

RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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RESEARCHERS FOCUSING ON RELIGIOUS FACTOR IN AGING

Decades of mounting research showing a positive relationship between well-being among the elderly and religious commitment has started a minor revolution in the fields of gerontology and geriatrics. The Arizona Republic (September 3) reports that "Gerontologists and geriatricians, scrambling to minimize the dependency and frailty of a fast-growing aging population, have begun to analyze early studies on the impact of religious belief on aging and initiate new studies in the area." Researchers began studying the connection between religion and aging about 40 years ago. But mainstream social scientists and biomedical researchers have tended to ignore or downplay the significance of such data. "Only in the field of gerontology has the study of religious faith gained steam, becoming difficult to ignore in the past five years. Though still marginalized, religion and spirituality have gained a higher profile as the concept of 'successful aging' has evolved," writes Jennifer Foote. The National Institute on Aging recently made three grants for studies that look specifically at the relationship between religion and aging-- an unprecedented move.

A growing number of books and professional groups are also examining this issue. Next year's White House Conference on Aging is likely to emphasize this topic, Foote writes. It is more the "sheer volume" of the research than the findings of individual studies that has prompted the new interest in religion and aging. But it is particularly the studies that have shown how religious belief tends to relieve death anxiety in elderly subjects and increase the quality and rapidity of recover that have gained wide attention (for instance a 1990 study showed that women with the strongest religious beliefs among a group of elderly with hip fractures have the strongest recovery rates). Even though it has been shown that church attendance drops off as a person ages, researchers find that religious belief takes on a new dimension for the elderly as they review their life and seek meaning in the face of suffering.

This non-institutional approach to religious belief among the elderly is reflected in the recent book Aging and the Religious Dimension (Auburn House, Westport, Conn., \$57.95), edited by L. Eugene Thomas and Susan Eisenhandler. The book looks at how the process of aging in itself serves as a kind of religious or spiritual experience--what one author calls a "pragmatic spirituality." In this thinking, "life review" and storytelling are viewed as an attempt at "spiritual reintegration" before death. Another chapter examines how the loneliness of the elderly and its transformation into the more positive quality of solitude is often a catalyst for renewed spirituality.

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**FUTURIST
RELIGION
AND THE
FUTURE OF
RELIGION**

Futurists are increasingly paying attention to religion, although their predictions often show as much about the religious views of some futurists as they do about the future of religion. In the September/October issue of The Futurist, Richard Kirby and Earl D.C. Brewer forecast that religions are "now headed toward what may eventually form a United Religions Organization (URO), structured in much the same way as the United Nations and sharing similar goals." The URO would "gather representatives of the world religions in perpetual spiritual-parliamentary sessions in order to advance the knowledge of God or the Transcendent for the whole human family." The organization would also create a new "just world culture," expressed in sustainable growth, "bioregionalism," and a new environmental ethic. Kirby and Brewer also make a number of other forecasts and observations on the future of religion. Through technology, such as the computer, and the growth of interfaith activity, world religions will begin to work together to tackle global problems.

Other forecasts and trends include: the world religions "working out the theoretical basis of a world theology...A mature, whole-earth theology will likely develop;" some groups are preparing to send their religions into outer space; churches are becoming like malls, "serving as economic centers as well as religious ones;" the merging of two or more religious impulses, such as Hinduism and Christianity, is producing hybrids, such as Christian Yoga; the East is rediscovering theism-- "We will likely see a major Eastern contribution to the global doctrine of God...in the twenty-first century; a world theology of peacemaking is emerging; the Green movement and world religions are converging. "Environmental ethics will increasingly be institutionalized in the work of Christian ethics;" a "fully integrated male/female world theology" is taking shape, where the "feminine is increasingly partnering the masculine in religious thinking."

