

Christianity, Foreign Religions, and the New Age —

Religious Trends in America

A thousand years ago, in the 990s just before the first Christian millennium was nearing its close, many of the Christians of Europe thought the world was about to end—and Jesus would return on or about A.D. 1000. Many today are expecting a supernatural momentous event to occur as soon as we near A.D. 2000.

Fortunately, we have several lines of prophecy, as well as certain types, to indicate that Jesus is, indeed, soon to return.

Here is a brief survey of the religious world as we near the end of the second millennium since the birth of Jesus Christ.

NEARING A NEW MILLENNIUM

During the Dark Ages, bands of peasants expected the millennial reign of Christ to begin. The 14th century English peasant revolt and the 15-16th century German peasant revolts were also keyed to millennial expectations.

In the 19th century, millennial hopes sprung up even in Islam, which partly caused a revolt in Sudan in 1881. Buddhists have, for over a hundred years, declared that the “third Buddha” is to appear at the height of predicted catastrophes—1,000 years after the nirvana of the second Buddha. This idea of a forthcoming millennial end is also found in Persian Zoroastrianism and Brazilian and African cultures.

Millennial expectations are again very strong—especially among Christians. As you know, a wide variety of beliefs are held as to how the world will end, how Jesus will return for His people, and what will happen thereafter on Planet Earth.

The whole world seems to be gearing up for some great excitement that is soon to occur.

GROWING CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

Most of the church growth in Western civilization is among fundamentalist and alternative religions. Evangelical churches have gained 10 million people in the past ten years. Every five years since 1965, the Evangelicals have grown 8 percent, while the staid, mainline Protestants have lost 5 percent. There are nearly 40 million Evangelicals in the United States, according to the National Association of Evangelicals.

In recent years, Jehovah’s Witnesses have increased from 330,000 to 752,000, and Seventh-day Adventists from 365,000 to 687,000. But the largest Pentecostal denomination—the Assemblies of God—has quadrupled from 572,000 to 2.1 million. The Pentecostals emphasize faith healing and speaking in tongues. Worldwide, there are about 100 million Pentecostals, including 3.7 million in the U.S.-based Church of God in Christ and 16 million members worldwide in the Assemblies of God. Throughout the world, in just ten years, the charismatic churches tripled to 277 million.

The Mormons have done very well also. They have

grown from about 750,000 in 1940 to 6.2 million today, with 4 million in the United States. They have 30,000 college-age missionaries (more than any other denomination) working in 95 countries and 20 territories.

With 15 million members, the Southern Baptists are now the largest single Protestant denomination.

It is of interest that several new “Christian” denominations started at or after our own denomination began in 1844: the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Scientists, and Spiritualism.

At the present time, 84 denominations ordain women, and there are 21,000 female ministers in U.S. churches alone. Both Catholic women and nuns and Protestant women are trying not only to gain ascendancy in ministerial status but also to change the very wording of Scripture, song books, books of prayer, and church rituals. It is of interest that both Christian feminists and New Age devotees speak of the “father/mother god.”

GROWTH IN EUROPE

Youth for Christ operates teen centers throughout Europe, and drew young people from 37 nations to a recent European conference and 12,000 to a rally in Africa’s Upper Volta.

Chinese and former Soviet Union’s young people, and older ones too, are eagerly attending evangelistic meetings by Western preachers. They are also getting Western rock music as well.

Fundamentalist Islam is unleashing a powerful revival among the Westernized middle classes of Turkey, Egypt, and several other Near Eastern and African nations. Experts are discovering a strange revival occurring simultaneously, on a worldwide basis, in Islam, Shinto, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity. Yet this trend was unforeseen as little as 25 years ago, when it was predicted that the religions would wither away before the onslaught of modernism. People want salvation; they want God.

GAINS AND LOSSES

But they are not as interested as getting it from the staid, mainline churches (the fundamentalist religions).

The United Methodist Church dropped from a high of 11 million members in 1965 to 9.2 million. The Presbyterian Church, USA, has lost nearly a million members, and is down to 3 million. The Episcopal Church is down from 3.4 million to 2.5 million. The three largest Lutheran denominations have lost about a million members.

It is known that official Catholic membership records are doctored, and do not give an accurate picture of how many people are really members of that faith. The official statement is that there are 53.5 million Catholics in America. The number of priests and nuns keeps decreasing. In 1968, there were 176,000 nuns; in 1988, that figure was down to 107,000. In 1987 alone, 5,577 nuns left.

Overall, Christian and Jewish congregations gained 4.1 percent in the 1970s, while the population grew by

10.9 percent.

