

RELIGION WATCH

10th Anniversary Issue

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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RELIGION WATCH
TURNS
TEN YEARS OLD

After 10 years of publishing RELIGION WATCH--which means 110 issues and over 1,500 articles-- it is tempting to look back and reflect on how the various trends we have monitored have significantly shaped, or will shape, religion and society. That was the plan, anyway, until the editor attended a recent conference on spirituality and healing in medicine in Boston. RW went away from that gathering with the impression that readers would be more interested in the research and discussions being conducted in this field (see page 2), than in the observations and forecasts (involving a good deal of guesswork) that would go into such an in-depth overview. In fact, the preference for citing the reporting, research and analyses of others rather than providing extensive commentary on the issues has been a RW hallmark from the beginning. With the growing diversity and fragmentation of contemporary religion, where developments can point in many different (sometimes conflicting) directions, RW has mainly sought to identify and map these disparate strands and has avoided trying to tie them together in order to support a central narrative or a particular theory or viewpoint.

Since many newsletters succeed by giving advice or promoting a cause, the non-opinionated nature of RW may be a factor in keeping our circulation on the low side and our budget on a shoe-string scale. There have been some months a few years ago when it was not too certain that there would be a "next issue." The new public engagement with religion and spirituality as well as recent media interest in RW (which may mean that if you hang around long enough, you're bound to get noticed) suggest a more hopeful future for the newsletter. Currently, RW is featuring more first-hand reporting and outside contributions, as well as benefitting from the steady input of contributing editor Erling Jorstad. For the near-future, we are investigating the implications of computer technology and electronic publishing for the newsletter. The best way to insure the progress and future of RW is for readers to tell other people about it-- and then give them gift subscriptions (\$18 per gift, and we're still extending givers' subscriptions for two issues). It has been enjoyable corresponding with and meeting RW subscribers and we continue to welcome your comments, compliments and criticisms of the newsletter. Thanks for your continuing support and interest and we hope you will stay with us as RW moves into the next decade of publishing.

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**HEALTH-
SPIRITUALITY
CONNECTIONS GROW.
ENCOUNTERING
RELIGIOUS
TRADITIONS**

"In 10 years when you go for a check-up, I predict that your doctor will not only ask about your medical history but also about your belief system." That prediction, made by Richard Friedman, a psychiatry professor at the State University of New York at a recent conference, reflects the confidence among a growing movement in the medical community that medicine is at a turning point in its relation to spirituality and religious belief. As research on the beneficial health effects of religious faith and practices continues to grow, clergy, doctors and other practitioners are now trying to figure out how to use such knowledge in their work and what such research means for religious believers and institutions. Such questions were discussed and debated by close to 1,000 participants at an early December conference RW attended on spirituality and healing in medicine in Boston. The conference was sponsored by the Mind/Body Medical Institute at the Harvard Medical School, which, under its founder Herbert Benson, has been in the forefront of this research. Benson set the expectant tone for the conference when he stated that the medical establishment will increasingly turn to healing techniques that draw on spirituality and religious and other "self-help" traditions because they will be viewed as cost-effective for doctors.

With the growth of HMO's (health maintenance organizations), medical providers have a greater concern to cut costs by decreasing the number of visits patients make to the doctors' office (since HMO's do not use a pay-per-visit system), Benson said. This bottom-line element combined with the mounting studies on the beneficial effects of faith and spirituality on health will likely accelerate the acceptance of such practices within the medical establishment, he added. HMO's are already expressing interest in the work of Benson's institute, and many medical schools are adopting or considering establishing courses on spirituality. He added that the use of spiritual practices would not infringe on a patient's religious freedom since the method of treatment would be based on choice and would work within their belief systems. Many of the research findings on faith and spiritual practices and their effect on health have had a vague, generic quality to them as they have not explored specific religious teachings and practices. The conference helped fill in some of the blanks and make connections between healing and specific faith traditions. In reviewing the faith-healing research findings, Dale Matthews of the Georgetown University School of Medicine said that it is the spiritual "practices rather than the beliefs that bring healing."

