

New Decade Poised for New Commitment

By Religious News Service

Writer Tom Wolfe coined the term, "The 'Me' Decade" to describe the 1970s. The phenomenon of "selfism" — search for inner meaning and concern with self as opposed to social concern — seemed to many observers to sum up the mood of the decade. In the world of religion, the growth of the inward turning cults was expressive of that search for personal meaning.

Human rights issues preoccupied the churches throughout the decade, and the overthrow of several repressive dictatorships in Africa and Latin America had broad religious backing.

Resurgence of Muslim fundamentalism, unknown for centuries, led to the establishment of a theocracy in Iran which shook the Middle East and the world.

Ecumenism, so much a watchword in the 1960s, appeared stalled in the 1970s; in fact, there were several denominational schisms. Even so, Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras made great strides in healing the centuries-old division between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, and their successors have continued to pursue the course they set. Some progress was also made by official theological dialogue groups. The drive for women's rights, learning from the civil rights movement, spilled over to the churches, many of which had practices rooted in patriarchal ages. For the first time there were women rabbis, admitted by Reform Judaism. The U.S. Episcopal Church, the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America all began ordaining women to the ministry.

Theologians wrestled with issues that have divided churches for centuries. Lutherans and Roman Catholics issued joint statements on Peter (1973), papal primacy (1974), and papal infallibility (1978). There were Anglican-Catholic agreements on the Eucharist (1971), ministry (1973), and papal primacy (1977). Christian-Jewish relations were advanced through a growing number of symposia on the Nazi Holocaust and its significance for Christianity, and a set of guidelines for joint worship drafted in 1979 by Reform Jews and an agency of the National Council of Churches.

The charismatic renewal, which began in the Catholic Church in the late 1960s, grew to influence all major churches in the 1970s. The movement seems to have peaked in 1977, when a conference in Kansas City, Mo., brought together charismatics from every theological tradition. At the end of the decade, charismatic rallies were drawing fewer people and the movement began to become integrated into the denominations.

By 1979, there were signs that the membership decline seemed to have bottomed out in most churches. Inflation took its toll, and while giving went up expenses jumped further. U.S. missionary activity overseas suffered. Both the World Council of Churches, based in expensive Geneva, and the Vatican reported severe financial difficulties. For the first time, the closely held secrets of Vatican finances were shared by the pope with the world's cardinals in an effort to increase support.

In the U.S. political sphere, churches became sharply divided over the issue of abortion following the Supreme Court rulings of 1973 which legalized it. The rulings led to the growth of the "pro-life" movement as a political force which sought to elect or defeat candidates, and press for a Constitutional amendment outlawing abortion.



Top Row, from left: Police with dogs charge into a crowd of blacks during a clash between two competing Rhodesian liberation movements in Highfield, a black township near Salisbury; The sudden death in an "automobile accident" of Bishop Janani Luwum of Uganda raised an international storm of protest against the rule of President Idi Amin; Reacting to a Supreme Court decision that Allen Bakke was the victim of "reverse discrimination," members of a national committee attempted to have the decision overturned; Middle Row, from left: Pro-lifer John Cavanaugh-O'Keefe is arrested during a demonstration at a Planned Parenthood abortion clinic; A demonstrator is arrested at the Seabrook nuclear power plant; Rev. Jacqueline Means is congratulated after becoming the first "regularly" ordained woman priest in the Episcopal Church; Bottom Row, from left: A Vietnamese woman begs for help while aboard a boat holding 49 other refugees; Louise Joy Brown became the center of a storm of controversy as the world's first "test-tube baby"; A starving Cambodian child struggles to eat a spoonful of food at a refugee camp in Thailand.

Many Roman Catholics, evangelical Protestants and Orthodox Jews identified themselves with the "pro-life" movement, while others in mainline Protestant denominations lined up as "pro Choice" advocates.

The U.S. Bicentennial gave the churches a chance to reflect on "civil religion" in America and the unique contribution of the United States to social policy — freedom of religion and the companion principle of separation of church and state.

The principle had more than academic interest as an increasing number of cases arose in the 1970s which appeared to pit the freedom to practice religion against the "no-establishment" clause of the Constitution. Cases in New York and Missouri raised questions of whether pupils had as much right to use public school property for voluntary prayer and Bible groups as did other extracurricular groups, such as the chess club, sports boosters or French club. The U.S. Supreme Court will be asked to rule on the question.

