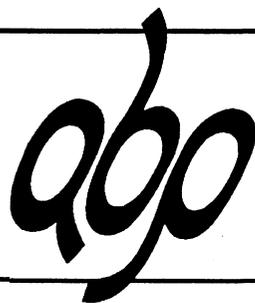


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October 13, 1999

(99-84)

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**'Religion and Ethics Newsweekly' host
offers list of trends in religion, ethics**

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- A longing for "the well-lived life" is prompting millions of Americans to explore a variety of spiritual paths, says veteran broadcast journalist Bob Abernethy.

That tops his personal list of significant trends in religion and ethics, the host of the PBS television program "Religion and Ethics Newsweekly" told participants in an Oct. 11-12 "Leadership Edge for the 21st Century" conference sponsored by the Baptist Center for Ethics.

"So many of us are so busy, stretched so thin and in so many directions," Abernethy said. That stress causes people to crave for significance and meaning beyond everyday concerns, he explained. Many are turning to spirituality, though not necessarily to organized religion.

"Go into any large book store," he said. "You'll find a few shelves on religion and a whole wall, probably, on the subject of spirituality."

As his program, which airs on 200 public television stations and is seen by an average 500,000 viewers each week, begins its third year, Abernethy said he sometimes feels "envy" for the rich spiritual traditions represented by guests he interviews on the show.

"We take religion seriously enough to cover as many different religions as we can, and what's most interesting that's going on with them, for a general audience," Abernethy said. "We're journalists, not televangelists, ... but we also know good journalism means getting at the heart of what people are talking about."

While many Americans are interested in religion, most are uninformed about faiths other than their own, he said.

"We in this country are so isolated religiously that we know a lot about what happens in our own church but not much, I think, about what goes on in another church down the street or another religion's place down the street," Abernethy said.

"The audience generally is very interested how somebody else worships," he said.

Second to America's growing quest for spirituality, Abernethy ranked the increasing diversity of religious expression in the United States as a significant trend.

"On anyone's list of what's going on, I think you would have to put religious diversity," he said. "We're not just Christian and Jew but just about everything else."

Such diversity implies "great dangers," Abernethy said, "unless we are careful."

The recent controversy over a booklet by the Southern Baptist Convention aimed at converting Jews during Judaism's High Holy Days illustrated the tension between respecting other faiths and carrying out what Christians believe "Christ called us to do," Abernethy said. "I think we need a lot of help with that," he added.

"Are there many paths up the mountain [to truth], ... or is mine the only one that reaches the top?" he asked.

Later, during a discussion, Abernethy offered another example of misunderstanding between different faiths. A recent segment on the program featured a Baptist editor analyzing reactions to the shootings at Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas.

"We have on our staff a wide range of people," Abernethy said. "One of them is a very wise and smart, also secular, Jew. Our story was that a lot of people around Fort Worth after that shooting felt that what happened was an indication of persecution. They saw themselves as part of a cosmic struggle between good and evil, forces of light and darkness, and they saw the shooting as part of a culture generally that they think is hostile to them. And his understanding of this, my friend absolutely could not fathom that a Baptist in Texas could feel persecuted.

"He said, 'Why? Why?' I said, 'Because they are Christians.' He couldn't understand it."

While some may fear that dialogue among different faiths might cause people to "water down" their religious beliefs in order to reach consensus, Abernethy said the opposite has been true for him.

"In my own experience, the more I learn about the faith and practice of other faith traditions, the more I want to explore the faith and practice of my own," said Abernethy, who said he grew up as a Baptist and now belongs to the United Church of Christ.

Abernethy said he is frankly surprised America has handled its religious diversity as well as it has.

"The potential for antagonism is all around us in this increasingly diverse land," he said. "I wish I had a better sense of a theology of diversity that would somehow permit us to be respectful of the truths of other faiths and at the same time seriously, deeply committed to the truths of our own."

