First Place

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TEMPLETON CONTEST: Breaking news entry (mainbar)

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POPE CALLS FOR AN END TO DEATH PENALTY
Mass for 100,000 Caps Brief U.S. Visit

ST. LOUIS -- Struggling against the weight of age and illness, Pope John Paul II on Wednesday wrapped up what may have been his final U.S. visit, departing for Rome after issuing a ringing appeal to Americans to reject the death penalty and to overcome racism.

The 78-year-old pontiff's exhortations were part of his broader appeal for a "new evangelization" of America, and of his call to promote family life and battle what he sees as the evils of abortion and assisted suicide.

But the prominence and tone of his condemnation of capital punishment were unusual and carried the greatest political import. The United States leads the West in the use of the death penalty; more than 500 people have been executed since capital punishment was reinstated in 1976 and 3,510 remain on death row, a fact that has drawn increasing fire from the Vatican.

At a solemn Mass in the Trans World Dome on Wednesday morning, the pontiff launched his most forceful and direct criticism yet, telling more than 100,000 worshipers that "the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil."

"Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform," he said in his homily in the covered sports stadium. "I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary."

The pope's appeal flies in the face of trends in America, where polls show consistent support for capital punishment. Church officials concede that a majority of Catholics, too, back the death penalty even as a majority oppose abortion. Thirty-six states have the death penalty, and even some socially moderate states, like New Jersey and New York, have reinstated it.

In Missouri, the issue has particular relevance: Two weeks ago, a 37-year-old man was killed by lethal injection, and the execution of another convicted murderer, 42-year-old Darrell J. Mease, had been scheduled to take place early Wednesday, just hours before the papal Mass. But in
November the Missouri Supreme Court, without comment, delayed the execution until Feb. 10.

On Tuesday, the pope's spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Walls, said the delay made "a mockery" of the issue, and said opposition to capital punishment is "a moral idea, not a political idea."

Mease was convicted of killing his drug partner and two relatives in 1988. His case has generated little of the public sympathy that others have, but the pope's call still received strong applause from his listeners, as did his admonition to end racism in America.

At the Mass, the pope called on Catholics to be "unconditionally pro-life," which he said meant opposing abortion, euthanasia, and assisted suicide. He also called for a renewal of traditional family values in America, calling the family "the primary and most vital foundation of society."

"As the family goes, so goes the nation!" he said.

Pope John Paul said the entire country faces a "great challenge," namely, "to put an end to every form of racism, a plague which your bishops have called one of the most persistent and destructive evils of the nation."

The pope spoke on racism several times during this visit, his fifth to the United States, and it was clear from the prominent role given to African-Americans in the liturgies and events that the pontiff wanted this to be a salient theme. The Catholic church in America has struggled to attract blacks, and just 12 of the nation's nearly 400 bishops are African-American.

Civil rights icon Rosa Parks, the woman who sparked the modern civil rights movement by her refusal to yield her seat on a bus to a white man in Alabama in 1955, was part of the closing day's events. She met briefly with the pope after attending the final ceremony of the visit, a late afternoon interfaith prayer service at the Cathedral of St. Louis.

In his remarks at the service, the pope returned to a central thrust of this week's visit to Mexico and the United States, namely seeing the Western Hemisphere as a unified whole, and of the United States special role in the new world of the third millennium.

"At the end of this century, at once marked by unprecedented progress and by a tragic toll of human suffering, radical changes in world politics leave America with a heightened responsibility to be for the world an example of a genuinely free, democratic, just, and humane society," the pope told an assemblage that included Vice President Al Gore and his wife, Tipper.
He told Americans to hold fast to the Ten Commandments as their
guide in this reordered world.

"America first proclaimed its independence on the basis of self-
evident moral truths," the pope said. "America will remain a beacon of
freedom for the world as long as it stands by those moral truths which are at
the very heart of its historical experience."

The final day produced no broadsides against Western consumerism
and materialism, as many expected. The pope spoke more forcefully about
those things in Mexico and in a lengthy document on the Americas that he
officially promulgated during the visit.

In fact, throughout the brief visit, the pope spent only a little more
than 30 hours in St. Louis, Pope John Paul sought to take a positive tone
and to avoid any of the finger-pointing that some experts predicted. By
encouraging, rather than remonstrating with his flock, he
projected the image of a pastor and spiritual leader.

At the morning Mass, for example, in an unusual bow to the wide
opposition to some of his conservative teachings, the pope at one point
appealed to alienated Catholics to return to the fold. Experts say millions of
people, perhaps as many as a third of America's 61 million
Catholics, have left the church over issues like the pontiff strictures against
women priests and birth control.

"Is this not the moment for you to experience the joy of returning to
your Father's house?" the pope said, noting his proclamation of a Great
Jubilee celebration for the year 2000. He even seemed to reach out a hand to
divorced and separated Catholics, who are forbidden from taking
Communion, and to those traumatized by the clergy sex scandals that have
rocked the American church.

"In some cases there may be memories to be healed," he said. "In all
cases there is the assurance of God's love and mercy."

"He is not scolding, no," said Marco Politi, an Italian journalist
covering the visit who co-wrote a 1996 biography of Pope John Paul, called
"His Holiness," with Carl Bernstein. "He is more pedagogical, more like a
grandfather."

That grandfatherly image was reinforced throughout the final day by
pictures of the pontiff, hobbled by a variety of ailments, struggling to
marshal his waning energies and rise to the occasion. At the Mass he
slumped in his throne, reading slowly, at times indistinctly, because of the
Parkinson's-like disease that has affected his once formidable speech and
motor skills. He also had an insistent cough over the two days.
Still, the pontiff persevered through the nearly three-hour service at the Trans World Dome, which was transformed from the home of the NFL's Rams to a stadium of spirituality.

If this was the pope's final service in America, it was a grand farewell: some 250 cardinals and bishops, and 1,000 priests distributing Communion to more than 100,000 worshipers, the biggest indoor Mass in U.S. history.

The pope wore shimmering gold vestments and the tall white mitre of the bishop of Rome. The Mass was a solemn occasion, with few of the spontaneous asides that delighted the crowd of 20,000 young people at a prayer service the evening before. At that event the pontiff joked with his audience and threatened to return to play hockey after he was presented with a stick and special St. Louis Blues jersey.

"He was really funny," 11-year-old Eric Heitz said as he headed to the Wednesday Mass, his second papal event in 12 hours.

By day's end, a visibly tired Pope John Paul left the United States, seen off by the Gores. His TWA 767 roared off into the lowering darkness, leaving the United States, and the question of when, or if, he might return.
SUPPÈLE CONTEST (sidebar)

28 January 1999

THE FAITHFUL GATHER EARLY, AND EXCITEDLY
People Arrive Through the Night for Mass

ST. LOUIS -- That Mary Clare Rigali snagged a ticket for
Wednesday's papal Mass
wasn't so surprising. Her great-uncle, after all, is Justin Rigali, the
archbishop of St. Louis.

But the 7-year-old from Santa Barbara, Calif., also knew that this
wasn't a family reunion. "We're going to see the pope!" she squealed as she
and her family made their way into the Trans World Dome, dressed in their
Sunday finest.

For almost everyone in St. Louis, the pope was the focus for the two
days of his visit.

Vendors were hawking souvenirs, a remarkably tasteful line of pins
and banners and T-shirts, given the kitsch on display for previous papal
tours, although not always with great success.

"I'm doing more walking than selling," said Dale Conway, who had
traveled from Dalton, Ga., to hawk his wares.

Most folks were focused on procuring tickets rather than
memorabilia.

John Paul Wegrzyń -- yes, he not only shares the pope's name, but
also his birthday, May 18 -- carried a sign outside the domed stadium
reading: "I need a miracle, 1 ticket." It was a day for miracles. Wegrzyń got
his ticket.

"I'm not a hard-core Catholic, but this is exciting," he said.

One of the unlucky few left outside was Mary Adeniyi of Belleville,
Ill., who came with her family even though they didn't have tickets.

"Since we can't get in, we still wanted to be part of it," Adeniyi said.
"It's history in the making."

Others went to great lengths to be part of that history. Folks traveling
to the Mass started lining up in the early morning hours Wednesday.
Sausage vendor Jerry Mercer had 25 people lined up to buy the first of 240
pounds of bratwurst when he fired up his grill at 3 a.m. Elizabeth Winjum,
29, came to St. Louis with her mother from Dubuque, Iowa, but they had to
volunteer as ushers at the Mass, necessitating an arrival at the dome at the
unconscionable hour of 1:30 a.m. "It was the only way to get tickets," Winjum said, seemingly unfazed by the schedule. "It's worth it for us even if we have to see him with our binoculars."