The above forecasts are far from disinterested observations but rather reflect much of thinking found in the literature of futurists. Kirby is the head of the World Network of Religious Futurists (WNRF), a group that in 1990 emerged out of the Joint Strategy and Action Committee, which is now part of the National Council of Churches. The emphasis on environmentalism and the unity of world religions is fairly common among religious futurists, according to the Rev. William Heins, who edits the WNRF's newsletter. Heins, a United Church of Christ minister, told RELIGION WATCH that the futurist interest in the unity of religions and a world theology has developed because "our communication capabilities have become so great that there is bound to be growth in the interconnectedness of people and appreciation for our commonalities and differences." (The Futurist, 7910 Woodmont Ave., Suite 450, Bethesda, MD 20814)

**HERMIT
SPIRITUALITY
GAINING
FOLLOWING**

There are signs that people are choosing a life combining solitude, spirituality and a simple lifestyle, often without support of the institutional church. In the Jesuit America magazine (September 10), Karen Karper writes that in the past two decades there has been an increase in Christians choosing to live as "hermits." Karper took an informal survey of 64 hermits in the Roman Catholic tradition and found

several common characteristics. "None of these persons gave any evidence that they were running away from life. Rather they evinced an overwhelming attraction for something (Someone) in whom they could find fullness of life." Karper finds that the usual path into a hermitage is through an initial encounter with religious orders. But she adds that many women are asked to leave their communities if they wish to live as hermits. Few (12 to be exact) of Karper's respondents were publicly recognized by Catholic dioceses as hermits, although all have some links to the larger Christian community. Many of the hermits are self-supporting through part-time jobs or receive supplemental income from government programs, such as Social Security.

Karper writes that just as the increase in the number of hermits in the early Middle Ages "paralleled a significant social shift from an agrarian economy to a more urban civilization...Something like that may be happening today. Historically, hermit life gains in popularity whenever a critical cultural shift is in progress. In a counter-balancing movement, some individuals seek a life of solitude, simplicity and prayer." Karper writes that most of those she surveyed have been living in solitude for 10-20 years, which means that "many hermits adopted this lifestyle during the 1970s." The solitary spiritual life is also drawing a more diverse group of people today, according to Sumner Wells of the New Monk Project, a network of hermits and others seeking contemplative spirituality. The Butler, Penn.-based project is itself a sign of the changing nature of spiritual practice. Wells told RW that the ecumenical network provides support for people from a wide range of backgrounds and professions--from students to politicians-- who wish to practice contemplative spirituality, often with a strong solitary dimension, outside of the bounds of traditional orders. "Most don't do it for life. They're not drawn to the lifestyle of religious orders. I think it's the individualistic strain in Americans that is making the hermit lifestyle more attractive," Wells said. (America, 106 W. 56th St., New York, NY 10019)

**ANTI-GAMBLING
CRUSADE NOT
POPULAR
IN PEWS**

Gambling is increasingly being targeted by religious leaders, although the rank-and-file church members have distanced themselves from this crusade, reports the Houston Post (September 10). An escalating battle against the fast-growing gambling industry is evident throughout the country. The United Methodist Church is especially active in the cause, as it helped form the National Coalition Against Organized Gambling, a group including representatives of 13 Christian bodies. Anti-gambling measures recently passed in Missouri and Oklahoma are said to be influenced by church involvement on the issue. Despite these victories, even religious leaders admit that their constituencies are far less likely to oppose casino gambling and in many cases, such as state lotteries, are pro-gambling in sentiment. One Catholic official says that the "strong opposition to it has diminished even among those groups that have been the leaders in opposing any form of gambling," such as the Baptists and Methodists.

Because of a weakening of opposition to gambling in many churches, leaders have reinterpreted such opposition to include social justice concerns, especially among Catholics who have traditionally not opposed some forms of gambling. University of Houston religion scholar Lynn Mitchell says that "Many church leaders, both liberal and conservative,

consider legalized gambling to be a social evil because it is regressive. It gets money from those who can least afford it, the poor." Anti-gambling groups also argue that gambling does not promote economic development, but rather devours local discretionary funds. Mitchell adds, however, that many devout people see gambling as a way to avoid taxes, and do not see the cases of misfortune from gambling that happen to a few individuals as applying to them.