"Another fast-moving field is genetic engineering," Abernethy said. "What do Christians have to say about recreating themselves as human beings? I don't mean in a spiritual sense, I mean in replacing parts. Should the rich be able to enhance their offspring genetically?" he asked, as they are already able to enhance them intellectually by sending them to superior schools.

Another trend is "the great battle of worldviews" between materialism and spirituality, he said. He quoted one guest who observed "the spirituality side is clearly winning" in America. "There is no doubt about us being a still religious country," Abernethy observed.

People of religious faith have complained for years that national television paid inadequate attention to news of religion, Abernethy said. Five years ago, as he was finishing up his assignment as a correspondent to Russia for NBC News, he decided to address the problem. The public television station in New York, Thirteen/WNET, agreed. So did the Lilly Endowment, which funds the program.

Abernethy said fellow journalists have been "very supportive" of the program in their comments. Several have asked about a job. He said he hopes the program will influence how other news organizations cover religion.

"I hope that we will find enough good stories and tell them well enough that people looking at the stories in the news business will say, 'Why didn't we have them?' and the result will be more mainstreaming of religion. We've got our work cut out for us, but if we do it right, that is what will happen."

About 50 people attended the conference, sponsored by the Nashville, Tenn.,-based Baptist Center for Ethics, held at Christian Fellowship Baptist Church in Atlanta.

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Newspaper columnist says left should reclaim Christian title

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Fundamentalism is giving Christianity a bad name in America, contends Atlanta Journal-Constitution columnist Cynthia Tucker.

Introducing her at an Oct. 11-12 "Leadership Edge for the 21st Century" conference in Atlanta sponsored by the Baptist Center for Ethics; Christian Fellowship Baptist Church pastor Emmanuel McCall described Tucker as "a prophetess in our city." She responded that a staff member at her church, Andrew Young, is fond of referring to the newspaper as her "pulpit" and the column as her "own personal mission."

Tucker said America needs to hear from those whose idea of Christianity is broader and more inclusive than the narrow view represented by the Religious Right.

"I am tired of hearing the word Christian from the public stage in newscasts and having it only mean one very, very narrow theology," she said. "So those of us who have a broader, more expansive view of Christianity have an obligation to take back the public stage. We have given it up. We have surrendered it. We need to do our own evangelization, if you will."

Tucker, a former Baptist who now attends First Congregational Church in downtown Atlanta, said she sometimes intentionally shocks readers by reminding them she is a Christian, qualifying that she is "a member in good standing of the Christian left."

She criticized Southern Baptists for their recent emphasis to convert Jews to Christianity between Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, Judaism's holiest time of the year.

"I am not a biblical literalist," she began. When Jesus issued his Great Commission to preach the gospel to all nations, "there was no faith known as Christianity," she said. "In the intervening 2000 years, I would argue Christians have done a pretty good job of getting the word out. It would be pretty hard to argue there is a single Jew in the U.S. that has not heard about Jesus."

Despite claims by some that Christians are subjected to discrimination in the United States, "this country remains largely a culture of Christianity," she said. "So the Southern Baptist aim was not to give the good news to a group that had never heard of it. From all I can see this campaign was a headline-grabbing public campaign. It did not seem to be a quiet person-to-person campaign. ... It seemed intended to offend."

"If we are going to live together as a thriving democracy, I think we have to have not just a flaccid tolerance but a genuine respect for those religions that endorse a moral code much like our own," she said.

She also questioned claims by some that America was founded as a Christian nation. While "there is little doubt that many of the founding fathers had a deep and abiding faith in God," she said, "the particulars of their Christian faith would cause some of today's fundamentalists to fall over in a dead faint."

Thomas Jefferson, she said, was a Unitarian, and Benjamin Franklin was open-minded to religions outside Christianity. They also were Enlightenment Rationalists, who held science in high regard.