"This makes it all very real," the Rev. Bryan Kuchar, assistant pastor of the cathedral, said by way of explaining the outpouring. "The pope is always so distant. You see him in photos and on television. This is kind of connecting theory with lived experience."

The weather helped, too. It was unseasonably warm and pleasant Wednesday -- Archbishop Rigali told the pope it was an answer to prayer -- which raised hopes that more people would turn out to see the pope's final motorcade than had the previous day. The chill air of Tuesday and dire warnings of papal gridlock downtown led to lighter-than-expected crowds lining the downtown streets.

Parking-lot owners were grumbling about empty spaces, Still, tens, or probably hundreds of thousands turned out, and St. Louis basked in the reflected glow of Pope John Paul's popularity.

By visit's end, church and city officials were comparing the visit to one of the three other great popular events of this century in St. Louis: The 1904 World's Fair, the 1927 welcome for aviator Charles Lindbergh, and last year's record-breaking feat by Cardinals slugger Mark McGwire.
FUTURE FAITH
A New Reformation In U.S. Churches

History has it that when Napoleon gazed upon the Gothic glories of the cathedral at Chartres he remarked, "An atheist would have a hard time in here."

It would be interesting to know what an atheist (or Napoleon, for that matter) would make of Meadowbrook Church, a young and fast-growing congregation in North Haledon.

On a recent Sunday morning, the Meadowbrook service opened in an auditorium with a five-piece electric band doing a 20-minute set of up-tempo Christian pop rock that kept the several hundred congregants, young adult suburbanites in jeans and Dockers, standing and singing and tapping their feet. When the curtain came down, to applause, the music segued to a one-scene drama: A 30-something woman curled up on a recliner, sipping coffee and musing about the emotional turmoil of her life: "I'm in control. I've got it together," she says dubiously. "Well, mostly together." Curtain up, and a man with a trio of female backups starts singing a pop hymn titled "Clumsy," featuring the refrain: "Oh Lord, we feel so clumsy..."

A brief talk by the pastor, Steve Musto, is followed by more music and the dismissal -- "Amen, and have a great day," Musto says -- then bagels.

Welcome to Christianity in the third millennium: contemporary, label-free, come-as-you-are spirituality where liturgies are performances and the "bible" on sale in the lobby isn't called a bible, it is "The Journey." Atheists and any others uncomfortable with standard-issue religion are welcome.

"It is something people could relate to," said Paul Siljee, 41, of North Haledon as he sipped coffee after the service. The Reformed Church Siljee grew up in just didn't connect with his modern-day life the way Meadowbrook does. "They speak about everything here: finances, marital problems," he said.

Meadowbrook is the Un-Church, if you will, and deliberately so.
"There's nowhere in the Bible where it says church has to be boring," says Musto, who just turned 28. "We are presenting timeless truths, but presenting them in an entertaining way."

A Church that Sounds Like a Corporation

This is no fad. It is the future. Churches like Meadowbrook are taking root everywhere, and are flourishing wherever they go.

Meadowbrook, for example (the name and logo come from market research showing people are less intimidated by a church that sounds like a corporation and looks like a mall), started in 1992 with a handful of worshipers. It now attracts 500 some Sundays.

The church recently moved its weekend service to this auditorium in Eastern Christian High School because the congregation outgrew its home on Squawbrook Road, a former Lutheran Church.

The seats are comfortable, the dress is casual. There are no crosses, no communion, no candles. Illumination is provided by a high-tech lighting system, audio by a huge sound board in back manned by three operators.

"Function is more important than form," says Richard Cimino, co-author of the 1998 book, "Shopping for Faith," a survey he wrote of American religion with Don Lattin of The San Francisco Chronicle. "You won't see many crosses or much stained glass. The goal is not to be churchy."

In everything from the style of worship to how churches look, it is the flock that is now telling the shepherds how to do things.

"American church-seeking behavior is very much like our behavior in looking for an automobile: the best buy for the best price," says Robert Wuthnow, a Princeton University sociologist and one of the foremost experts on religious life in the United States.

For the next millennium, this means Sunday services that will be far different from anything your parents could have imagined. Indeed, some say we are witnessing the biggest transformation in Christianity in 500 years.

Phyllis Tickle, religion editor of Publishers Weekly and the author of several seminal books on modern religious trends, compares this period in Christianity to the upheavals of the 16th century, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the cathedral door, the official start of the Protestant era.

"There are enormous parallels between the original Reformation and what we are going through," Tickle says. "It's very analogous."

The Golden Age of Churchgoing
How dramatic is the change?
Consider that on any given Sunday morning in 1958, in Anytown, U.S.A., you would have found about half of the citizenry heading off to a steepled neighborhood church, most likely one of the stolid mainline Protestant denominations, Reformed, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, or Congregational, or else the local Catholic Church.

This was the "Golden Age" of churchgoing, as sociologists have described it. America's vision of itself was somewhere between "Father Knows Best" and "Ozzie and Harriet," and even if the truth of that image was sometimes as illusory as the shows themselves, there is little doubt that the intervening years witnessed a seismic shift in the country's religious habits.

The change started with a slide in the number of Christians going to church, which reached its nadir in 1996, when weekly attendance had eroded to its lowest level this century, just 38 percent as measured by the annual Gallup Poll.

Church loyalty took an even steeper nose dive.

In that shining year of 1958, for example, just four Americans in 100 had left the Christian denominations they grew up in. By 1984, one out of three had left or switched, and the rate has continued to rise.

The Protestant churches that have always been the bedrock of America's religious geography took the biggest hit. Membership in those mainline denominations has fallen steadily since 1965, from nearly 75 percent to just over 50 percent today. For the first time in U.S. history, those identifying themselves as Protestant will soon dip below half of the population.

Even Roman Catholics, traditionally the most religiously cohesive Christian community, have not been spared.

In 1972, 46 percent of Catholics said they had a strong attachment to the church and 48 percent said they attended church weekly. The National Opinion Research Center now reports that in 1998 just 37 percent of Catholics described themselves as "strong" members. Weekly Mass attendance had dropped even more sharply, to 29 percent.

Significantly, during this same period the number of people who expressed no religious preference doubled from 7 percent to 14 percent.

"People don't see being religious as necessarily affiliating with a church," says Cimino. "Spirituality is everywhere. It has broken beyond the walls of the institutions."
Searching for the Roots of Spiritual Wanderlust

How did Christianity in America come to this pass? There were no 95 theses, no systematic abuses sparking widespread protests, no doctrinal disputes pitting one set of believers against another.

The answer goes beyond any single explanation, a convergence of factors, some obviously profound, others seemingly superficial.

For example, some argue that society first had its collective eyes opened in the 1960s when the first photos of Earth were transmitted from space. That made people think that we were all members of a single community, and hence that no one's God was necessarily "righter" than another's.

Others contend that the roots of our spiritual wanderlust go even deeper, to the 1930s, when Alcoholics Anonymous was founded and the self-help movement was spawned. By the 1950s and 1960s, AA had led to a veritable alphabet soup of 12-step programs, such as Narcotics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous, most of which require members, currently an estimated 15 million people, to acknowledge the force of a "Higher Power."

The ethos of these programs suddenly "made it all right for Americans to talk to each other about inner things," says Phyllis Tickle, something we were loath to do before.

Tickle and other observers also argue that the 1965 relaxing of the immigration laws was critical in reshaping our religious psyche. For the first time, the United States received a major influx of Asian culture, with the attendant interaction with Eastern thought and philosophy.

"The country was fairly Protestant Christian up to that time," says Tickle, a practicing Episcopalian. "But whatever Protestant Christianity had, it certainly had no sex appeal. No pizzazz. No color. No soul."

"Eastern spirituality and Buddhism just rushed into that vacuum like a storm."

Views on Authority, Truth, and Immortality

Add to those developments the cultural ferment that started with the Sixties, the drug culture, Woodstock, the rising divorce rate, and continued through the economic upheavals of the Seventies and the hyper-materialism of the go-go Eighties. Then, just as people settled down in the nesting Nineties, science kicked in with revolutionary advances in everything from the nature of consciousness to computers and the World Wide Web.
All this prompted Americans to reconsider their views on authority, on truth, on immortality, topics that until then had largely been the purview of institutional religion.

But the biggest shock to the religious status quo wasn't scientific, or cultural, or even theological: It was demographic.

