

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

Volume 8 Number 6

April 1993

## NEW RELIGIONS DRAWING FOLLOWERS AND CONFLICT IN EUROPE, EASTERN EUROPE

New and alternative religions ranging from Indian to New Age to Evangelical Christian are alive and well in Europe and are booming in Eastern Europe, moving into the religious vacuum created by the collapse of communism. Participants in an international conference on "New Religions and the New Europe" held at the London School of Economics explored these themes and others in late March. The conference, jointly sponsored by the Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (INFORM), the Centre for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), and the Institute for the Study of American Religions (ISAR), drew a diverse lot of academics, representatives of cult-watching and anticult groups, and a contingent of members from new religious movements, such as the Unification Church, Scientologists, Soka Gakkai, and the Hare Krishnas. Of special interest were at least half a dozen members of the Family, formerly the Children of God. They have kept a low profile for many years but now have again become public, defending themselves against their critics and trying to establish themselves as missionary-minded, communal Christian evangelicals.

Eileen Barker, an organizer of the conference and director of INFORM, reported that her database now had information on 1600 religious movements in Europe and that the flood of requests for information on such groups was inundating the organization's small staff in London. Several movements represented at the conference reported having thousands or tens of thousands of members throughout Europe. The New Age movement was also reported to be thriving in both Eastern and Western Europe. The most striking news reported was that of the expansion of the new religions into Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Most of the groups claimed large and rapidly expanding memberships in Russian and other formerly communist nations. Shaunaka Rishi Das of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness said that his organization's membership in Russia was now at least 10,000 and growing, with new centers opening frequently. That means that the Russian base of the movement is two or three times larger than the American membership was at the height of the movement in the 1970s. Even the relatively little-known Brahma Kumaris movement claims 800 Russian members and now operates three centers in Russia and one in Belarus.

Scholars from both Eastern and Western Europe substantiated the optimistic reports from the new religionists. Isotta Poggi of the University of California at Santa Barbara provided a long list of Eastern

Religion Watch is published monthly except once during July and August. Richard P. Cimino; Editor/Publisher. Erling Jorstad; Contributing Editor. A subscription in the U.S. is \$19.95 per year. \$25 for libraries. Write for foreign rates. Mailing address: P.O. Box 652, North Bellmore, NY 11710. (ISSN 0886 2141)

European countries in which various groups are active. Agnes Dörr characterized many groups as highly active in her native Hungary, noting that when Jehovah's Witnesses announced a rally to be held in Budapest, 70,000 turned out. Does this expansion of new and alternative religions in the former Eastern bloc mean that such groups will win the spiritual battle for the soul of the region? Definitely not, argued J. Gordon Melton of ISAR. The winner will be evangelical Protestantism, which during years of underground evangelism and Bible-smuggling has built a network of structures that gives it an unparalleled base for institution-building all over the East. Melton's argument was corroborated by Dadeusz Doktor of the University of Warsaw, whose data suggested that non-Christian movements in Poland typically have only a few hundred members, and collectively perhaps 5,000, but that Christian groups have much more substantial followings. Yet none of the groups can expect entirely smooth sailing. Barker, of the London School of Economics, cautioned participants that the past is not necessarily the best guide for the future. She said that the milieu of repudiation of materialism that fueled the quest for meaning in the West a quarter-century ago is quite unlike that of Eastern Europe, where prosperity is desperately sought, and that the groups themselves have changed as their members have aged and the groups have matured in their outlooks.

Moreover, the reception to new religions sometimes borders on outright repression in both Eastern and Western Europe. Dörr described various ways in which the Hungarian government has taken steps to keep new religions from operating legally. James T. Richardson of the University of Nevada reported several situations in which the Court of Human Rights has upheld various efforts by government within the European Community to restrict freedom of religion, arguing that the outlook for freedom for religious minorities is no better there than in the U.S., where the Supreme Court has in recent years repealed previously established standards of free exercise. Spokespersons for several major religions and religious organizations, including the World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Church of England, all indicated during the conference that their bodies are also not particularly interested even in dialogue with new religions. The nature of the cult wars may change, but those wars have not ended, contended Massimo Introvigne, director of CESNUR. Undoubtedly the conference participants will have much more to discuss at next year's meeting of CESNUR in Recife, Brazil. —By Timothy Miller, professor of Religion at the University of Kansas, who has most recently edited the book "When Prophets Die: The Postcharismatic Fate of New Religious Movements" (SUNY Press, 1991).