"I believe they would look with dismay at many classrooms today, where fundamentalists would seek to push back evolution and the big-bang theory," she said. "How can we expect to lead the world in the next century ... if we lose our scientific mastery?"

"God is in no way diminished" if he created the world in billions of years rather than seven days, she said.

The desire of many fundamentalists to force America into a "Christian nation" would also "give cover to the rabid crazies," like racist groups that mask themselves as Christians, she said. "At its worst, this kind of thinking, this kind of religious chauvinism, leads to civil war, as it did in Kosovo," she said.

Tucker, who is an African American, suggested Americans "start small" in encouraging religious diversity.

"We haven't done nearly as well as we should have in dealing with diversity we already have," she said, noting that Andrew Young is still fond of saying that 11 a.m. Sunday is America's most segregated hour.

"Why is it that most of us who claim to follow the same set of beliefs ... can't worship together?" she asked.

Tucker said she is encouraged that more Christians are encouraging diversity by participating in projects that bring black and white congregations together.

"I see small steps in the right direction, but I don't think we are yet ready for the coming diversity of the next millennium until we can start to talk to each other more, to worship together," she said.

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U.S. Supreme Court rejects three church-state disputes

By Larry Chesser and Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court sidestepped three more church-state disputes during the second week of its 1999-2000 term.

Without comment, justices refused Oct. 11 to review:

-- the invalidation by New York's top court of a public-school district created to provide special education for the Hasidic Jewish community of Kiryas Joel;

-- lower-court rulings that Maine properly refused to pay tuition at parochial schools for students living in rural areas not served by public schools; and

-- the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's refusal to reinstate a law exempting the sale of religious publications and other religious articles from the state sales tax.

The high court's rejection of these disputes, along with four other cases when it opened its new term Oct. 4, continued a trend of steering clear of church-state disputes.

To date, only one church-state dispute is scheduled for review by the Supreme Court this term. On Dec. 1, justices will hear a request by New Orleans education officials to reinstate a federal funding program used to provide computers and other educational equipment to parochial schools.

Last summer, the high court appeared to signal an interest in the Kiryas Joel case when it stayed the ruling invalidating the special school district. But only three justices -- Sandra Day O'Connor, Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas -- voted to hear the case, one short of the four votes needed grant review.

New York lawmakers first created the district in 1989 after efforts to provide special-education services for disabled Satmar Hasidic students in existing public schools proved unsatisfactory to the community.

The special district was challenged in court and struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1994 because it singled out a religious community for special treatment. At issue before the high court this time was New York's third try at creating the Kiryas Joel school district.

New York's top court rejected claims that the legislature had this time enacted a "religion-neutral" law.

"The non-neutral effect of the statute is to secure for one religious community a unique and significant benefit -- a 'public school' where all students adhere to the tenets of a particular religion -- unavailable to all other similarly situated communities," New York's top court said.

At issue in the Maine dispute is the state's exclusion of religious schools from a program that provides private-school tuition for students residing in areas not served by public schools.

The ban on paying tuition to religious schools was challenged in state and federal courts. In the Oct. 11 order, the high court left standing rulings by the Maine Supreme Judicial Court and the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upholding the ban.

At issue in the Pennsylvania case is a 1971 state law that exempts from sales tax "religious publications sold by religious groups and Bibles and religious articles."

Pennsylvania's highest court said that because the statute exempts only religious publications and articles, it provides the same "preference for communication of religious messages" that the nation's high court struck down in a 1989 Texas case.

The Pennsylvania court noted that the Texas legislature later broadened its tax-exemption statute to include a range of religious, philanthropic, charitable, historical, scientific and other nonprofit organizations.

The Pennsylvania tax exemption lacks the broad coverage later enacted by Texas lawmakers, the Pennsylvania court said, "and it is the role of the Pennsylvania legislature, and not the function of this Court, to remedy this deficiency."