After World War II, the G.I. Bill introduced higher education to the masses, and the masses responded by getting good jobs, moving into the suburbs, and making babies. Life wasn't "parochial" anymore. People drove where they wanted to go, and met, and married, people from other communities.

Once unthinkable combinations, Catholics and Lutherans, Baptists and Episcopalians, became commonplace, to the point that today, most Christian marriages are interdenominational. And mixed families tend to have softer allegiances.

"We're no longer living in an Episcopal neighborhood or a Jewish neighborhood. It's easy to look over the fence and see what the other folks are doing," Rodger Kamenetz, author of "The Jew in the Lotus," said recently.

"People are very mobile," agrees Wuthnow, whose latest book is "After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s," (University of California Press). "They move around, and you typically change churches when you move."

Of all the demographic developments, however, none was bigger than the appearance of the ballyhooed baby boomers, that self-indulgent, solipsistic cohort whose first wave washed over America's maternity wards in 1946 before trickling out in 1964.

Left behind when the tide receded were 76 million young Americans. Most of them went through the turbulent Sixties together, fought in or against the Vietnam War, midwifed the Age of Aquarius, dropped in, maybe dropped acid, then dropped out, trading tie-dyed jeans for a three-piece suit and the good life.

Then came the real shocker: middle age. In 1996, the first boomers turned 50. "They all looked up and said, 'My God! How did I get here?'" explains Tickle. "And that's a theological question."

When the boomers decided to come back to church, everything changed.

**A Distrust of Institutions**
In his landmark book of 1993, Wade Clark Roof, a sociologist of religion at the University of California at Santa Barbara, called the boomers "A Generation of Seekers." Roof's extensive polling and in-depth interviews painted a detailed picture of a generation that seeks out the spiritual but doesn't want their faith in the way it was handed down from their parents.

These Americans distrust institutions and leaders, and they value experience over beliefs. They want God, but on their own terms.

One-third of boomers, about 25 million people, call themselves born-again Christians, but one-third of boomers also envision God as Mother. Two-thirds dropped out of church as youths but 40 percent have returned.

Still, eight in 10 say you can be a good Christian without attending church, and three-quarters say a person should explore many religious teachings and not just stick to one faith. One-third believe in reincarnation.

They are spiritual, as Americans always have been and apparently will continue to be. More than 95 percent of Americans consistently say they believe in God (and 90 percent identify as Christian).

The boomers are no different: Only 1 percent say they don't believe in God, and just 3 percent say they're "unsure." But their idea of spirituality has often been to the trendy side.

First it was Transcendental Meditation, then crystals, then angels and untold numbers of books of pop spirituality. Americans will still consult those oracles during their quest, but now they also want a church. And not just any church.

"They look for good programs, good music, small groups, and children's activities," Roof writes. "They pick and choose what to believe and how to belong, with choice in such matters taken for granted."

The process seems irreversible. If the boomers were the avant-garde of change, the trailing cohorts, Generation X, the baby busters, are equally demanding.

"As a general rule of thumb, they do not have a worldview," says Bill Easum, founder of 21st Century Strategies, a top church consulting firm. "That means anything goes, except business as usual. Business as usual is over."

For churches hoping to survive into Christianity's third millennium, that means a scramble to adjust.

**Religion Packaged as a Consumer Product**
Almost overlooked in the shifts of the last generation was the moment in the 1960s when the United States switched from being a producer of goods, a manufacturing society, to a consumer nation.

Religious attitudes followed suit.

"We are a consumer society, and people are consumers of religious goods and services, just like other things," says Carol Childress of Leadership Network, a Dallas-based consulting firm that prepares churches for the next century. "It is not a negative thing or a good thing, but it is reality."

Even the Dalai Lama calls the United States a "spiritual supermarket." And now that believers are consumers, churches have to be marketers. Like any other business in a competitive field, they have to appeal to the clients quickly, keep them hooked, then hang on to them.

Childress says "effective" churches, she eschews the term "successful" -- will have to do extensive market research on their target community. "The intent is not to manipulate them but to understand them," she says, citing management guru Peter Drucker along with the Apostle Paul.

Studies show, for example, that churches preaching the enduring truths of the Gospels have 11 minutes --11 minutes-- to grab newcomers before the potential congregant decides whether to return. The studies also show that if a new churchgoer does not make at least two friends within the first six months, he or she will look elsewhere.

"We went through every church in this area. I mean every church," John Bruinooge, 40, of Prospect Park said about the family church search that finally ended at Meadowbrook. When Bruinooge and his wife and three children all sat down to decide which congregation they liked best, the kids decided it: "They said they wanted the church with the guitars. We knew what that meant."

**Even Bathrooms are Important**

Everything from music to the condition of the bathrooms comes under scrutiny. Research shows that churches should have designated greeters at the door, and that people get turned off if they feel pressured to give money.

Little wonder that when the plate (actually velvety-quiet bags) get passed at Meadowbrook, Musto tells first-timers not to contribute.

"Your friends did not invite you here to take your money," says Musto.
Even the hallmark of church tradition, the hierarchical, top-down dynamic, is being turned on its head. At one time, the shepherd imparted knowledge and the flock followed, the old religion class by rote. Not any more.

"This is now an experience-based culture. People, particularly those under 35, filter everything through the grid of experience," says Childress. "It used to be that knowledge came first and was validated by experience. It is the reverse now in our post-modern world: Experience comes first, and is then validated by knowledge."

Because of this change, the church consultant industry has exploded, with futurists charging $1,000 a day and up. The costs are high, but the stakes are higher.

According to Easum, three in four churches will be closed in 27 years if they don't modernize. Easum, a Methodist pastor who has worked with hundreds of congregations, looked at the rate of decline in church attendance, the graying of the current rolls (the median age for most mainline denominations is well over 60) and the lack of new, younger members. Then he did the math.

"You don't get a decline," he said. "You get a precipice."

**Local Autonomy will be the Norm**

So what will Christianity in America look like in the third millennium?

For one thing, the denominations that have been the organizing principle of church life will exist more in name than in authority.

"Two words describe the future of religious denominations: Downsized and decentralized," Cimino and Lattin write in their book. Local, autonomous churches will be the norm. "The future life and vitality will not be in the national office but in the local churches," says Childress. "Denominations will survive as resources to local churches."

In fact, sociologists of religion see believers coalescing into four "super-categories" by 2050: ¶

1. Liturgical churches, the high church, incense and altar bells end of the Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran spectrum, for example. 2. Conservative churches, be they Southern Baptist or Presbyterian who preach the evangelical, fundamentalist gospel often associated with the religious right. 3. Charismatic churches, ranging from black congregations to white
Pentecostals. 4. The leftovers, the remnants of the mainline Protestants, the "professional Christians," as they are called, who will struggle on.

That means a Methodist church in North Jersey might have more in common with a Catholic church in Southern California than with another Methodist church in central Illinois. The religious commentator Martin Marty calls these new religious confederacies "crisscross ecumenism."

For all the differences in these streams, however, there will likely be a commonality among all the successful churches, namely, flexibility in worship.

"Worship will be driven by music, not a talking head," says Easum. "It will be visual rather than print-based. Those are keys."

The models, what University of Southern California sociologist Donald Miller calls "new paradigm churches", are the Vineyard Churches and the Willow Creek Association.

**17,000 Congregants at Four Services**

These churches are big, and they are popular. The original Willow Creek Church was started in 1975 in a Chicago suburb and attracts 17,000 congregants in four weekend services and a "Gen X" service. The Willow Creek Association was begun in 1992 as a loose affiliation of churches and has blossomed to 2,715 members nationwide, including 23 in New Jersey. Meadowbrook is one. The Vineyard Churches are also going strong. The first Vineyard Church was started in Anaheim, Calif., in the late 1970s, and its snappy blend of contemporary worship and modern evangelicalism quickly caught on. There are now 500 Vineyard Churches in the country, two in New Jersey, in Cape May and Hackensack.

"We don't want casual Christians, but we want people to come as they are. I enjoy preaching in blue jeans," says Dumont native Phil Chorlian, 32, who started the Hackensack church three years ago with his wife and a friend. The congregation moved from Chorlian's home to a ballroom at the Saddle Brook Holiday Inn to a converted warehouse off River Street in October.

Although some critics pan the new-style worship as superficial spirituality that thrives on packaging rather than life-changing truths -- "nutrasweet for the soul," is how one commentator derides it -- devotees say the easygoing, nurturing style brings them closer to faith than fire-and-brimstone sermons.
"We're really into intimacy with God," says Joe Bei, 41, a Vineyard member from Elizabeth. "I was raised Catholic, but I never had a personal relationship with God."