## KORESH AND PROPHET BRINGING ON NEW JONESTOWNS-- OR JUST MORE CULT WARS?

The conflict surrounding David Koresh and his group known as the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, has often been portrayed by the media and law enforcement agencies as a cult long on the threshold of violent activity. But AWARE, an organization of academics seeking to provide unbiased information on new religions and counteract anti-cultist groups, has challenged that view. The current issue of the group's newsletter Aware News (April) says that the dramatic events surrounding Koresh have "evoked a veritable media feeding frenzy, a frenzy which an odd assortment of self-proclaimed 'cult' experts have taken advantage of in an effort to promote their peculiar views on alternative religions." It adds the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) was wrongly led to believe that the Branch Davidians was a violent "suicide cult" rather

than a survivalist group; Koresh stocked food and other supplies like most survivalists, and local law enforcers did not believe the group would engage in unwarranted violence against the Waco community. The ATF consulted cult deprogrammer Rick Ross for some of their information on Koresh's group. Ross, an ex-convict, "clearly has a vested interest in portraying non-traditional religions in the worst possible light. Thus ATF's impression of the Branch Davidians as a possible Jonestown could easily have been formed by information received from Ross and others of his ilk...What Rick Ross communicated to the ATF would have reinforced the widely-prevalent stereotype of 'cults' as criminal organizations ready to commit the worst atrocities at the drop of a hat. Mainstream scholars have thoroughly debunked this stereotype as inaccurate."

During the Koresh controversy the media focused on the Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT) in Montana as a possible example of another "Waco" in the making. The Washington Post (March 20) reports that neighbors and law officials have become increasingly nervous about the New Age-oriented survivalist group led by Elizabeth Clare Prophet, especially since she will not allow law officials to inspect its premises. Prophet raised alarm a few years ago when it was learned she directed the construction of elaborate bomb shelters and stocked them with provisions and a large cache of firearms. The same issue of Aware News cited above offers a far different view of the controversy: Prophet's group is nonviolent and cannot be compared to the Branch Davidians. Members of AWARE recently visited the CUT complex, examining the community's fallout shelters and interviewing leaders Prophet and Edward Francis. They found CUT "adults and children to be unusually healthy, friendly, and well-adjusted. The leadership style was relaxed, with a flexible membership structure-- ranging from full-time staff living on Church property to independent members living in nearby towns--that allows members to intensify or reduce the level of their commitment as they see fit." The controversy over the CUT's storing firearms stemmed from the groups buying such weapons illegally to avoid negative media attention, according to the newsletter. Most of the negative publicity in the wake of the Koresh incident has been generated by a local newspaper publisher personally opposed to the CUT. (Aware News, 160 N. Fairview Ave., Ste D282, Goleta, CA 93117)-- Erling Jorstad, RW contributing editor and professor of History at St. Olaf College, contributed to this report.

## FOUR SQUARE CHURCH'S INFORMALITY, FLEXIBILITY KEY TO RAPID GROWTH

The International Church of the Four Square Gospel may not be as well known as its Pentecostal counterpart, the Assemblies of God, but it is becoming the fastest growing denomination in the U.S. through its informal, flexible style of ministry, according to Charisma magazine (March). The Four Square Church, started by flamboyant evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson during the 1920s, has grown from 921 congregations in 1980 to 1,516 in 1991-- a 65 percent increase. The denomination now has started more than 25,000 congregations overseas, including more than 7,000 in Brazil. "In the Pacific Northwest [long the most unchurched U.S. region], Foursquare churches produce pastoral candidates so fast that the region doesn't have enough new churches in which to place them. Similar expansion has begun to occur on the East Coast and in urban areas where the Foursquare Church has not been active in the past," reports Steven Lawson. The denomination's adaptability and decentralized structure are the key factors cited for the church's growth. There is a movement of 70



baby-boomer oriented churches within the denomination known as Hope Chapel. These churches, many of them multi-faceted "megachurches," are based on the West Coast (as well as in Hawaii and Japan) and use a contemporary worship style to appeal to a younger audience.