**PROZAC--
CHALLENGING
OR AFFIRMING
RELIGION?**

The increasing use of anti-depressants, such as Prozac, to change mood disorders and even personality traits is raising new questions about the relation of the brain to spirituality. An article in *Common Boundary* (September/October), a magazine on the relation of psychotherapy and spirituality, focuses on how Buddhists are coming to grips with Prozac in their spiritual practices, but the report brings up issues that are likely to engage other religious believers on this matter. Although nearly one million prescriptions are written for Prozac and related drugs each month, "...antidepressants are underprescribed in circles where people tend to view their problems as a spiritual emergency-- a state that definitely has more cachet than depression," writes Barbara Graham. Prozac is different than other anti-depressants in that it not only relieves serious depression but also seems to work on personality traits, such as self-esteem, anger, and a general sense of well-being-- states of mind with which many religions have been concerned. But most of the therapists and spiritual practitioners interviewed in the article say that using Prozac has not conflicted with and has even enhanced their religious practice.

One Buddhist meditator says that before taking Prozac, "I was swimming upstream...without ever making any progress." After taking medication, he finds "much more intense stillness in my [meditation] practice now. And I don't beat myself up for not being a better practitioner..." Those interviewed seem to agree that Prozac and similar drugs do not deal with the "dark night of the soul," or other existential predicaments that serve to spur people on to spiritual growth. A Zen monk adds, "Taking medication is kind of like sitting in a chair rather than sitting cross-legged on the mat. Whether there's something wrong with people's legs or the neurotransmitters in their brains, we need to adjust the practice so they can experience it." [While there has been little research on the impact of Prozac on religious believers, it seems likely that those groups which have a strong therapeutic dimension--such as stressing self-esteem--are likely to be in conflict with much of the psychopharmacological revolution, viewing it as unwelcome competition; Scientology and its anti-Prozac campaign is one such example. Religions that have an emphasis on the transcendent are less likely to experience such conflict because they have invested less in fostering psychological adjustment and well-being.] (*Common Boundary*, 5272 River Rd., Suite 650, Bethesda, MD 20816)

**CAIRO CONFERENCE
CREATES
DIVISIONS,
NEW COALITIONS**

Last month's United Nations conference on population and development in Cairo demonstrated the growing diversity that has developed among religious groups on family planning issues, according to several reports. Before the opening of the conference, it was predicted that something of a religious war was taking shape on such issues as abortion and family

planning, as Catholics joined with conservative Muslims and other religionists in a coalition against secular-oriented feminist and population control groups. By mid-conference, however, it appeared that the conference could not be viewed in a strictly religious versus secularist framework. The fragile alliance between Muslims and Catholics broke down as the diversity of Islamic views on contraception, family planning and even abortion emerged. The Long Island Catholic (September 14) reports that while agreeing with the Vatican that the conference "should not be exploited for the recognition of immoral behavior," Muslim participants showed more favorable views on artificial birth control, with several Islamic countries--such as Egypt, Bangladesh and Morocco receiving praise for their family planning programs. There is even some debate among liberal Muslims on whether abortion is permissible in the early stages of pregnancy, since the Koran does not directly address the subject. [The conference, however, is reported to have drawn American Muslims and Catholics closer together on pro-life issues.]

The Cairo conference created religious coalitions that were just as likely to be liberal and moderate as conservative. The Washington Post (August 25) noted that the MacArthur Foundation helped sponsor a conference of leaders from Protestant, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and other religions that endorsed the goals of the Cairo conference, including the decriminalization of abortion. The New York Times (September 24) reports that the New York-based World Conference on Religion and Peace issued an inter-faith statement on the eve of the conference supporting birth control education, while affirming an opposition to abortion as a means of family planning. The Wilson Quarterly (Summer) reports that regardless of most religions' teachings on family planning, the adherents of such faiths are increasingly availing themselves of such practices. Catholic countries continue to register rates of contraceptive use that are just as high, if not higher, than non-Catholic countries. Among Muslims, even such a militant Islamic regime as Iran has reversed its initial opposition to family planning as it has created a program that includes everything from aggressive public education to free vasectomies. "The ethics of reproduction are also changing in [once pro-natalist] Hindu nations," according to the article. In Nepal, for instance, religious considerations have taken a back seat to a trend toward smaller families and government-run family planning services. (Long Island Catholic, P. O. Box 9009, Rockville Centre, NY 11571-9009; Wilson Quarterly, 600 Maryland Ave., SW, Suite 430, Washington, DC 20024)