If the Vineyard continues to grow, it will be in the vanguard of the third millennium church.

Large Churches Growing at the Expense of the Small

Experts say that of the nearly 400,000 congregations in the United States, about 80 percent average 200 or fewer members. That figure has held steady for decades. What is changing now is the top 20 percent, the large churches that are getting even bigger, mainly at the expense of the lower 80 percent, a case of the rich getting richer.

A decade ago, experts say, there were perhaps a thousand churches with 1,000-plus in weekly attendance. Today there are as many as 20,000 of these super-size churches, with some estimates going as high as 10 percent of all U.S. churches falling within that mega-range. Churches such as Wayne's Calvary Temple or the Hawthorne Gospel Church are local congregations that reach that threshold.

The Rev. Lyle Schaller of Illinois, an author and expert on church growth, estimates that as many as 60 to 65 percent of Christians attending services do so in a large congregation, and the numbers are rising.

Schaller and others note that the younger generation is more comfortable with "bigness" than the older folks. Rock concerts, sports stadiums, political rallies, blockbuster movies, 500 channels, the World Wide Web -- "mega" is the modifier of the new millennium. Little wonder that these new churches have been described as "the evangelical answer to Home Depot."

"We will see a shaking out, when the smaller churches will simply go belly up," says Wuthnow, the Princeton sociologist. "People will start sorting themselves into the middle and larger churches. There is a certain advantage of scale that Americans really appreciate: nice auditoriums, well-trained choirs, a large staff, many ministries."

"It's almost like the phenomena of mergers and acquisitions that we see in the corporate world," says Wuthnow. "Big corporations can still have the individual product lines, but still have a stable overall structure."

The upshot is that these new churches can be both big and small, and folks like intimacy along with size. Research shows that up to 40 percent of Americans participate in small groups of one form or another, and Christians will still want that up-close and personal experience.
"The truth is a large church is a collection of smaller churches," says Childress. "So the challenge for any large church is to understand the principle that growing larger means growing smaller, whether it is with Bible studies or athletic leagues or women's groups."

Explorers Arriving Where They Started

Even if Christianity in the next millennium won't be packaged in a familiar form, there is little doubt that it will survive, because of the endurance of faith and because of habit.

"Churches and churchgoing is so strong in our country it is not likely to follow the British or Swedish model, where churchgoing is unfashionable," says Wuthnow.

In part, that is because Americans in this fast-paced, transient society are on the hunt for the chimera of the Nineties: community. But community, especially the grouping of homogeneous, like-minded people that religious congregations tend to foster, is just part of what the new churches provide.

"There are lots of ways to find community, at the Elks club, reading groups, what have you," he says. "But the main thing that churches do that nobody else does is corporate worship. That is an innate need. All societies ever studied have shown a need to worship."

Carol Childress agrees. "We are in a spiritual age. There is a very deep hunger in our culture." Satisfying that hunger will be a quest as ancient as it is new. "This world we are moving to is much more akin to the New Testament world" of Jesus time, she adds.

Diana Kolodny, a member of Hackensack's Vineyard Church, put it in almost the same terms. "We want to live the way Jesus did," the 28-year-old in jeans said as the band tuned up behind her on a Sunday morning. "We hope to be like the beginning."

In short, the third millennium of Christianity may look a lot like the early years of the fledgling faith, a time of fluidity in worship and the emergence of a religious identity.

It is no coincidence that Wade Clark Roof chose a few lines from T.S. Eliot, perhaps the greatest of modern Christian poets, as the epigraph to his book on the new religious landscape:

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."
THE END IS NEAR, OR SO THEY SAY

The signs of the end are as clear to Chris King as the words printed in the Bible, and they show that the long-promised Second Coming of Jesus is close at hand. The conditions for Christ's return, as set out by the prophets, are being fulfilled in our day, King says.

First came the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 ("Gathered from many nations to the mountains of Israel," Ezekiel 38:8), and then the troubles with Iraq ("When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, you will know that desolation is near," Luke 21:20).

The restiveness in Russia (Ezekiel 38:15) and the growing power of China (Revelation 16:12) also foretell a coming conflict, he says. Not to mention the electronic tracking of each person ("No one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast," Revelation 13:17).

The spark for it all, King argues, could be the Y2K computer meltdown that doom-and-gloomers predict will occur on Jan. 1, 2000, when the world's silicon chips misread the "double-zero" date as 1900. That could lead to, as it says in Daniel, the "time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations," the precursor to the Last Judgment.

Which is why King, a born-again Christian in Syracuse, N.Y., has started the Central New York Y2K Survival Group, attracting a range of Christians who want to be prepared should these developments truly herald the beginning of the biblical Tribulation.

"It's not stretching it at all," says King, who is 27. "They fit extremely well."

While many people would frown at the details and darkness of King's prognostications, his fervor is symptomatic of a persistent angst gripping Americans as time's odometer turns to 2000.

Whereas the third millennium is held up on one hand as the rosy-fingered dawn of a wondrous new age, another view, prevalent among many Christians marking 2,000 years since Jesus birth, sees this beginning as "The End."

"This is an era of apocalypticism rather than just people waiting for that ball to fall in Times Square," says Stephen J. Stein, a professor of
religion at Indiana University and an editor of the new, three-volume
Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism.

The figures bear Stein out.

A Time/CNN poll last year showed that nearly one in 10 Americans
think it likely "the world as we know it" will end come Jan. 1, and a 1997
Associated Press survey shows more than seven in 10 Christians believe
Jesus will return for the Last Judgment within the next century.

There are an estimated 1,500 millennial cults in this country, and Ted
Daniels, whose Millennium Watch Institute has monitored millennial
activity for years, "quit counting" the number of self-proclaimed millennial
doomsayers at 1,200. He says the temptation to prophesy is universal.

"It is exciting to believe that the ultimate drama, the climax of
creation, is focused on you," says Daniels. "You are the superstar at the
greatest moment in history: the end of history."

The irony is that millennialism in the religious sense has nothing to
do with the millennium on the calendar.

Christian millennialism derives from the elaborate and spellbinding
visions recorded by St. John in the Book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse,
which portrays the promised return of Christ to pronounce a final,
apocalyptic sentence on mankind. Christ's believers are to be
miraculously, physically extricated, or Raptured, from this crisis, but many
disagree over when that would happen.

According to John, this Last Judgment will be preceded by a terrible
seven-year Tribulation, which some believe Christians will have to endure
before being swept up to Paradise. That is why some end-time Christians
are busy preparing for a rough stretch ahead.

The Tribulation is to be followed by 1,000 years of peace on Earth
before the final Battle of Armageddon between the forces of Good and Evil,
when Jesus and his followers will emerge triumphant.

The paradox of this end-time scenario can produce conflicting
emotions: Believers want Christ to come and establish his kingdom, but
they fear the sufferings it may entail for them, and the fact that friends and
relatives who are not believers will suffer eternal damnation.

The apocalypse" is the best of all possible news if you're a believer,"
says Daniels. "It's the worst of all possible news for everyone else."

This is a grand drama in which the Four Horsemen and the Antichrist
are players on a universal stage. In fact, the language of the apocalyptic
canon is so poetic and full of mysterious numbers and images that
Christians have been able to formulate a dizzying variety of end-time
scenarios.
Predicting the end "is an act of creative, interpretive imagination," says Stein.

Currently, most Christian millennialists, who tend to be evangelicals and fundamentalists, agree on a few common elements.

One is that the Jews must be gathered again in Israel so that they can convert when the Messiah returns. That effectively happened in 1948.

A second is that the Temple in Jerusalem must be rebuilt. Some say that development is imminent, but most mainstream church leaders warn against trying to set a time line based on these events.

"Our people have been burned by date-setters so often," says D. M. "Woody" Woodward, the pastor of Jacksonville Chapel, a 1,000-member evangelical congregation in Lincoln Park. Woodward believes Christ will one day return to Rapture his followers to Paradise, but says putting a date on the Second Coming "makes Christians look like a bunch of kooks."

Even Jesus admonished his followers against foretelling the time of his return: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven," he said.

That warning, however, has barely put a dent in the end-time industry, especially when a round number rolls around on the Christian calendar, as it will next year. Part of this is simply our fascination with numbers, what Stephen Jay Gould, author of "Questioning the Millennium," has called "calendrics", and part of it is basic human nature.

"Millennial dates are just particularly charged moments where the other effects get amplified," says Richard Landes, director of the Brookline, Mass., Center for Millennial Studies, which is cataloging all manner of millennial phenomena.