Other Foursquare congregations are just as diverse, ranging from the traditional Pentecostal First Foursquare in Fresno, Calif., to a racially mixed congregation in Chicago. Church president John Holland says, "We don't try to make a pastor 'Foursquare.' Rather, we encourage pastors to use their giftings and individual strengths to reach those in the community around them. You will not find a 'typical' Foursquare congregation." Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan notes that without bureaucratic baggage, the church allows local pastors to implement their own strategies for ministry as long as they remain within doctrinal bounds. Even the Four Square training of ministers is often tailored more to individual needs, Lawson adds. There is also a theological openness in the Foursquare not found in other Pentecostal denominations. After a period of restriction against women ministers in the denomination during the 1970s, there is now a resurgence of women in ministry. When other traditional Pentecostal bodies dismissed the charismatic movement in the 1960s, Foursquare churches were generally open to such currents. Even such an "orthodox" Pentecostal doctrine as the necessity of speaking in tongues as a sign of being baptized with the Holy Spirit is not insisted upon by some pastors, such as prominent Foursquare leader Jack Hayford. (Charisma, 600 Rhinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746)

## RADICAL CHRISTIAN RIGHT SECEDES IN POLITICS?

Since the election of Bill Clinton there have been signs that some conservative evangelicals are now pressing for a more countercultural stance, especially in the more radical sectors of the Christian right, such as the Reconstructionists who call for a "Christian America" ruled by the Bible. For instance, the Reconstructionist American Information Newsletter (February) says that the strict church-state separationists who criticize conservative Christian involvement in politics may have a point. The newsletter says that "Christians do not belong in the same body politic with left-fascists of this stripe, fascists who want to remove my God-given right to free speech, free association and freedom of worship and thought. They want an absolutist secular culture and totalitarian state and I think it is time that we consider granting them their desire by means of secession. We should seriously consider what type of force would be necessary to divide the country. It may be time, in a paraphrase of Jefferson, to consider 'dissolving the political bands.' I am not likely to be dissuaded from this view by the argument that one should accept tyranny in order to 'witness' to the tyrant. The 'witness' has obviously been given to these and rejected. In that case, Jesus told us to 'wipe the dust from our sandals,' which I also take to be a secessionist sentiment." (American Information Newsletter, P.O. 2408 Boise, ID 83702)

## CURRENT RESEARCH RECENT FINDINGS ON RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

\* Two recent studies, one Lutheran and the other United Methodist, document the long suspected trend of lay people in mainline bodies continuing to show diminished loyalty for their national bureaucratic leadership. The Minneapolis Star-Tribune (March 21) cites an exhaustive survey of Lutherans by the Minnesota Poll which shows that only 24

percent express a great deal of confidence in organized national denominational programs; 56 percent of those same people state they have a great deal of confidence in their local pastor. Among United Methodists, church growth specialist Russell Richey of Duke University Divinity School, finds much the same pattern. Large national programs, organized some 30 to 40 years ago, are failing to energize or make vivid the needs of members, who choose to involve themselves almost entirely with local activities. Both Richey, speaking for Methodists, and church historian Martin E. Marty, speaking for the Lutherans, say that the national organizations will survive by becoming smaller and finding new ways to make connections with the everyday lives of members.-- By Erling Jorstad.

\* While Americans believe that the materialism and greed are harming moral values, most individuals are interested in making a lot of money and in accumulating a lot of material possessions, paying little attention to religious teachings on financial matters, according to a recent study. In the Christian Century (March 3), sociologist Robert Wuthnow cites a study he conducted which shows 89 percent of respondents agreeing that "our society is too materialistic," and 73 percent agreeing to the view that "being greedy is a sin against God." Yet most respondents look upon wealth and the wealthy very favorably. Eighty percent say they "admire people who make a lot of money by working hard" - 11 percent more than those who say they admire "people who take a lower paying job in order to help others," and 20 percent more than those who acknowledge admiring "people who work hard but never make much money." Wuthnow finds that religious faith and biblical teachings on poverty and wealth has little impact on the ways people conduct their financial affairs. Only 12 percent reported being taught that it was wrong to want a lot of money. Sixty Eight percent agree that "money is one thing, morals and values are completely separate." Wuthnow writes that "what religious faith does more clearly than anything else is to add a dollup of piety to the materialistic amalgam in which most of us live." At the same time, he finds that most people want the churches and synagogues to encourage people to be less materialistic. (Christian Century, 407 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, IL 60605)