A Gallup poll in the late 1980s found that 94 percent of Americans believe in God. "India, Poland, and the U.S.A. have the most religious people," says William D. Antonio, of the American Sociological Association. Sixty-one percent of Americans say that religion is "very important in their lives," according to a 1987 *USA Today* survey. While 84 percent of Americans say they believe in the divinity of Christ, 44 percent say they do not attend church.

A Gallup polls showed 63 percent of Americans called TV evangelists "untrustworthy," and 23 percent voted them "trustworthy." The PTL, Swaggart, and Oral Roberts scandals have cost all the television evangelists dearly.

Yet one third of Americans describe themselves as "born-again" Christians.

INVASION BY FOREIGN RELIGIONS

New religious groups are springing up in America. Of 206 new groups recently listed, 28 were new Eastern religious groups, 19 were Pentecostals, 11 were Adventists, 11 Mormons, and 11 "Spiritual, Psychic or New Age" groups.

What about the "new religions" invading the West? There are many of them. Many of these are based on Eastern religions, especially Hinduism.

Four percent of the U.S. population is Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu. There are 4 million Islamics in America; about one fourth of them are Black Muslims. So there are more Muslims than there are Episcopalians. For example, in Colorado alone, there are 6,000-10,000 Muslims. There are mosques in Denver, Boulder, Fort Collins-Greeley, and Pueblo.

Then there are the Buddhists: at least 600,000 in America, from two main Japanese sects, and thousands from Southeast Asia. The total number of Buddhists is between 3 and 5 million.

There are more than 40 Hindu temples and more than 500 Hindu religious organizations in the United States. Many worship in their homes and are not included in any listing.

ENTER THE NEW AGE

The so-called "New Age" religions are actually the Eastern religions (especially Hinduism) under the guise of Western names.

In difficult times, people run to fundamentalism or ecstatic spiritual experiences. Millions of Americans have studied yoga, meditation, or other Eastern disciplines. What they want is a link between their everyday lives and a higher power.

While fundamentalism offers the teachings and standards of former years, New Age offers something far different. Claiming to reject outside authority, it supposedly teaches a turning to inward power. Yet, in reality, it is teaching men to listen to spiritualist writers, and, through "channeling," rely on spirit voices.

Researchers estimate New Agers are about 5-10 percent of the U.S. population. According to a poll conducted by the University of Maryland, 6 percent of the people in

that state identify with the New Age movement. Though harder to find in the central and southern states, New Agers could easily total 12-15 percent of the East or West Coast cities.

The old fable of the devil, whispered in Eden, that "you are god," is the basis of New Age beliefs. "Human potential" is the name they give it. The theory of reincarnation is generally included in the package, along with spirit mediums. New Age is just a mix of Hinduism and spiritism in new terminology.

J. Gordon Melton, editor of the *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, estimates that nationwide there are about 400-500 "channels." ("Channels" or "channelers" is the New Age term for spiritualist mediums.) Yet other sources claim that Los Angeles alone has over 1,000 of them. We are told that they are especially active in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other major West Coast and Northeast cities. But they are also doing well in Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Florida, and northern Illinois.

Ninety-five percent of the readers of *New Age Journal* are college educated, with average household incomes of \$47,500. In 1989, the circulation of that magazine was 165,000.

Sophia Tarila's *New Age Marketing Opportunities* lists 456 New Age publications and a total of 7,000 listings. The *National New Age Yellow Pages* has more than 450 listings in its 260 pages. Bodhi Tree, a New Age bookstore in West Los Angeles, stocks 30,000 New Age books. Bantam Books has increased its list of New Age books tenfold in the past ten years. Between 1985 and 1989 the number of New Age bookstores doubled to 4,000. Total sales of New Age book titles now exceed \$100 million a year. New Age records sell \$50 million a year. Audio and videotapes for "mind expansion" and the like are a \$300 million-a-year business.

Perhaps the most insidious part is the fact that corporations spend an estimated \$4 billion per year on New Age consultants and New Age seminars—which they require their employees to attend, or be fired. A California business survey of 500 companies found that more than 50 percent had used "consciousness-raising" techniques. This includes such giants as TRW, Ford, AT&T, and General Motors. *Krone training* was required of all Pacific Bell's (in California) 67,000 employees. Fortunately, so many workers objected—that they filed a lawsuit so they would not have to attend the classes.

The syllabus of Stanford University Graduate School of Business's "*Creativity in Business*" course (taught by Michael Ray) lists meditation, chanting, and dream work, Yoga, Zen, and tarot cards.

According to the National Opinion Research Council, a full two thirds of Americans say they have had an ESP experience, and 42 percent say they have had "contact with the dead." In 1973, those percentages were only 58 percent and 27 percent respectively

More WAYMARKS - from —

PILGRIMS REST

HCR 77, BOX 38A - BEERSHEBA SPRINGS, TN 37305 USA