Landes, who is also a professor of medieval history at Boston University, divides millennialists into "roosters" and "owls", the roosters being the squawking alarmists, the owls the unruffled believers who take the long view.

"Think of the culture as a forest and roosters as matches," Landes explains. "If the forest is wet, a match will fizzle. Millennial dates are like very dry forests."

The first time around was no different. No one was sweating about ATMs or the integrity of the power grid, but there was fear and trembling in the land in the year 999.

On Dec. 31, 999 pilgrims crowded St. Peter's Basilica, weeping and trembling as they awaited midnight, "Not a few dying from fright, giving up their ghosts then and there," according to chronicles of the day. Others sold their possessions and headed to the hills to await the Rapture.
 Needless to say, things didn't go as feared, but that didn't dampen subsequent millennial speculations from prophets both quirky and dangerous.

In the 16th century, Nostradamus, the French astrologer and physicist whose many and fantastical predictions make Jeane Dixon look like an amateur, said 1999 would inaugurate the rule of "a Great King of Terror." (Rest easy: he said the end of the world wouldn't actually happen until A.D. 3900.). Closer to our time, a Baptist minister in New England named William Miller predicted Christ's Second Coming for 1843 and drew thousands of followers. When Miller's date came and went, it was known as "the Great Disappointment", his movement reorganized to become the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Earlier this decade a onetime Seventh-day Adventist, the self-styled Messiah David Koresh, broke away to form his own sect, the Branch Davidians.

His prophecy ended in blood. In 1993, Koresh and 80 of his followers died in a conflagration in Waco, Texas, following an assault on their compound. Koresh had promised to surrender when he finished interpreting the seven seals from Revelation. He never finished.

Last year in Garland, Texas, a cult led by a Taiwanese ex-patriate named Chen Hon Ming predicted that God would appear on March 25. He and 80 followers waited, in vain, in white smocks and cowboy hats. They then moved to Buffalo, N.Y.

Meanwhile, Monte Kim Miller is still at large. Miller, the leader of an apocalyptic American sect called Concerned Christians, dropped out of sight in the fall after saying he would die in Jerusalem next December and be resurrected three days later to start the Battle of Armageddon.

Christians aren't the only Chicken Littles of history.

Judaism and Islam have end-time scenarios, usually tied to a date on their respective calendars, as do Buddhists, some Hindu sects, and many New Agers. Stargazers have noted that on May 5 next year, the Sun, Moon, and the five planets visible to the naked eye will be in alignment. Jesus said his return would be announced by "signs in the sun, moon, and stars," but many have taken astrological portents to extremes.

In March 1997, the California cult leader Marshall Applewhite led 39 of his Heaven's Gate disciples in a mass suicide as part of a plan to join up with a spaceship trailing the Hale-Bopp comet. Other UFOlogists are
coopting Native American prophecies and predicting that Jesus, who they say was an alien traveler, will return in a starship.

"There are as many apocalyptic scenarios as there are apocalyptic interpreters," says Stein.

And the psychological ingredients for apocalypticism can be found almost anywhere, any time.

"It is a reaction to the way things are in the world," says Daniels. "Anybody is subject to this. If you feel like your life is out of control, or you don't know where your next meal is coming from, you're susceptible... Millenarians are always radical, always in opposition to everything quotidian, everything routine."

Hence, Marxists were secular apocalyptics, preaching a proletarian revolution of the old world order, as are militia types who often have ties to millennial extremists.

The threat of nuclear war once fueled millennial fears. Now it is more likely to be AIDS or natural disasters -- "There will be famines and earthquakes in various places," as it says in the Gospel of Matthew. The culture at large is reflecting this gloominess, with grim TV shows like "Millennium," about a retired FBI agent who tracks serial killers.

"This is spilling into mainstream culture more than people are willing to admit," says Landes.

Then there is the Y2K bug, itself a function of the first day of 2000, just the kind of meltdown that is supposed to herald the apocalypse.

"It is obvious from all the eschatology I have studied that Christ is coming back to rescue man from these terrible events," says Thomas Clark, a Chicago man who has three small farms in the countryside stocked with grain grinders and generators, items he has been selling at a brisk pace through his Web site.

"I consider it both a business and a ministry," he says.

Actually, millennial alarmists have a long tradition of profiting from end-time anxiety. In 1970, evangelist Hal Lindsey wrote "The Late Great Planet Earth," a best-seller that indicated the world would end around 1981. Lindsey has since repackaged his predictions in a dozen other works that have sold tens of millions.

The Internet is fertile ground for millenials of all types, in particular the doom-and-gloomers like Gary North and his "Remnant Review," which preaches a harsh, survivalist doctrine.

Countering doom-sayers like North and Clark are people like Woodward, who says he doesn't want his Lincoln Park flock running out buying guns and ammunition and food and heading for the hills.
"I tell them we need to live as if Christ died yesterday, was raised today, and is coming tomorrow," Woodward says. "But we also need to live as if Christ isn't coming back for another 1,000 years."

That message will probably be easier to sell if, or when, we get through the next few decades. By then Y2K will have come and gone, as will have other dates of potential significance to millennialists.

For example, Dec. 25, 2000, is the "formal" date of Christ's birth (which probably happened in 4 B.C. in any case). The year 2033 would be the next benchmark, since tradition says Christ was 33 when he was crucified.

If the world as we know it is still around after that, the millennial heat will likely cool, flaring periodically, but not as virulently as today.

"No one can maintain real millennial fever forever," Daniels says. "Eventually you've got to organize, routinize things. That is the kiss of death for the excitement. Suddenly you've got a bureaucracy."
TEMPLETON CONTEST: Analysis entry

29 December 1999

JEWS REVISIT TRADITION
Assimilation Loses Its Appeal

When leaders of the Reform wing of American Judaism gathered in Orlando, Fla., earlier this month, the first item on the agenda was not the usual workshop on political lobbying or speech on anti-Semitism, but a primer on Hebrew.

If that sounds like the start of a Borscht Belt rimshot, it is in fact the leading edge of a campaign that the most liberal branch of Judaism is taking very seriously: to restore traditional spirituality to a denomination whose adherents often see faith in terms of culture or social action, rather than worship of the divine.

"We sense that our Judaism has been a bit too cold and domesticated; we yearn to sing to God, to let our souls fly free," Rabbi Eric Yoffie of Westfield told the 5,000 rabbis and lay people in a frank keynote address to the biennial meeting of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the synagogue arm of the Reform movement that Yoffie heads. Describing liberal Jews as "the least worshipful of peoples in North America," Yoffie called for a "revolution in worship" and he backed up his words by starting each day of the conference with communal worship and workshops on prayer and Torah study.

Those sessions were packed, while meetings on social action and Israel went begging.

As remarkable as this turnaround is for Reform Judaism - in 1885 the movement rejected traditional observance as "altogether foreign to our mental and spiritual state" - experts say it is just one more manifestation of an incipient return to tradition across the spectrum of American Judaism.

"The question we have to answer now is: Why be Jewish?" said Gary Rosenblatt, editor and publisher of The Jewish Week, based in New York. "It is not only about anti-Semitism; it is not only about Israel; it is not only about social justice. So what do you do now if you're Jewish?"
The answers are everywhere as American Jews have taken to wearing skullcaps (yarmulkes) in public and prayer shawls (tallit) at synagogue, keeping kosher and studying Hebrew, Torah and the mystical rituals of kabbalah, an esoteric discipline that had lain fallow for centuries.

In one sense the move toward observance reflects a broad trend as Americans, led by the graying Baby Boomers, have begun rediscovering the beliefs they once shunned. But the trend is more striking for Judaism given its history as a religion that defined itself as much by how one lived as by what one believed. ¶

"Judaism has always been a way of life rather than a set of doctrines. Judaism has always been a set of rules," said former Reagan administration official Elliott Abrams, a Conservative Jew and a conservative thinker at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and author of "Faith or Fear," a 1997 book urging Jews to return to belief.

"When Jews came to America they stopped obeying these rules," Abrams said. "Because there were no doctrines, no catechism to hold on to, the whole thing just fell apart."

Indeed, surveys have consistently shown that Jews are about half as likely as other Americans to say religion is very important to them. And while about four in 10 Americans go to weekly services, fewer than 10 percent of Jews attend synagogue that often.

In one national survey in 1997, more than seven in 10 Jews said "being part of the Jewish people" was most important to their Jewish identity, while just 13 percent cited "religious observance" as the keystone of their Jewishness.