In its Oct. 4 actions, the high court:

- Refused to alter lower-court decisions that said preventing two Muslim policeman from wearing beards violated their religious freedom. The high court rejected Newark, N.J., city officials' appeal to allow the prohibition.

- Declined to hear arguments from a Albany, N.Y., public-school teacher that he was wrongly prevented from joining students in prayer outside the classroom. Dan Marchi, a teacher of emotionally disturbed and mentally disabled children, said students requested that he join them. Marchi also charged he was wrongly barred from referring to God in letters to parents.

- Left standing an Arizona state court's decision that upheld tax credits for donations to charitable organizations that allocate their revenues for nonpublic school tuition. The lower court said the tax credit does not violate the Establishment Clause, because it has a secular purpose, it aids a broad spectrum of citizens and therefore does not advance or inhibit religion, and it does not excessively entangle government with religion.

- Refused to review a lower-court ruling that sided with prison authorities who transferred prisoners to maximum-security custody based on the prisoners' membership in a religious group classified as racist, violent and a "security threat" by the U.S. Bureau of Prisons. The lower court said prison officials did not offend prisoners' First Amendment right of free exercise of religion by classifying religious groups to which they belonged.

GOP House leaders introduce nationwide voucher measure

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Republican leaders in the House of Representatives have introduced a voucher bill that would pay tuition at private and parochial schools for an estimated 27,000 students attending public schools declared to be in a state of emergency.

Modeled after a governor's authority to act following a natural disaster such as destructive weather, the Academic Emergency Act -- a five-year, \$200 million pilot program -- would let governors declare "academic emergencies" in schools that are "chronically failing." The designation would make students eligible to apply for a voucher of up to \$3,500 and would provide \$3,500 to a public school for each child who leaves the school under the plan.

"Too many schools are failing our children," House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas, told a room full of reporters gathered in the Capitol building. "When communities are devastated by floods, fires, droughts or earthquakes, they are declared natural disaster areas. They become eligible for financial assistance from the federal government. Yet when schools fail our children, our children remain trapped."

But critics say the plan is unconstitutional and would hurt public schools.

"This plan is nothing short of its own natural disaster. It will rip through our cities and towns and decimate our public schools," said Carole Shields, president of People For the American Way.

Jimmy Williamson, Fred Hale professor of Education at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, said the proposal is "old wine in new wineskins."

While offering supplemental aid to public schools that lose students is a "new wrinkle" in voucher bills, Williamson said, it "does little to shield the fact that public funds will be provided to support religious and other private schools."

"Rather than trying to support religious and private schools -- many of which are no better or worse than public schools -- policy makers should be demanding accountability and providing the resources directly to public schools to attract and retain highly qualified teachers and improve the learning environment in public schools," he said.

In a related topic, Secretary of Education Richard Riley and Florida Republican Gov. Jeb Bush squared off over the issues of education vouchers at a recent hearing of the House Budget Committee.

Bush said an "opportunity scholarship" plan in Florida allows students from public schools that are rated low to receive vouchers that private and parochial school must accept as a full tuition payment.

Last year, students at only two public schools qualified for the voucher. More than 130 students used the voucher -- 67 attended another public school and 58 attended one of five private schools, including four parochial schools.

Bush said the program has debunked common myths about education vouchers. He said the program does not "skim" the best students from low-performing public schools.

Bush told Associated Baptist Press that the plan is constitutional because "the money goes to the parent who chooses which school to send their child to."

He also said that private and parochial schools have to accept anyone under the plan, but he acknowledged that if a private school is not set up to accommodate children with disabilities, the schools is not forced to do so under the plan. "But parents know what's best for their children and they're not going to send them to those schools."

But Riley said that the appeal of vouchers rests on the idea that "there is some parallel universe of superior private schools that is ready, able and willing to take on the job of educating 46 million public school students." He added: "I'm here to tell you there is no such parallel universe. The only way to fix public schools is to fix them and not to abandon them."