**HOSPITAL
CHAPLAINS BUSY
BUT LEAVING
RELIGION
AT THE DOOR?**

Chaplains are being recognized as bringing both spiritual and physical benefits to hospital care, while de-emphasizing strictly religious concerns, according to the New York Times (September 7). Hospitals are hiring chaplains who have special training in counseling and interfaith understanding as well as religion. The chaplains go on rounds, consult with doctors and nurses and provide guidance on the increasingly complex decisions created by today's medical technology. The hospital chaplaincy has changed in that such work is no longer treated--both by hospitals and sponsoring religious bodies--in the same way as other pastoral work that provides prayer, sacraments and spiritual advice. Today, there is more of an emphasis on chaplains listening to patients problems, "sometimes without being able to provide any special insight." One Catholic chaplain says, "We see spiritual care as part of holistic care. Our work is primarily the work of the spirit, not necessarily the work of religion."

The broader mission is to help a person tap into their spiritual resources in times of crisis..." The methods of training chaplains have also changed. In the past, chaplains were mostly assigned to such work by religious superiors; today chaplains receive about 1,600 hours of specialized training, much of which takes place in hospitals under the supervision of experienced chaplains.

PUBLISHING UPDATE

CATHOLIC CATECHISM A BEST-SELLER

* The Catechism of the Catholic Church is breaking publishing records just six weeks after its release, according to the National Catholic Reporter (September 16). "So enthusiastic was the public's response to the long-awaited tome that the U.S. Catholic Conference spun into a third printing of 616,000 copies in mid-August, bringing the total of books in print to a whopping 2 million." Along with brisk sales through book channels, such as wholesalers, major bookstore chains and parishes, the catechism is even selling in such retail outlets as Wal-Mart, Target and Venture. The Catholic rush to buy the 803-page-user's manual of the faith could eventually pump upward of \$2 million in royalties into the Vatican coffers. Observers have varying theories as to why the catechism is so popular. Rarity is a factor, since this is the first universal catechism in over 400 years. One Catholic official says the catechism provides "magisterial substance, not fluff" for families. Phyllis Tickle, the religion editor for Publishers Weekly, says that the catechism clarifies the borders of the American church as a body within a greater body of Roman Catholicism, this urgency on the part of American Catholics to know if their understanding of American Catholicism fits within that larger border."

CULTURE WARS BOOKS DRAWS READERS

* Several major books dealing with the culture wars-- the battles over values and their relation to public policies-- are selling briskly. An article in the Publishers Weekly (July 11) suggests the first salvo in this trend was fired by Vice President Dan Quayle in his criticism of the television show Murphy Brown. Since then, similar jeremiads against cultural decline have gained wide readerships, such as William Bennett's The Book of Virtues and columnist Cal Thomas's The Things That Matter Most (Zondervan). These and related titles are now selling well over a half million copies each. The major buyers are yuppies and baby boomers, who are "trying to get back to simpler times," according to a spokesperson for Waldenbooks. Added to the continuing demand for books on spirituality and the ministry of angels, culture war books reflect the ongoing consensus that some kind of significant religio-moral renewal is spreading across the U.S.-- By Erling Jorstad, RW contributing editor, and most recently author of "Popular Religion in America: The Evangelical Voice" (Greenwood).

CURRENT RESEARCH: Recent Findings On Religious Behavior And Attitudes

EVANGELICAL SEMINARIANS EMBRACE THERAPEUTIC VIEWS

* Evangelical seminarians are increasingly being influenced by a secular, therapeutic mind-set that emphasizes the immanence (or nearness) of God over his transcendence, according to a recent study. The study is based on a survey of 730 seminarians from seven evangelical schools conducted by Calvin College and is presented in the recent book God In The Wasteland (Eerdmans, \$19.99) by David Wells. The survey found that there is a gap between the beliefs the students profess to hold and the beliefs

that actually shape their worldview, particularly in their view of the self. For instance, 40.2 percent of the respondents affirmed that "realizing my full potential as a human being is just as important as putting others before myself." About 45 percent listed such things as an experience of inner-peace and a sense of community as the most important benefit of salvation; 41.6 percent held the more traditional view that the most important benefit is that they have been spared judgement for their sins.