In America, critics say, being Jewish can mean no more than supporting Israel and knowing where to find a good deli. "Eating bagels and watching Woody Allen movies," as Michael Medved, the film critic and Jewish traditionalist, has put it.

Now that is changing, and it is not only conservatives like Medved and Abrams who are leading the charge.

In his 1998 book, "The Vanishing American Jew," famed defense lawyer Alan Dershowitz lamented the loss of Jewish identity and applauded what he called the "reJewvenation" of Jewish spirituality in America. In the end, Dershowitz prescribes an ethical rather than religious solution to this yearning so as not to alienate Jews who still lean to the secular side.

But not all liberal Jews are shying away from God talk.

Liz Cohen, president of Temple Beth-El in Somerville, told reporters at the Orlando convention that she supports the emphasis on spiritual renewal "because the classical Reform (movement) was bereft of spirit. We
threw away too much. Now we're rediscovering the traditions, and it's fresh."

Experts say this religious renaissance is due to a confluence of factors.

The old saying that Jews are like other Americans, only more so, seems to be as true today as it ever was. Jews are on average older than the rest of the aging American population -- nothing like mortality to sharpen one's sense of the sacred -- and they are on average more educated and have benefited more financially during the latest boom.

All of which has led many Jews to turn inward at the same time that various external circumstances fostering Jewish identity and unity changed.

For example, Israel is less threatened today than at any time in its history, and the Jewish state has made it clear that it is not dependent on the largesse of American Jews to survive.

"It is like the empty nest syndrome," said Rosenblatt. "The kids leave and the parents say we need to redefine our roles."

There are also indications that Jews feel more secure in America than ever.

Earlier in the century the Jewish priority was assimilation, and Jewish immigrants naturally took as their religious model the highest social class -- white Episcopalians, Presbyterians and the like -- who were also the among the least emotional worshipers. In addition, fervent Christianity had never proved friendly to Jews, either in the Old World or New.

"Those Christians who are most demonstrative -- Southern Baptists and Pentecostals -- were of a lower social class that was thought to be anti-Semitic," said Abrams. "Both of these things turned Jews off to religiosity, so they adopted the restrained Yankee model."

That suspicion seems to have softened in recent years, reinforced by the decline in reported incidents of anti-Semitism through much of the 1990s. At the same time, second- and third-generation Jews are much less concerned about "fitting in" than were their parents. These younger Jews were shocked by a famous 1990 study showing that 52 percent of American Jews are marrying outside the faith - and they are not afraid to pray in Hebrew or wear yarmulkes or do whatever it takes to retain their religious identity.

"As we end the 20th century, 92 percent of the American Jewish population is American-born," said sociologist Egon Mayer, who headed the 1990 study. "There isn't any longer a feeling that we need to sound like Americans and not foreigners."
That is not to say the religious revival in American Judaism is inevitable or easy.

Last March in Michigan, a rabbi who was to be ordained by the Society of Humanistic Judaism was rejected by the movement's seminary for talking about God too much. And many Reform Jews still bristle at the notion of embracing "Old World customs" that they had once so thoroughly rejected. Reform Rabbi Lawrence Colton, the interim rabbi at Plainfield's Temple Sholom, has criticized the move to "retraditionalize" as "invasive, judgmental, regressive and insulting" and suggested that liberal Judaism might break away as a stand-alone movement.

In the centrist Conservative movement, too, efforts to enforce codes of observance on the leadership and congregations are prompting a growing number of conflicts and complaints.

Still, Mayer says that if the various streams of Judaism continue to push a return to tradition, a growing number of Jews may respond.

"This is an area where people who have needs are often the one least able to articulate those needs," he said. "When the structure is supplied it awakens dormant feelings that people can resonate with."
TEMPLETON CONTEST: Profile entry

October 1999

ATHEIST WITH A HUMAN FACE
Can a Soccer Mom From New Jersey Save Atheism?

When Ellen Johnson walks into the room, the first thing you notice is that she looks nothing like the last grande dame of free-thinking atheism, Madalyn Murray O’Hair. Johnson is a tall, blonde, Angie Dickinson-slim soccer mom (her words) from Rockaway Township who is dressed, on a spring day in Piscataway, where she has convened a national gathering of American Atheists Inc., in a pastel outfit with matching pumps. O’Hair was an unkempt bullhorn of a woman who reveled in her role as the most hated woman in America, an epithet she earned after winning the 1963 Supreme Court case that banned prayer in public schools and made her a celebrity. ¶

From then until the day she mysteriously vanished four years ago, O’Hair was atheism in America, and her creation, American Atheists, a major force in keeping religion out of public life and tweaking America’s delicate religious sensibilities. “We find the Lord’s prayer to be that muttered by worms groveling for a meager existence in a traumatic, paranoid world,” O’Hair wrote in a typical salvo published in Life in the early sixties. For decades, O’Hair was a cantankerous favorite of the TV talk-show circuit who could curse like a sailor and counted pornographer Larry Flynt among her allies. Then in August 1995 she disappeared from her Texas home along with her son, Jon Garth Murray, 42; her granddaughter, Robin Murray-O’Hair, 32; and $629,500 in American Atheists’ funds. ¶

Enter Ellen Johnson. A longtime member of American Atheists’ executive board and a personal friend of O’Hair’s, Johnson was drafted to lead the movement out of the wilderness where O’Hair had dumped it -- to tone it down, polish it up, and make it newly palatable to the mainstream. “We’re civil rights workers is what we are, working for a cause that’s very important,” Johnson says, pitching hers as a defense of a besieged minority in a religion-mad world. “It’s not something I want to do for the rest of my life, but I will if I have to. I wouldn’t abandon it.” But the question is whether anyone, even this Martha Stewart of atheism, can save what used to be the most venerable, visible manifestation of unbelief in the nation’s history. ¶
Johnson has made a promising start, bringing the organization’s shaky finances under control, stanching the hemorrhaging membership, and reorganizing some of the state directors whom O’Hair had swept aside in her mania for control. And in the most public sign that life for American Atheists will go on after Madalyn, Johnson moved the group’s headquarters from Austin, Texas, the buckle of the Bible Belt, to what she hopes will be more receptive environs in Cranford, New Jersey. “People up here are less inhibited,” says American Atheists treasurer Richard Hogan, a pleasant good ol’ boy from Texas who is, by all accounts, as wily as a cardsharp when it comes to stewarding the group’s shaky finances. “People here are more intelligent.”

The new office is close to New York City, the nation’s media center, and to Washington, where American Atheists hopes to establish a political foothold. And it is an easy commute for Johnson, whom many atheists look to as the savior of their band. “We’re changing our image,” says John Obst, the group’s Maryland state director. “Madalyn had her way, Ellen has her way. There’s a very positive attitude now. The organization is more upbeat.”

And so on Good Friday, when much of the country is solemnizing the Crucifixion, Johnson unveils the new and improved version of American Atheists in a meeting room at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Piscataway. At first it seems a lot like the old version, complete with O’Hair’s sense of both persecution and privilege and her unapologetic disdain for faith. Bumper stickers on the cars outside proclaim “Jesus Is Lard”, and posters show a God-like figure sodomizing Uncle Sam. “Religion is really the culture of death,” Ron Barrier, Ameri-can Atheists’ savvy spokesman, tells about 75 attendees. “This week is a zombie festival predicated on death.”

Johnson’s keynote address is largely a polemic against the prevailing religious culture. “From cradle to grave, religious superstition pervades our lives, and it is not by accident, my friends,” she says. She warns the delegates against believing stories of deathbed conversion by atheists “totally blitzed” on morphine. “The incidence of atheists becoming religious is about as frequent as that of homosexuals going straight,” Johnson says. And she ridicules the notion that students might want school prayer. “The very same students who go to schools with rings in their tongues and lips? Oh, puh-leeze!”

Flashing the techniques and scorn of a southern televangelist, Johnson runs down the standard litany of school prayer abuses, reading testimonials from victimized atheists and, to the delight of the delegates
scattered in only half the available seats, making easy fun of religious belief.

But hints of a new tack are also discernible, from the baby boomer-friendly theme Johnson chose for the gathering -- "Supporting Our Atheist Youth and Families" -- to her insistence on setting aside a room for day care, where an atheist Mrs. Doubtfire tenderly watches over the next generation of freethinkers, occupying them with games and a video of Ghostbusters played over and over.

In this post-Madalyn era, the difference is style rather than substance. In place of a belligerent O'Hair stands a polished 44-year-old housewife with the demeanor of a den-mother and the determination to run the convention her own way. She banishes two protesters from PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), not because their sign billing Jesus as a vegetarian might offend but because they're tacky. One protestor is dressed like a cow.