Practices such as church attendance and prayer were commonly cited as showing beneficial health effects during the conference. There was a closer focus on meditative variety of prayer and its relation to a "relaxation response" technique developed by Benson. The response, developed in part by studying Transcendental Meditation practitioners during the late 1960s and 70s, involves the use of repetitive words or prayers and has been found to be effective in helping such conditions as heart disease, chronic pain and even infertility. Benson has since found the relaxation response in other spiritual practices, whether it be Catholics reciting the rosary or Buddhists meditating, as well as in secular versions. While the response need not be "spiritual"-based, its practice "often results in a more spiritual approach" by patients. He added that since these different practices have similar effects on health, it may mean that they share the same underlying reality

or experience, a possibility which could even contribute to greater unity and peace among religions. The next step, Benson said, is to prove such a commonality by more research in physiology. For instance, research using brain scanning suggests that the visualization methods practiced during meditation (and possibly other spiritual practices) affect certain parts of the brain, according to Stephen Kosslyn, a Harvard University psychologist.

There was a concern among conference participants that linking religious faith and spirituality too closely to medical healing may do harm to the integrity of both fields. Some voiced concern that many spiritual practices could become valued for the relaxation response they generate rather than for their transcendent and spiritual purposes. Seyyed Nasr, a George Washington University Islamic scholar, emphasized the difference between "psychic" or psychological healing and spiritual healing which is tied to faith in God. While Islamic practices have been found to have a therapeutic value (such as the recitation of verses from the Koran), he said that "meditation shouldn't be divorced from a sacred structure." Matthews of Georgetown University drew a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic faiths and their effect on health. Those who have faith as part of their identity (intrinsic) do experience positive health effects; others who might use religion or spirituality as a way to achieve status or health (extrinsic), do not receive such benefits, and may actually experience negative health effects.

The conference sought to broaden the appeal of healing research beyond wholistic health, New Age-oriented and Eastern religious groups that have been the most friendly to mind-body thinking. There were sessions on healing practices among Pentecostals, Christian Scientists, Seventh Day Adventists, Jews and Catholics [there were no mainline Protestant representatives or perspectives]. Until recently, Christian Scientists did not cooperate with scientific researchers on healing issues, according to Benson. But the participation of Christian Scientist leader Virginia Harris in the conference suggests a new openness on the church's part to the medical and religious communities. Harris made an appeal for greater interfaith unity while teaching orthodox Christian Science principles. There was also the attempt to draw out of these traditions common principles and techniques that could be of use to practitioners and patients outside of these groups. For instance, theologian Harvey Cox of Harvard University found parallels between a charismatic Christian form of healing which views such an experience as receiving and transmitting divine energy and Eastern forms of healing with similar teachings. Steven Matthysse, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School, concluded that it is not far-fetched to think that medicine will eventually adopt some of the concepts and terminology derived from religious healing traditions.

**CREATIONIST
PRESSURE
SILENCING
EVOLUTION
IN SCHOOLS?**

A major cause of the Christian right, the teaching of creationist interpretations of the Bible, is making significant headway in public schools and college-level science courses, according to the America magazine (November 18). E. Kristin Peters of Washington State University, writes that pressures from parents, churches, and political conservatives are causing a growing number of schools to simply give up

on teaching natural selection and Darwinian theory. Teachers have found it easier to "capitulate" to local school boards than to teach these modern scientific theories, Peters writes. A similar trend is evident in public colleges and universities. Oddly enough, Peters finds that only in church-related--mainly Catholic and mainline Protestant--colleges are teachers freer to teach about the history of life on the planet, including the theory of evolution. (America, 106 W. 56th St., New York, NY 10019)--By Erling Jorstad.

