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OCCULTISM, GENERAL

“Conventional Christian Beliefs and Experimentation with the Paranormal” by F. Carson Mencken, Christopher D. Bader, and Rodney Stark — from the abstract: “We know from previous research that some individuals with strong, conventional Christian beliefs [i.e., in heaven, hell, God, and resurrection] may also profess beliefs in paranormal phenomena incongruent with Christian beliefs (extrasensory perception, psychic abilities, communicating with the dead, [astrology,] etc.). What we don’t have a full grasp on is to what extent people with conventional Christian beliefs will also experiment with these paranormal activities. It is one thing to believe in psychic abilities, but quite another to consult a psychic.... In general, conventional Christian beliefs have no direct effect on the reported number of paranormal experiences, but, these effects are conditioned by the level of church attendance. Among those who attend church often, conventional Christian beliefs significantly decrease the reported number of paranormal experiences. Among those who do not attend church, holding conventional Christian beliefs increases the number of reported paranormal experiences.” (Perhaps one might call the latter state “naive poly-inclusivism.” - RP) *Review of Religious Research*, 50:2 - 2008, pp245-246.⁴

RELIGION, GENERAL

After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion, by Robert Wuthnow¹ — reviewer William H. Swatos, Jr., shares some of the findings: “The post-boomers ... tinker with relatively standard religious concepts to create higher-order worldviews that work for them. In more cases than not, these are closer to the core of traditional religiosities than we may have been led to believe by media accounts derived from fringe movements....

“It is not that mainline Protestants are running like mad to become Evangelicals, but that Evangelicals are having more children while liberal Protestants are having less — and this mounts up across a generation.

Roman Catholics of nonimmigrant parents are also having less children than the boomer generation, but these are offset by immigrants — both in the adult and child generations — to buoy Catholic numbers....

“Hispanic Catholics tend to reflect traditionalism, while Hispanic Protestants are much more open to Americanization.... Indeed, across the board, Hispanic Protestants were more accepting of the North American milieu.... As a whole, young Asian Americans are ‘much less churchied than the general population of younger adults.’ ...

“The overall implications of the book suggest that as a whole the religious potential of the post-boomer generation may be under-tapped but is not in a tailspin.... Contrary to those who see Evangelical/charismatic ‘new churches’ flourishing, however, Wuthnow points out that proportionately ‘Evangelical Protestants have barely held their own,’ and American Roman Catholicism has maintained itself primarily through immigration. Those who have held on, Wuthnow argues, are those who have attracted ‘the married minority.’ ... One of the most interesting findings [is] that so-called ‘contemporary’ worship services that seem to many churches to be the answer do not in fact appeal to over a quarter of any age group of today’s Christians between 21-97 years of age and are *least* appealing to those in the 21-29 year age category.” *Review of Religious Research*, 50:2 - 2008, pp194-205.⁴

SCIENCE FICTION

When I finished reading “Sci-Fi’s Brave New World” by James A. Herrick, cover story of *Christianity Today*³ this month (pp20-25), a subtitle came to mind: “Wake up! Unorthodox religious dreamers are designing your future.”

Herrick opens with a brief survey of sci-fi film and television influence concluding that its message, and that of “a wide range of artists, popular writers, and even scientists [presents] space and the future as sources of hope.” In general, we are getting “stories that are subtly persuasive and freighted with spiritual implications.”

(continued on next page)

The sci-fi genre “has profoundly shaped not only the entertainment industry, but Western spirituality as well,” argues Herrick. “I have labeled the modern myths arising from science, science fiction, and new religions *scientific mythologies*. These powerful narratives represent a cultural current the church needs to take seriously as the source of a growing worldview.” Like it or not, “They provide answers to perennial questions about our nature and place in the cosmos, our predicament and redemption, and the future.” Typical of the popular American cafeteria-style approach, the sci-fi crowd tends to “fashion personal spiritual systems from individual experience and elements of mythic popular culture.”

Herrick concludes in part that “the church needs to broaden its apologetics work to include serious analysis of and response to popular culture, now our most potent form of religious persuasion.” You’ll learn a lot more about all this in his recent book, *Scientific Mythologies: How Science and Science Fiction Forge New Religious Beliefs*.²

WITCHCRAFT

“Survey Reveals Americans’ Feelings about Wicca” (no byline) — dated Jan 26 ‘09, this page from the Barna Group web site says its “studies indicate that while young people, in particular, are interested in witchcraft and are comfortable with the idea of worshipping nature, few Americans claim to be Wiccan. Based on interviews with more than 4,200 adults during 2008, Barna studies showed that Wiccans represent about one-tenth of one percent of all adults.”

As you might expect, Wicca is not familiar to most people. “A slight majority of Americans (55%) say they have not heard the term ‘Wicca.’

“Among the 45% who have heard of [it], the segments most familiar with Wicca include

people younger than 60 (50% are familiar with the name, compared to 35% of older adults); Christian evangelicals (65%); Skeptics (61% of atheists and agnostics); Asian Americans (52%); upscale adults (62%); and those who describe themselves as socio-politically liberal in most cases (55%)....

“Among those who have heard of Wicca, nearly two-thirds (62%) described it as an organized form of witchcraft. Smaller proportions defined Wicca as a form of Satanism (7%) or as a religious cult (7%). About one-fifth (18%) said that although they were familiar with the name, they knew little or nothing about Wicca.

“When asked to express their view of Wicca, 6% held a favorable view (2% very favorable and 4% somewhat favorable), and 52% held unfavorable views (7% somewhat unfavorable and 45% very unfavorable)....

“Those who possessed a ‘very unfavorable’ view were most likely to be found among residents of the South and Midwest (52% of whom had a very unfavorable opinion); born again Christians (67%); and socio-political conservatives (61%).”

The Barna commentary includes some unexpected remarks. After the statistical discussion, we read: “Wicca has significant opportunities for growth.” This is followed by a list of “conditions that would facilitate an increase in the number of Wiccans in America.” The personal views of founder George Barna are given. These include the opinion that he “expects significantly growing numbers of young Americans to embrace elements of Wiccan practice, such as spell casting and performing magic rituals, which have proven to be central behav-

iors featured in various popular media presentations in recent years. Many young adults will not consider themselves to be Wiccan but will adopt some of its practices and thinking alongside their more traditional religious views and behaviors.”

The opening paragraph of the essay summarizes that “while many adults are not familiar with Wicca, nearly half of the adult population has reserved having an opinion on that religious group even though its best-known practices directly contradict the religious faith that they personally embrace.” <www.tinyurl.com/djyeh4>

SOURCES: Monographs

1 - *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, by Robert Wuthnow (Princeton Univ Prs, 2007, hardcover, 312 pages) <www.tinyurl.com/bnhods>

2 - *Scientific Mythologies: How Science and Science Fiction Forge New Religious Beliefs*, by James A. Herrick (IVP, 2008, paperback, 288 pages) <www.tinyurl.com/bl4jve>

SOURCES: Periodicals

3 - *Christianity Today*, <www.christianity-today.com>

4 - *Review of Religious Research*, <<http://rra.hartsem.edu/reviewof.htm>>

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