\* A recent Gallup Poll of North and South American countries finds that most people make a strong connection between their faiths and protecting the environment. Emerging Trends (February), the Gallup newsletter on religion cites the poll as showing that more than nine adults in 10 in the U.S. (93 percent) and similar numbers in Brazil (99 percent), Mexico (93 percent), and Canada (91 percent) agree with the assertion that nature is God's creation and therefore it is the duty of humans to take care of the environment. Both Americans (77 percent) and Canadians (83 percent) are less likely than the Brazilians and Mexicans (97 percent each) to agree that all living things have the same right to exist as humans. As for religiously inspired involvement in environmental issues, the four-country survey finds that Mexican church members are most likely to report that their religious leaders have encouraged them to take actions to protect the environment (56 percent), compared to Brazilian church members (39 percent), U.S. members (38 percent), and Canadians (26 percent). But when it comes to the member's actions (such as recycling), U.S. church members top the list (56 percent), followed by Brazil (42 percent), and Mexico and Canada (40 percent). The newsletter comments that the positive attitude of Mexican church members may be particularly encouraging because critics of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have feared that Mexicans would not be as

environmentally concerned as their counterparts in the U.S. and Canada.  
(Emerging Trends, 47 Hulfish St., Suite 215, Box 389, Princeton, NJ  
08542)

## LIBERATION THEOLOGY MOVES FROM CENTER STAGE, TRYING NEW STRATEGIES

Latin American liberation theology is undergoing deep changes due to such recent developments as the fall of communism, the transition of most Latin American countries to democracy, the growth of conservative leadership and groups, according to recent reports. While some proponents of liberation theology, such as Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff, have claimed that there has been few changes in the movement in the last few years [see July/August '90 RW], there is the growing observation that liberationism is facing new challenges. In Christianity & Crisis (December 14), Ken Serbin writes that the Santa Domingo document issued by the Latin American bishops last year signaled the changing image of the region's church as it placed a greater emphasis on spirituality and evangelism and less on political activism. But Serbin writes that liberationism has suffered from internal problems also. Liberationist or "popular" church activists have been gradually moving away from the mainstream of the church; the resignation of Boff from the priesthood last year was one sign of this trend. The "base communities," which give popular expression to liberation theology, "probably number a fraction of the tens of thousands claimed by the church, nor is it clear how successful they have been in helping the poor."

But Serbin sees liberationist concerns reviving in the current movement to resist "neoliberal" economic policies throughout Latin America; even the conservative Santa Domingo document included such criticism of free market economic policies-- a "sign that progressives still had a good deal of...influence and that issues of liberation have become a standard of the Latin American church..." In the liberal Catholic magazine Commonweal (March 26), Maryknoll missionary Robert Hurteau writes that the decline in the number of foreign clergy and religious in Latin America, who have been the most ardent supporters of liberation theology, has also been a significant factor in liberationist decline. Hurteau sees Peru (often considered the birthplace of liberation theology) as a model of how liberation theology may be changing: "Among the proponents of the church of the poor, if one listens closely one hears fewer calls for changing unjust social structures and more talk of creating political, social, and economic spaces where the poor can live and work; less of a quest for liberation and more about the quest for life and human dignity...This is the attempted change of focus: We will achieve a new society not so much by changing the structures that affect people as by people pushing together for a decent space in society." (Christianity & Crisis, 537W. 121st. St., New York, NY 10027; Commonweal, 15 Dutch St., New York, NY 10038)

## JAPAN'S NEW RELIGIONS STRESS TECHNIQUE, SEARCH FOR AUTHORITY

The new religions making the most impact in Japan today are those stressing individual spiritual powers and techniques while also being led by strong authority figures, according to International Minds (Winter), a British journal of psychology and international affairs. Susumu Oda and Shimji Satoh write that unlike the earlier waves of believers in Japan's new religious movements, today's "converts are not satisfied with the hope of worldly gains to be achieved through the medium of the head of

the cult. Nor are they content to seek advancement through the ranks of a mass religious organization. They want to have spiritual experiences of their own and to achieve extrasensory perception and other paranormal powers for themselves...Today's young recruits are little interested in religious doctrine. The focus in the current wave has turned from belief to techniques..." The authors write that the new religions are primarily drawing teenagers and young adults (who register the highest in belief in the supernatural); in fact, for this age group joining an unknown "cult" and developing spiritual powers is viewed as "fashionably attractive." While the religious movements in the past grew and crowded the other movements out, the newer movements, whether they be Shinto, Christian or Buddhist, are coexisting with each other.