Johnson's style is especially eye-catching because atheists tend to be a geeky bunch -- scientists and computer technicians whose fashion sense runs more to Trekkies than to Talbots. Not so Ellen Johnson. On the second day of the convention, she wears a striking pink suit, and at the banquet that night stunning evening attire.

But the charm offensive also has worked in substantial ways. Johnson has established a Washington lobbying office, and earlier this year she snared New Jersey congressman Rush Holt, the Democrat and physicist who defeated Christian rightist Mike Pappas, to address the organization. Last year the federal government flew Johnson to Seattle to testify on religion in public schools at a hearing of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. "We think we can appeal to people in a way that we didn't before," Hogan says. "We don't want to be as harsh a movement as we were before."

At first blush there seems to be little in Johnson's resume to herald her role as O'Hair's successor, and she doesn't shed much light on her life. She won't tell you where she lives, much less allow you near her house, and she gets really bugged if you ask about her children and husband. "If I say two words about him, he'll freak," she says, freaking a bit herself.

But from interviews with Johnson and from a variety of other sources and records, her background can be sketched in. She grew up in Midland Park, New Jersey, in the late fifties and early sixties -- the high-water mark of churchgoing in the United States. Her hometown remains 96 percent white and largely Republican despite the changes in America's social topography; Midland Park has at least 9 churches for its 7,000 residents.
"We were surrounded by Lutherans and Catholics," Johnson says. "I was happy I wasn’t what they were." She says her parents were atheists, even though they didn’t label themselves that way. "It’s almost like growing up gay," she says. "You know you’re different." In high school, she sang in the chorus but mainly worked on behalf of population and women’s issues. Her senior picture in the 1973 yearbook shows a post-Twiggy blonde with the studied allure of a wannabe adult, and beneath is a quotation from the famous -- and famously irascible -- humanist George Bernard Shaw: "The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them but to be indifferent to them."

Indifference wasn’t Johnson’s problem; she wanted to save the world. She majored in environmental science at Ramapo College and earned a second degree in political science and a master’s from the New School for Social Research in Manhattan. She was headed for law school when, as she says, "I got tired of school." It wasn’t until Johnson saw O’Hair on television in 1978 that she discovered herself. "Oh, that’s what I am," Johnson recalls thinking. "She was absolutely right on everything she had to say. I was hooked." O’Hair had won another convert, and when the two women met at the home of a mutual friend in New Jersey, they took a shine to each other.

Today Johnson lives in an elegantly appointed home on a winding road in predominantly white and Republican Rockaway Township and drives her two children to soccer games, piano lessons, and dance classes in a sport-utility vehicle. She swears that it wasn’t her plan to be American Atheists’ savior, post O’Hair. After O’Hair disappeared, the board of American Atheists drafted Johnson, telling her that the organization wouldn’t survive without her leadership. It was still a close call.

By the time OÔHair vanished, her best days and those of American Atheists were behind her. She was a ponderous, ailing, and bitter 77-year-old who many believed had driven her organization into the ground. In fact, her disappearance quickly became as enthralling as her presence ever had been. Countless news reports put O’Hair in Mexico, New Zealand, even Tahiti, living the good life on money donated by credulous freethinkers. O’Hair loyalists prefer a conspiracy angle, noting that she disappeared just before the Pope’s arrival in New Jersey, an event she had planned to picket, "which leads one to believe something happened," says Piscataway atheist Lance Wilhelm, a lab technician whose favorite scenarios include a government-inspired plot or one orchestrated by the Vatican.

The most likely theory is the simplest: Madalyn, Jon, and Robin were killed for money, according to the assertions of some authorities. Whatever
happened, it left American Atheists rudderless, and while everyone speculated and snickered about O’Hair’s whereabouts, Johnson stepped in to remake the organization in her own image. She has made inroads; she says that American Atheists now has 2,500 members, an increase from the group’s low of 1,400, though still a far cry from the fanciful 70,000 that O’Hair liked to claim. But further gains may be hard to come by.

For one thing, America remains a fiercely religious country. Forget what the religious Right tells you and, for that matter, what American Atheists says about its alleged 25 million humanist sympathizers in the United States. In reality, an estimated 95 percent of Americans consistently profess a belief in a higher power. A recent review of general social surveys from the past twenty years indicates that less than 1 percent of Americans consider themselves real atheists, certain that God and an afterlife do not exist. And atheism, like Marxism and pacifism, remains a luxury of the privileged. Atheists are largely white, older, and well educated; hardly any minority members or anyone under 50 attended the Piscataway convention last spring, and atheists evidently don’t like to get their hands dirty. “American Atheists has thousands of members but very few activists,” concedes David Silverman, the group’s New Jersey state director.

The movement has been damaged by nasty squabbles among various secularist groups, feuds once fomented largely by O’Hair, who managed to alienate even her own followers. Tensions erupted in the early eighties when O’Hair, during the last American Atheists national convention in New Jersey, disbanded all state chapters, ordering them to liquidate their assets and send her the money. “She stormed in and excommunicated everyone,” recalls Marie Castle, who witnessed what became known among atheists as the Jersey Massacre. “Madelyn and Jon were really obnoxious. The chapters said ‘The hell with you’ and left.”

Castle went on to found the Atheist Alliance, while other dissidents coalesced into groups like Atheists United. Both are larger than American Atheists, which under Johnson has reestablished only seventeen state directors. None of the three groups is as large as the two main rationalist movements, the American Humanists Association and the Council for Secular Humanism. And no one seems eager to join forces with American Atheists -- not that Johnson’s group is making overtures.

Most urgent for her now is straightening out the financial mess O’Hair left behind. “I want money and power and I am going to get it,” O’Hair once wrote in her diary, and she allegedly fulfilled her ambition on the backs of her followers, plundering the organization’s accounts to support a lifestyle that included $1,000-a-day vacations, mink coats, and
expensive cars. Yet she still owed more than $250,000 when she vanished.

Johnson says that the group's finances are under control and that she can attract more members by focusing American Atheists' agenda on the church-state issues that have proved critical to lobbies like the American Civil Liberties Union. But she may be too late. While American Atheists floundered, the other secularist groups established themselves as the serious advocates of the cause. They set the free-thought standard, advancing secularism's serious intellectual, educational, and political traditions. In contrast, Johnson's group comes off like a bunch of wacky cousins. "If separation of church and state were left up to the atheists, we wouldn't have separation of church and state," says Rob Boston, assistant communications director for Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Anne Gaylor, head of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, echoes that view. "We stay at arm's length from American Atheists," she says.

In the end, success for American Atheists may depend on a reinvention of the O'Hair formula: relentless self-promotion. History shows that atheist movements in America usually grow up around charismatic leaders and die with them. Johnson hopes to avoid that fate by courting the public without offending. "I was very much influenced by their style in the beginning," Johnson says, referring to O'Hair and her son Jon. "Then I realized I'm not like them and I can't be like them. Right or wrong, I'm just not comfortable being antagonistic."

She needs to work on her execution though. When Nightline producers rebuffed Johnson because she attached a series of conditions to her planned appearance, she fired off a dense four-page protest that included remarks like, "Why should American Atheists provide ABC with millions of dollars in advertising revenues?" Any whiff of criticism of her or O'Hair provokes complaints about society's dislike of strong women. "The emphasis is always on the negative. It's like how Barbra Streisand always gets trashed," Johnson says during an interview at a Staten Island studio where she tapes Atheist Viewpoint, a cable show that she and Barrier host several times a year. Primped and polished as always, it's easy to see why some have likened Johnson to a television host. The studio is the only venue where she has agreed to answer questions, and only after lengthy efforts to secure her cooperation. She explains that the burdens of being a working mother leave her no time.

