seek to understand their beliefs and practices" in relating to non-Christian groups, it was found that the younger the respondent, the more likely he or she would choose the answer "seek to evangelize." (Presbyterian Panel, Research Services, Presbyterian Church, 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202)

* The rate of baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention is continuing to decline, according to recent denominational figures. Baptists Today newspaper (January 6) cites recent statistics showing that the estimated number of SBC baptisms for 1993 was 350,000, a decrease of five percent from the 1992 figure of 367,000 baptisms. This is the second year of decline in baptisms for the Southern Baptists. The two years of decline follow four years of increased baptisms, peaking at 397,000 in 1991. An SBC evangelism official said the declines may indicate a lack of preaching about baptism and evangelism in many congregations. (SBC Today, 222 East Lake Drive, Decatur, GA 30030)

* Islam and Christianity had the highest growth rates of all world religions between 1980 and 1982, according to a recent study by the Rockford Institute's Center on Religion and Society. Ecumenical Press Service (January 16-31) reports that the study showed the number of Muslims grew by 30.5 percent in that period, reflecting very high birth rates in northern and central Africa and in several Middle Eastern countries where Islam is the predominant religion. The study found that Islam is gaining substantial numbers of converts in several non-Islamic countries. Christianity also gained a modest number of conversions, with its percentage growth rate increasing by 30.5 percent. In the same period the number of Hindus grew by 28.8 percent, while the number of Buddhists increased by 21.9 percent. The growth rate for atheists and non-believers was estimated at 29 percent, rising from 911 million people in 1980 to 1175 million in 1992. Judaism increased by only six percent, from 17 million to 18 million. During this period the world's population as a whole increased by 29.8 percent. (Ecumenical Press Service, P.O. Box 2100, CH-1211 Geneva 2)

WORD OF LIFE -- A NEW KIND OF RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT FOR A NEW SWEDEN?

A small charismatic movement is riding the waves of social and economic changes in Sweden and is finding a growing following and controversy in the process. Sweden differs from other Western democracies for its extreme political stability, large state role in culture and welfare, ethnic homogeneity, and national church. But such developments as new immigration [bringing in Catholicism and Islam], a growing involvement in European affairs (through working with the European Community), and the growth of the private sector due to a new center-right coalition government (having defeated the Social Democrats in 1991) are changing Sweden. At the same time, a "minirevival of evangelical, charismatic Christianity" has taken place in the highly secularized nation largely based around a group called Word of Life (Livets Ord), according to the journal Sociology of Religion (Winter). The group is tied to the faith movement, which was started by U.S. Pentecostal leader Kenneth Hagin and teaches that prosperity and health can be "claimed" by believers. The Swedish group has been strongly involved in evangelism and missions

through a sophisticated use of the media and its Bible schools, which have trained over 3,000 students. More than other similar movements, Word of Life has motivated evangelicals to enter politics--both at the local and national levels-- as it views Sweden as having a special calling as a "missionary nation" to reach the world for Christianity.

"This calling, it is said, can be fully realized only by combining society-wide Christian influence with a reduction of secular state control over education, the family and the economic system," writes Simon Coleman. Word of Life has strong ties to the U.S. (leading many to claim the group is an extension of the Christian Right), viewing it is a model of religious freedom and Christian vibrancy, and it also has a strong transnational focus. Coleman writes that Word of Life is on the "cutting edge of change" since it preaches values--such as international networking, U.S.-based positive thinking and entrepreneurism, anti-statist thinking, and use of sophisticated media-- that are becoming accepted by Swedes. "In a sense, it sacralizes the very forces that may currently be transforming the country, as the political hegemony of Social Democracy, dominance of a relatively centralized media system, and legitimacy of long-established religious organizations come under threat," thus making Word of Life also a catalyst for debate about the shape of the new Sweden. [Word of Life may not likely become a major Swedish church body, but Coleman's study suggests that the above developments will bode well for the growth of similar (if more moderate) evangelical groups in a country that has long been written off as irreversibly secularized.]

ISLAMIC-ASSOCIATED PRACTICES DRAWING PROTESTS, CHALLENGING WEST

Muslim women are increasingly speaking out against what they see as oppressive practices associated with militant Islamic groups and political leaders, and they are also forcing Western societies to deal with sensitive matters of cultural and religious pluralism, according to the National Times (January), a bi-monthly magazine digest. Militant Muslim leaders have reintroduced such practices as legalized polygamy, denying women the right to divorce and child custody, strict penalties for women involved in adultery, and female circumcision. The latter practice has never been an official part of Islam, but it is now spreading "into regions and countries which never previously practiced it...In Sri Lanka, for instance, where they had a symbolic ceremony in which the knife was touching the sex of the girl, but not [drawing] a drop of blood, women from Muslim fundamentalist groups are now asking for actual circumcision. Similarly in Malaysia and Indonesia. So under the banner of Islam, something which was local...ancient Egyptian, is now being spread as Islam," says Marie-Aimée Hèlie-Lucas, founder of Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUM), an international group fighting for women's rights for Muslims. WLUM has had "small but significant successes considering the David-and-Goliath playing field," writes Ann Louise Bardach in her article, which first ran in Vanity Fair magazine.

Many of WLUM's victories appear to be in the West, where they serve as an advocate for immigrant women. But such advocacy has not been popular with European judiciaries and governments. When faced with female circumcision among Muslim immigrants in France, the Socialists fearful of inciting racism tried to evade the issue by ignoring it. "They didn't want to be called cultural imperialists, and the conservatives-- well,

they simply didn't care," says one activist. The Netherlands has considered legalizing female circumcision. In the "last decade, virtually every Western country-- from Sweden to Spain to the United States-- has been confronted by a series of unfamiliar legal, medical, and ethical conundrums," Bardach writes. In the U.S., female circumcision is said to be widespread, especially among female Muslim African refugees (there is no law against it). As such traditions are imported to the the U.S., moderate Muslim groups, such as Muslim Women's League and the Islamic Center of Southern California, have sought to teach that "true Islam" does not support such measures, including polygamy. One of the key leaders in the Muslim women's movement is Koranic scholar Fatima Mernissi of Morocco. Mernissi says the Koran supports women's rights and that most of the more restrictive Islamic laws come from the less authoritative Hadith (or books of Islamic tradition), which has been criticized by moderate Muslims. (National Times, 318 E. 84th St., New York, NY 10028)

CORRECTION Last month's suppleme orted that Operation Joseph is a
new organization fighting new re s movements in the black community.
Although the group was new to RW, it has been in existence for five
years.

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