**NEW AGE
WRITERS TURN
TO FICTION
TO EXPRESS
TEACHINGS**

New Age leaders and writers are increasingly turning to fiction to get their message and teachings across to followers while also seeking a larger mainstream readership, according to Common Boundary (November/December), a magazine focusing on psychology and spirituality. The turn to fiction to convey religious teachings has become evident among different faiths--including evangelicals such as Pat Robertson and Charles Colson--but it appears that writers and publishers associated with the New Age are investing heavily in this medium. Among the New Age-oriented writers trying their hands at fiction are Deepek Chopra with his novel "The Return of Merlin," Natalie Goldberg (author of "Banana Rose") and goddess writer Starhawk (with her novel, "The Fifth Sacred Thing"). Why the move to fiction? Chopra is now convinced that "A novel reveals the truth, and nonfiction is a lie."

Others interviewed in the article say that fiction is a natural way to convey the mystical, emotion-based beliefs associated with the New Age, since nonfiction is "more of a cognitive, linear-organized process," says Christina Grof, a writer on wholistic health who is also working on a novel. Some publishers think the new fiction will not draw anyone outside the New Age orbit and that the authors' reputations as being involved in alternative spirituality will work against them. But Bantam editor Linda Gross thinks the move to fiction is a "natural evolution, a bridging of New Age and mainstream. There will be readers coming to these novels who don't understand New Age principles but enjoy the novels. These are crossover books; they'll be shelved in both fiction and New Age." (Common Boundary, 5272 River Rd., Suite 650, Bethesda, MD 20816)

**BAR, BAS
MITZVAHS
CATCHING ON
WITH ADULTS**

Within the last five years bar and bas mitzvahs for adults have "become a regular feature of Jewish congregational life," reports the New York Times (November 21). "It's grown like wildfire. It's part of the whole Jewish spiritual renewal in this country," says Sanford Seltzer, director of the Reform Jewish movement's commission on religious living. Traditionally reserved for Jewish youth as an initiation into adulthood and participation in the faith community, bas and bar mitzvahs are now attracting adults who never took part in the ritual as well as those who want to repeat the event because they went through it by rote without learning Hebrew or Judaism. Women are reported to represent at least three-quarters of the adults requesting the ceremony, mainly because women were initially not allowed or encouraged to participate in the ritual until the 1970s.

Although no statistics are available on how many of these ceremonies have been conducted, it is estimated that half of Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist synagogues around the country regularly conduct

them (bar and bas mitzvahs are not part of Orthodox Jewish tradition). A 1994 survey of Reform congregations found that 462 of the 540 respondents had conducted the ceremonies. The phenomenon highlights the spiritual interest, increased awareness of women's roles and the "increasingly keen understanding that deft marketing can lure people back to places of worship." One rabbi says, "It's a hook for adult education, let's face it. It's a pop-market way of getting people to commit to a higher level of Jewish involvement."

**COURTSHIP
GAINING HEARING
AMONG
EVANGELICAL
PARENTS**

There is a growing phenomena of evangelical parents adopting courtship as an alternative to modern dating practices, according to the National & International Religion Report (November 27). This revived practice of courtship involves restricting exclusive male-female relations until a couple is spiritually and financially ready for marriage, which usually means eliminating dating during the teen years. In this practice, a young man contacts the father of the girl and asks for permission. An answer of "yes," usually draws the young man into activities involving the whole family, as well as seeing the young woman alone. The newsletter cites a recent issue of the magazine published by the evangelical activist group, "Focus on the Family" as criticizing dating because it too often involves youth in short-term relationships, creating "baggage" for later married life. Jonathan Lindvall, a minister in Springville, Calif. who conducts youth seminars, says the number of people considering courtship as an alternative to dating has grown in the last five years. (National & International Religion Report, P.O. Box 21505, Roanoke, VA 24018-0560)

**CHRISTIAN
COUNTRY MUSIC
ESTABLISHES
IDENTITY**

"Christian country" is a "rapidly developing music genre" among evangelicals, reports the Washington Post (November 11). While country music always has had Christian performers, it was not until three years ago that Christian performers with a preference for country music attempted to establish a separate artistic and commercial identity through starting the Christian Country Music Association. "In recent months, however, the idea has taken hold, as major Christian record companies have added country divisions and hundreds of radio stations have begun playing the music--some of them exclusively," writes Bill Broadway. Christian country is basically country music with Christian lyrics and falls between traditional Southern gospel music and mainstream country. Christian country is distinctive in the way it denounces the "cheatin' and drinkin'" that are depicted in many country songs. Most of the singers are in their mid-thirties to mid-forties--and come from evangelical backgrounds--many from charismatic and independent Baptist. The article adds that Christian country musicians have influenced mainstream country performers to be more outspoken about their Christian faith.