"It's seven days a week, morning, noon, and night," she groans, referring to her job with American Atheists, which pays a meager $10,000 a
year. “It just doesn’t stop. It’s constant. In your free time you’re reading. It’s just a whole lot of people.” ¶

Complaints notwithstanding, Johnson vows to keep the faith. “My atheism is something that I hold very dear to my heart,” she says. “It has enriched my life and made me a better person, which is why I have spent the last twenty years of my life working to share the ‘good word’ or ‘good news’ of atheism, to put a twist on a typical religious phrase.” ¶

On Easter Sunday, while the FBI tries to dig up Madalyn Murray O’Hair on a cattle ranch in Texas, Ellen Johnson is in Cranford doing her best to bury her. It is the closing day of the American Atheists convention, and Johnson is determined to make it special by hosting a ribbon-cutting ceremony to inaugurate the group’s national headquarters. “What you see before us is a very real symbol of the new direction our organization will take in the months and years ahead,” Johnson tells the group before snipping the silver streamer. ¶

Her role seems akin to that of the harried social director for the Love Boat. She has chartered a bus to bring delegates from Piscataway to Cranford for a tour of the new facilities, still being prepped to house Johnson’s office and a “free-thought” library with 68,000 volumes and a lighter from Bertrand Russell. “Come on in, walk around!” she urges the delegates. ¶

During a buffet lunch, two veteran atheists waiting on line for food decry the Salvation Army soup kitchens that make the destitute sing hymns for their supper. “It’s a tragedy,” says one man, dressed in a gentlemanly tweed vest and rep tie. After the meal, Johnson shouts to the milling assemblage, “We’ll be getting back on the bus at 3 pm, but do one thing first: Help me clean up.” ¶

Before pitching in, Roland Gervais, a 30-year member of American Atheists, pauses to savor Johnson’s orderly, camp-counselor style. “Every movement needs a confrontational leader at the beginning,” he says, defending the contentious O’Hair. “We don’t need that now. We’re more about acceptance.” ¶

Over Gervais’s shoulder, Johnson rattles off a schedule of upcoming events, including protests, meetings, and a summer solstice barbecue. “Oh, one more thing,” she says. “We’re going bowling tonight! Anyone interested should meet in the lobby at 5:30 pm.” ¶

Atheists? Bowling? The delegates exchange worried glances, and you have to believe that whatever her fate, Madalyn Murray O’Hair never figured the afterlife to be like this.
TEMPLETON CONTEST: Writer's choice entry

13 June 1999

THE SERMON AT THE MALL CINEPLEX
"Star Wars" Reinterprets Religion

He was born of a woman, but had no mortal father. He is the Chosen One sent to redeem the universe, who must first be tempted by the Forces of Darkness. His incarnation in a dusty corner of the Empire was foretold by prophecy, as was his role in the final battle between Good and Evil.

Jesus of Nazareth, right?

With his latest Star Wars installment, "The Phantom Menace," filmmaker George Lucas has gone further than ever in revealing the spiritual heart of his faraway galaxy, and box-office returns show that the power of the mythos Lucas created can easily overcome what is widely seen as a weak script and wobbly direction.

As of last weekend, "The Phantom Menace" was the nation's most popular film by a wide margin, earning $255.8 million in three weeks, a titanic haul that analysts attribute in part to Lucas acolytes who see his films dozens of times.

If the devotion hasn't risen to the level of a cult, there is no doubt the religious themes of "The Phantom Menace" are more explicit than in any other Lucas project, and that moviegoers are responding to his celluloid sermon.

"These films touch a deep chord in us," said John Wood, a religion professor who teaches a course called "Christianity and Film" at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. "There is a longing in us to say that evil is not the last word, that good will win out. And Lucas portrays that in cosmic terms."

Lucas is certainly not the first to employ these themes in film.

Classic Westerns such as "Shane" and "Pale Rider" are the archetypes of the good vs. evil genre, with the white hats triumphing over the black hats. Later movies, such as this year's other techno-meditation, "The Matrix," have sought to inspire or enlighten or raise "big" questions about existence.

But Lucas, who describes himself as a "Buddhist Methodist," has gone a giant step further. As he told Time magazine, he coined the Force "to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people, more a belief in God
than a belief in any particular religious system." Yet to do that, he had to
fashion his own cut-and-paste cosmology lifted straight from traditional
religions.

To some, the result is little more than a religious Rube Goldberg, a
pastiche of tenets custom-made for a spiritually shallow era.

Others say the critics should lighten up.

"Obviously we don't go to 'Star Wars' and say, 'Oh, great, we can
hold this up on the level of Holy Scripture'," said Chet Klope, assistant
pastor for youth at Pascack Bible Church in Hillsdale. But Klope said Lucas
films are useful parables with "a lot of virtuous things, discipline, a higher
purpose, something worth dying for. These kinds of themes are positive."

Lucas himself says his goal is more ambitious than recasting fables:
He says he wants to reinvent ancient myths for a new age. As always, his
inspiration is the late mythologist Joseph Campbell, whose "The Hero With
a Thousand Faces" was the touchstone for the first Star
Wars trilogy. Campbell's emphasis on transformation, the hero's journey
and other enduring motifs are part of what he called the Western world's
"monomyth."

In Lucas reinvention, that myth generally takes a Christian spin.

The Force, for example, is the pervasive energy of the universe that
guides our actions, if we submit, to a happy ending. But the concept is
equally recognizable as the Holy Spirit. And the heavy-breathing Darth
Vader of the first "Star Wars" movie and the horned Darth Maul of
"Phantom" have become the most popular icons of satanic evil since
Mephistopheles.

"The Phantom Menace" even has an original sin, greed, in this case
and as in all the Star Wars canon, the brown-robed Jedi knights evoke
mendicant friars like St. Francis.

As for Anakin Skywalker's nativity tale, the backstory that is the
focus of this prequel, it could come straight out of St. Luke: Young Anakin
as "the Chosen One" whose advent was prophesied long ago, a savior who
would "bring balance to the Force." His own mother doesn't understand how
she conceived him, "There is no father," she tells Qui-Gon. "I carried him, I
gave birth to him. I raised him. I can't tell you any more than that."

All of which is not to say "The Phantom Menace" is merely a
Christian sheep in wolf's clothing.

Mythologists note that the virgin birth is a time-honored part of the
hero story, and for every Gospel allusion, Lucas throws in a dash of Greek
mythology, along with bits of Hinduism, Zoroastrianism (the ancient
Persian religion that is the source for the Dark Side motif), and a heavy lacing of Buddhism.

Take Liam Neeson's Jedi character, Qui-Gon Jinn, whose Zen-like prescriptions, "Feel, don't think", are in synch with his Eastern-sounding name, which itself is neatly homologous with Qi Gong, the mystical Chinese discipline that includes mind-body practices such as tai chi.

Qui-Gon's discovery of Anakin, who does not yet understand his own significance, parallels the Tibetan Buddhist practice of locating a young boy in whom the soul of a dead lama, or spiritual leader, has been reincarnated. Buddhists raise the boy in a monastery to fulfill his religious mission, just as Anakin will be trained as a Jedi in future episodes.

Needless to say, this theological potpourri bothers some traditionalists.

"There are fans who have made a virtual cult, a faith if you will out of a movie released 22 years ago," columnist Robert Lockwood wrote in Our Sunday Visitor, a national Catholic weekly. "They have created an after-life for themselves out of a piece of fiction."

Others simply see this as a further dumbing-down of faith, "mysticism for the masses," as one critic put it. Lucas defends his approach, saying he distills religions "down to a more modern and easily accessible construct."

But Wood said the real danger of simplification is that important values can be lost. For instance, for all of their Christian attributes, the Jedi use violence to defeat evil, not exactly what Jesus taught. To paraphrase, "Those who live by the light sabre die by the light sabre." Also, the Force seems restricted to the priestly caste of the Jedi, an exclusivism that smacks of the Gnostic heresy of early Christianity, which refuted the church teaching of a salvation open to all.

The principal complaint, however, is that the faith Lucas constructed doesn't require much of its adherents, beyond following their feelings. "Here is a Force that doesn't make any demands," Wood said. "It is kind of a religion without morality, and that's attractive to a lot of people."

Still, most believers seem to take Lucas religious amalgam in stride and say the Stars Wars films do more good than harm by raising important issues.

"I have talked to teenagers about the movie, and they start asking, What if the Force is out there?" said Klope, who took the church's young adult group to a screening Thursday night, followed by a critique of the film. "So there is an opportunity to have it lead into discussion like that."
If "The Phantom Menace" stumbles, observers say, it is not in providing too little religion, but too little emotion, the drama, plot, and personalities at the core of all great religious traditions.

Instead of showing us what he wants to say, Lucas tells us, preaches, if you will, a risky strategy for both art and faith.

So when Lucas explains that the Force is really something called "midichlorians" (mitochondria, perhaps?) that live in the cells of every living being, it comes off as a little too much information.

"He's trying too hard," said John Lyden, a religion professor at Dana College in Blair, Neb., who writes on religion and film. "The religious element in the film almost loses its power because it is too explicit.

"As soon as you identify a myth as a myth, it doesn't work that well," Lyden said. "Myths work best when they work on the unconscious. Star Wars has become aware of itself as a religious phenomenon."

"The special effects in the original film weren't anything compared to this one," he said, "but it was a better film."