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State Department lists China, others severe violators of religious freedom

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- China, Iran, Iraq, Myanmar (Burma) and Sudan have been listed by the U.S. State Department as severe violators of religious freedom.

Robert Seiple, ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, announced the "countries of particular concern" at an Oct. 6 hearing of the Senate Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights.

Seiple said Secretary of State Madeleine Albright intends to notify Congress shortly of the five countries as well as the Taliban and Afghanistan -- governments not recognized by the United States -- and Serbia, which is not a country.

The listing of "CPCs" is mandated by last year's International Religious Freedom Act, established to create a framework for monitoring and preventing religious persecution abroad.

Last month, the State Department released an 1,100 page report, also mandated by the act, which detailed the status of religious freedom around the world. But leaders of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom -- a 10-member independent commission established under the bill -- criticized the report for not listing the CPCs.

Sen. Don Nickles, R-Okla., sponsor of the bill, said in a written statement: "I am pleased to see that it is beginning to have an effect on U.S. foreign policy. I urge Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to use the appropriate tools we have placed at her disposal to make certain the United States is an effective advocate for religious freedom around the world."

The bill calls for the president to take some action within 90 days of the listing or to notify Congress if the president decides to impose no penalty at all.

According to Nickles, the bill is designed to reform U.S. foreign-policy making; to promote religious freedom through both incentives and presidential actions; and to "dispel the option of silence. The president must take action in all countries engaged in religious persecution."

Steven McFarland, executive director of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, said the State Department gave an accurate "diagnosis" of the status of religious freedom when it issued the 1,100 page report on roughly 194 countries. However, he said, "The proof in the pudding is the treatment of these countries. What's the curative plan?"

While applauding the inclusion of China in the list of CPCs, McFarland criticized the absence of countries such as Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba.

McFarland said, "all eyes are going to watch the first action." McFarland said, "It's not just who's on the list but what will be done to them so countries won't want to be on the list."

He added, "The first inaction or wrist slap in the face of documented persecution would make a damnable mockery of the new law and our nation's renewed commitment to international religious liberty."

At the Senate subcommittee hearing Seiple told lawmakers the State Department report details religious-freedom abuses in other countries not listed as CPCs.

"In some instances, like Saudi Arabia, those countries are beginning to take steps to address the problem," Seiple said in a written statement. "In some countries such as North Korea, religious freedom may be suppressed, but we lack the data to make an informed assessment. We will continue to look at these cases and collect information so that, if a country merits being designated under the Act, we will designate it."

Seiple said the listing of CPCs was delayed to give Albright time to review the report and other data.

He also told lawmakers that his staff has visited 15 countries in the last several months and met with hundreds of government officials and human rights groups. "Our office has become a clearinghouse for people with information about religious persecution and discrimination, and for the persecuted themselves," Seiple noted.

He highlighted U.S. efforts in three countries -- China, Uzbekistan and Russia.

"In China, our collective efforts on behalf of persecuted minorities -- and I include members of Congress in that 'collective' -- have been persistent and intense but have unfortunately had little effect on the behavior of the Chinese government."

He said religious practice there is more widespread than 30 years ago, "but serious and significant problems remain." He noted restrictions on Tibetan Buddhist worshipers and others who do not worship in an "official" registered church.

Seiple recounted the disappearance of Catholic Bishop Su Zhimin of Hebei Province. "Since his disappearance, there have been conflicting reports about Bishop Su's whereabouts and condition, but the Embassy has continued its efforts to determine his status. His case also was raised during the president's state visit to China in July 1998."

Seiple said the work of senior U.S. officials in Uzbekistan has led to positive developments, including the reported release of several Christians and Muslims from prison.

He also discussed a 1997 Russian law favoring older established religions over newer ones. "While there remain significant problems with that law, and the potential for abuse is still there, we have not seen our worst fears confirmed," Seiple said. "We believe this is true because the central government of Russia has acted to blunt the potential effects of the law."

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