**CATHOLIC
SCHOOL SHORTAGE
DEVELOPING?**

In parts of the U.S., Catholic school education is becoming a "privilege of the wealthy and well-connected," according to the Catholic World Report (October). "In inner-city neighborhoods with high crime rates, where the majority of the population is often not Catholic, there are openings in Catholic schools. But in middle-class or suburban communities, waiting lists are increasingly the rule, even for members of

the parish," with parish "insiders" often finding the available spaces, writes Robert Hutchinson. He adds that although new schools have recently been built, increased birth rates and dissatisfaction with public schools are intensifying the shortage. The shortage is also the "result of the U.S. bishops' short-sighted decision to close down so many parish schools in the 1970s and early 1980s. Tough zoning regulations and building codes...make it very difficult and expensive to re-open schools once they have been shut down, or simply to add additional classes to each grade in the schools that remain." The shortage may negatively impact many baby boomers and busters who have returned to parishes in concern for their childrens' education. Hutchinson cites studies showing a connection between Catholic faith and Catholic schooling (such as by Andrew Greeley) and suggests the shortage of spaces may have long-term impact on the church. (Catholic World Report, P.O. Box 1328, Dedham, MA 02027)

CURRENT RESEARCH: *Recent Findings on Religious Attitudes and Behavior*

CHURCH ATTENDANCE AFFECTS DIVORCE VIEWS AMONG YOUTH MORE THAN OTHER FAMILY ISSUES

* The controversies and media coverage stemming from the "Re-Imagining" conference unintentionally provided a "public face" and greater support for feminist theology in American society, according to a recent University of Colorado study. The Re-Imagining conference of 1993 generated long-term controversy and divisions among mainline Protestant denominations for its invoking of female imagery for God. Observers have contended that the furor and denominational actions resulting from the controversy (such as, in one case, firing one of the organizers of the gathering from a church leadership post) has represented a "win" for conservatives and a setback for the religious left. But the study, conducted by Lynn Schofield Clark and Stewart Hoover and presented at the late October conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, found that the publicity surrounding the issue has, in part, been viewed positively by event organizers and their sympathizers. The press attention served to gain liberal Christian feminists a new respect for toughness among other feminists, who tend to discredit Christianity as a male-dominated religion, as well as creating a hearing for feminist theology on the national and local levels. (For information on the study, write: Center for Mass Media Research, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309)

RE-IMAGINING GIVES FEMINISTS 'PUBLIC FACE'

* While church attendance has a strong effect on American youths' expectation of divorce, active religious involvement has little effect on teens' expectation of having illegitimate children and on their attitudes about unconventional families, according to a recent Gallup poll. Most of the approximately 500 teens surveyed agreed that divorce in the U.S. is too easy to get, and that most divorced couples did not work hard enough to save their marriage. Yet one-third of Protestant and Catholic teens forecast that divorce is likely in their future. This expectation, however, is less among recent church attenders than those not recently attending-- 28 percent versus 44 percent. About one teen in five who is a recent churchgoer expects to have an illegitimate child some day, which is about the same percentage for non-recent attenders. While most teens were found to want traditional marriages and families, they were often tolerant of family situations where single parents and unmarried couples are raising children. "Few teens think that gay or lesbian couples are ideal parents, but Roman Catholics and non-attenders of church are twice as likely as Protestants or recent church attenders to approve of such

arrangements." (Emerging Trends, 47 Hulfish St., Suite 215, P.O. Box 389, Princeton, NJ 08542)