The respondents also tended to emphasize God's immanence rather than his transcendence. Wells notes that these findings confirm those of sociologist James Davison Hunter of a decade ago, who claimed that evangelicals are diluting their theological identity due to modernity's influence. Wells says that such a therapeutic mindset "may well soon be spreading yet further among the evangelical laity....[The seminarians] will likely offer leadership that is more consensual, that takes large account of the feelings of those being led, and that will place as much emphasis on preserving relationships as it does on acting on principle."

**RELIGIOUS
MOTIVATIONS
IN HATE CRIMES**

* Eighteen percent of some 7,600 hate crimes reported to the FBI in 1993 were motivated by religion, reports the federal agency. The Chicago Sun-Times (September 10) reports that the numbers of such crimes are probably much higher since they come from agencies covering only 56 percent of the country. Anti-Jewish crime rated the highest with 1,189 incidences; anti-Catholic crimes: 30; anti-Protestant: 25; anti-Islamic: 11; anti-other religions: 55; anti-multi-religious groups: 11; anti-atheism-agnosticism: 3. Other hate crimes were motivated by race (62 percent), sexual orientation (12 percent) and the rest by ethnicity/national origin. Intimidation was the single most frequently reported hate crime at 35 percent.

**UTAH'S ACTIVE
MORMONS MORE
CONTENT
THAN OTHERS**

* Active Mormons lead happier lives than do non-active Mormons or members of other religions, according to a recent survey. The study, conducted by the University of Utah Survey Research Center, defined active Mormons as those who attend church at least once a week. The independent Mormon magazine Sunstone (September) reports that the survey of 600 Utah residents found a higher level of contentment among practicing Mormons in such categories as health, community, housing, financial security, public education, and relationships. (Sunstone, 331, S. Rio Grande St., Suite 30, Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1136)

**FINNS HOLD
TENDER VIEW
OF GOD**

* Most Finns do not hold the traditional view that God is somber or severe, according to a recent survey. The study, conducted by the research center of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland in cooperation with Finnish Gallup and the Lutheran weekly "Kotimaa," found that such a traditional image of God as awesome and punishing--said to be influenced by the nation's Lutheran heritage-- is accepted by only five percent of Finns. Fifty-nine percent of the 1,200 respondents said they believe that God is loving and forgiving. Interestingly enough, the minority who viewed God in more stern terms consisted mainly of those who seldom attend church worship, according to a report in Lutheran World Information (September 22). Eight percent of the respondents said they do not believe in God and six percent had doubts about the existence of God. (Lutheran World Information, 150 Route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland)

WORLD NOTES

**NEW RELIGIONS
GROWING SLOW
IN E. GERMANY**

* New religious movements in the former East Germany are growing more slowly than initially expected, according to the British Catholic magazine The Tablet (September 10). Most "cults" and "sects" had achieved greatest participation before the 1989 collapse of Communist rule, and "had since shown a tendency to split into smaller, less influential groups." Most of the new religious movements to which young people were the most attracted, such as Scientology and Transcendental Meditation, have changed their recruitment methods and are now concentrating on personal contacts rather than distributing "propagandist material," according to a report first appearing in the Czech Catholic weekly Katolicky tydenik. It is added that with 35,000 adherents, the Jehovah's Witnesses are currently eastern Germany's largest non-mainstream religious group. (The Tablet, 48 Great Peter St., London, SW1P 2HB England)

**REVIVAL OF
JUDAISM IN
POLAND**

* Judaism in Poland is undergoing a resurgence after a period when the religion was generally considered to be heading for extinction, according to Inside Israel newsletter (Volume 14 No. 9). Jews have often been considered to make up a small and declining community in Poland; such a film as "Schindler's List" claimed there were only 4,000 Jews remaining in the country today. Actually, researchers find that such a commonly quoted figure reflects the situation of several years ago. There are nearly 80,000 Polish Jews today. The discrepancy in numbers may be due to the fact that democracy in Poland "seems to have awakened a desire on the part of many people here, who have denied their Jewishness for decades, to reconnect to Jewish life," says one observer. Another Polish Jew added that "Only a couple of years ago in Poland, one dared not even whisper to a close friend that one was Jewish, for fear of the insidious and often officially sanctioned anti-Semitism." (Inside Israel, Box 22029, San Diego, CA 92192-2029)

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