Oda and Satoh add that the newer religious movements "deliberately apply the findings of modern psychology concerning brainwashing and sensory deprivation." Such groups as the Science of Happiness [see September and November '91 RW) are serving as "surrogate families for their adherents in the 'fatherless' society of today's Japan, where the paternal authority of the past has been greatly eroded and the pressure of work leaves many fathers with little time for their families. In psychological terms, the heads of cults serve as substitute fathers." The writers see the strong father figures presented in these groups as meshing with the "yearning of the public for a 'strong leader of a strong Japan,'" especially with the lack of political leadership revealed during the gulf war. The ideological vacuum among intellectuals left by the decline of Marxism is another reason cited for the growth of the new religions. There is also a strong apocalyptic element in these groups, offering followers predictions for the future. (*International Minds*, 19 Hugh St., London SW1V 1QJ England)

## ISLAMIC UPDATE

\* The recent bombing of New York's World Trade Center and other acts of violence suggests that religious-inspired terrorism has shifted from the close-knit, professional, and more secular-oriented groups of the 1980s to unstructured and amorphous groups of radical Muslims seeking to carry out fundamentalist Islamic goals, according to the Wall Street Journal (March 17). These Muslim extremists, a "tiny minority" within Islam, "aren't people on a payroll like those in some of the old terror organizations-- these are true believers," often willing to take greater risks, says Mike Ackerman, a consultant analyzing terrorism trends. The trend is most disturbing to security specialists, as the new groups are harder to track than the older ones (which are still in existence, although dormant). The new terrorists are often organized in small local groups around a charismatic cleric; thus, even if the cleric is jailed, there are "others like him" to inspire terrorism, says one expert.

Although these groups are loose-knit, they often show an international reach. A militant Islamic group in Pakistan sent a fax in the aftermath of the Twin Tower bombing and the investigation of New Jersey cleric Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman to the Cairo office of the Reuter news agency denying any involvement in the incident. But the fax added that any unjust defamation of the cleric would not go without retaliation. The fundamentalist terrorists are far from amateurs. There are training camps for some groups in the Middle East; there are even Afghan Islamic terrorists who received their training from the CIA during the Cold War (some of the suspected terrorists from the Twin Tower bombing



were trained in Afghanistan). Most of the experts interviewed see increasing terrorism coming from fundamentalist Islamic groups, stemming from such factors as the failure of fundamentalists to take power in countries through political means, such as Algeria; renewed Muslim animosity toward the U.S. and Israel after the gulf war; and the fading appeal of more secular terrorist groups which failed to win economic and political payoffs for the masses of people.

\* Fundamentalist Islamic organizations are finding a growing appeal among the Turkish population in Germany in the face of growing right-wing, anti-immigrant sentiment, according to a recent study by the Center for Turkish Studies in Essen, Germany. The study, cited in the National Catholic Register (March 14), finds that the recent wave of attacks directed at foreigners--especially the 1.8 million-strong Turkish community--as well as a trend toward right-wing politics are key factors in the growth of radical Islamic groups. The study says "Islam in Europe will become more and more fanatic the more Muslims in Europe have to fight for their rights." Nevertheless, it adds that more than 60 percent of all the mosque-centered associations in Germany have moderate policies and are influenced by the Turkish government. (National Catholic Register, 12700 Ventura Blvd., Suite 200, Studio City, CA 91604)

\* A small but growing number of Spanish intellectuals and professionals are seeking to recover their country's Islamic roots, especially in the region of Andalusia, according to the New York Times (March 1). "Grouped in communities in Granada, Seville, Almeria, Jerez de la Frontera and Màlaga as well as Cordoba, some 2,000 Spaniards have formally converted to Islam. Many of them are intellectuals and professionals who were previously drawn to competing doctrines of Roman Catholicism and Marxism. Yet they belong to a far larger movement of Andalusians who are coming to terms with their Arab past," reports the newspaper. The new interest in Islam in the poor region of Andalusia has been influenced by the movement toward greater regional autonomy in Spain, as well as by the recent celebration of the fifth centenary of the fall of the Arab stronghold of Granada. The Andalusian Muslims argue that Islam is natural to the region, since it had not been Christianized before the Arab occupation began in 711. Convert Alhakem Morilla has been promoting an Andalusian form of Islam without seeking to defend the way Islam is practiced in various Arab countries. Rather than proselytizing, the local Islamic center has held social programs for interested visitors, resulting in a regular crowd of inquirers, with some eventually converting.



**Religion Watch**  
P.O. Box 652  
North Bellmore, N.Y. 11710

**Inside This Issue:**

- A Report From A Conference On New Religions In Europe
- An Alternative View On The Branch Davidians