**RELIGIOSITY
NOT A STRONG
FACTOR FOR
HAPPINESS
IN MARRIAGE**

* Religiosity does not significantly increase happiness within marriages, according to a recent study cited in the evangelical digest Current Thoughts & Trends (November). The study, a 12-year longitudinal study of 2,033 married people first published in the Journal of Marriage and the Family, measured religiosity by the frequency of prayer and Bible or religious reading, church attendance and participation in church activities, and religion's impact on daily life. Happiness in marriage was defined by the closeness of the couple's interactions, the frequency of disagreements and divorce proneness. Researchers Alan Booth, David Johnson, Ann Branaman and Alan Sica found "little support for the idea that an increase in religious activity leads to improved marital relations." The most significant positive effect of religiosity was in impacting divorce proneness. A slight increase in church attendance and religion's influence on daily life was correlated with a rise in marital happiness.

**CATHOLIC,
MAINLINE
CAMPUS
MINISTRIES FEEL
FINANCIAL CRUNCH**

* Catholics and mainline Protestant campus ministries are facing a financial crisis, according to a recent study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. Campus ministry is said to be "caught in the poverty cycle," says one Catholic campus official. The study, which surveyed 305 Catholic and Protestant campus ministries, found that 75 percent of the ministries expect major reductions in their funding or staffing within the next three years. Ten percent of the respondents say the elimination of their operation in the near future is likely, according to the CARA Report (Fall), the newsletter of the center. Catholic campus ministries were the least likely to report danger of closing, with six percent saying termination was likely in the next three years. Most of the Protestant ministries responding were under mainline Methodist, Episcopal and Lutheran auspices. (CARA Report, Georgetown University, Washington, DC 20057-1033)

**ADMINISTRATIVE
TASKS FOUND
TO OCCUPY
CLERGY'S TIME**

* The long-standing belief that parish ministers are spending substantial amounts of time on routine administrative matters was recently given scholarly support in a recent study in the Review of Religious Research (December). Professors Gary William Kuhne and Joe F. Donaldson studied the daily schedules of a sample of Protestant ministers in detail and found that at least one-third of a day's schedule was taken up by office administration at the expense of counseling, study, sermon preparation, and community activity. The authors suggest that assistance in taking some of the administrative pressure off pastors can be found in several places, including courses at the seminary level on administration, and enlistment of more volunteers and paid professional laity. Kuhne and Donaldson conclude that such positive steps will relieve the frustration caused when ministers "discover they're not going to study the Bible all day." (Review of Religious Research, Texas Tech University, Dept. of Sociology, Lubbock, TX 79409-1012)--*Erling Jorstad*

**DUTCH WANT
LESS OPINIONS
FROM CHURCHES
ON WAR, PEACE
ISSUES**

* A survey of Dutch people reveals that 53 percent think churches are not competent to express opinions on wars and other violent conflicts. The public opinion poll, cited in the National Catholic Reporter (October 27), found that 68 percent of respondents believe churches should concentrate instead on helping war victims, supporting U.N. troops and praying for peace. (National Catholic Reporter, P.O. Box 419281, Kansas

City, MO 64141)

**SCIENTOLOGY
GAINING GROUND
IN RUSSIA**

The Church of Scientology is gaining "more and more ground in the areas of politics, business and the media in Russia," reports *Idea* (October 26), an evangelical German news service. The manager training courses conducted by the church are reported to be in "very high demand," and already "hundreds of factories, banks and insurance companies in Russia" have been adopting Scientology principles on business, according to Alexander Dvorkin of the Russian Orthodox University in Moscow. Dvorkin says that the introduction of Hubbard's system has resulted in the reestablishment of Stalinist management structures within the companies. Scientology has had the greatest success in Perm, a city with 1.5 million people. The city's mayor is reportedly a convert to Scientology and he has "instructed the town employees to adopt the administrative system propagated by the Scientologists," according to the news service, which is citing an article in *Berlin Dialogue*, a German magazine on new religious movements. Dvorkin adds that the mayor of the city of Novgorod near St. Petersburg had also completed a Scientology-based training course. (*Idea*, Postfach 18 20, D-35528 Wetzlar, Germany)

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