The Unification Church, founded in the 1950s in Korea by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, whom followers see as a messiah, was the subject of media exposes and numerous investigations on the federal and state levels.

The church was accused of everything from brainwashing young people to attempts to exert political power in the United States.

Terrorism marked the decade. The Irish Republican Army and the

Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) used terrorism to advance their aims in Ulster and the Middle East, and were criticized for doing so by most religious groups. In the case of the PLO, however, several Christian groups urged Israel to negotiate with moderate elements in the group as a means of achieving Middle East peace.

In nearby Uganda, the dictatorship of Idi Amin was overthrown during the 1970s. The decade also saw the end of repressive dictatorships in Nicaragua, Equatorial Guinea, and the Central African Empire. But repression of religious groups continued in the Soviet Union, and other Communist countries of Eastern Europe. In several Latin American nations, the Philippines and South Korea religious groups criticized government at their own peril.

The rise of theocracies, a phenomenon not seen for centuries, was experienced in the form of Muslim states in the 1970s. Iran became the most prominent example, but similar phenomena also occurred in Libya and Pakistan. Islam also began to grow significantly in the West. Muslims outnumbered Methodists in England, for instance.

A Muslim, Christian and Jew — Anwar el-Sadat of Egypt, Jimmy Carter of the United States, and Menachem Begin of Israel — negotiated a treaty that led to a state of peace between Israel and one of her Arab neighbors for the first time since the Jewish state was established in 1948.

At the same time, however, the 1970s saw the violent explosion of tensions between right-wing Maronite Catholics

and Palestinian-backed Muslim leftists in Lebanon. Syrian intervention brought an uneasy end to the civil war in 1976, but Lebanon remained an occupied country the end of the decade.

China joined the rest of the world in the 1970s, a process that was advanced by its admission into the United Nations in 1971 and the death of Mao Tse-tung in 1976. An internal liberalization brought about by the Hua Kuo-feng regime led to some relaxation on religious groups, although missionaries do not foresee any opportunities whatsoever to return.

Cambodia was in the news both at the beginning and the end of the decade — first as the site of United States bombing and later as the scene of a mass starvation abetted by warring factions.

Cambodian refugees were aided by religious groups around the world. Similar situations in many parts of the Third World marked the decade. While religious groups may have differed on many issues, they were united in fighting world hunger and battling human-rights violations, although there were some differences as to where the latter were to be found.

In a world looking for heroes, Pope John Paul II came on the scene in 1978 as a champion of human rights and a symbol of faith and love. Personally more charismatic than the late Pope Paul VI, his predecessor once removed, the theologically conservative Polish pontiff began signaling that the era of experimentation dating to the Second Vatican Council was at an end.

The last years of Pope Paul's reign were marked by a battle with right-wing critic French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. He had denounced Vatican II reforms and defied a suspension order from the Vatican by publicly celebrating the Tridentine (Latin) Mass on several occasions. An anticipated confrontation with Pope Paul was forestalled by the pontiff's death in 1978. As the decade ended, both Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Lefebvre seemed to be hoping to find the means of a mutually acceptable reconciliation.

Sexual ethics drew a good deal of attention in the Roman Catholic Church in the past decade. In 1976, a Vatican agency emphasized the church's condemnation of pre-marital sex, homosexual acts, and masturbation. A similar approach was taken by the U.S. bishops in a pastoral letter. But the following year, a study sponsored by the Catholic Theological Society of America drew controversy for proposing that no sex act should be considered intrinsically evil. Such a view was again sternly rebuked by the Vatican as 1979 drew to an end.

Some influential figures in the world of religion passed from the scene in the 1970s. They included theologians Rudolf Bultmann and Reinhold Niebuhr; Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston; Father Charles E. Coughlin, the fiery radio preacher of the 1930s; Lord Geoffrey Francis Fisher, retired Archbishop of Canterbury, Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel; Archbishop Makarios, president of Cyprus; Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammed; Hungarian Cardinal Josef Mindszenty; and famed preacher Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen.

With the close of the decade there was a note of pessimism in the December report of a U.S. presidential commission, in which religious groups participated, that chronic hunger crises loom through the end of the century.

The response of Christianity, along with other of the world's great religions, will put to the test the biblical admonition to "love your neighbor as yourself."