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FAITH-BASED WEB SITES

“Digital Dogma” by Lindsey B. Koehler — this sidebar (p54) is attached to the cover story, “A Religious Experience,” featured in the April edition of Denver’s magazine 5280 (pp46-55). As is often the case with secular stories about religion, the feature has a journalistic viewpoint that is at times a cross between a review of circus acts and a “theater of the absurd” approach. In this case, the largest photographs in the piece (omitted from the online edition) represent, in decreasing size: a female Lutheran pastor who uses vulgar language with abandon, a church which has a large wall snapshot-collage displaying its parishioners’ tattoos, and a Methodist minister whose “services are doled out over wings and pitchers of beer in local bars.” (None of the photos are included in the online edition.)

The sidebar profiles Patheos.com, a Denver-based web site which boasts “nearly 2 million” monthly visitors and “6 million pageviews a month and growing.” Consequently, “That makes Patheos.com the largest multifaith site on the Web.

“Launched in May 2009, Patheos.com aims to be to faith what ESPN.com is to sports. ... But [cofounder Leo Brunnick] and Co. make it clear that Patheos.com is not an interfaith site. ‘We are a marketplace of ideas,’ Brunnick says. ‘There may be people on our site who will say, ‘As a Christian, I believe atheists are going to hell’ but we do moderate the site in a way that we avoid people directly telling each other to go to hell.’” The sidebar concludes: “This year, the site is poised to overtake Beliefnet.com and Christianpost.com to become the largest religion media site.” <www.bit.ly/HG0BNp>

MENTAL DISORDERS

“The God Complex” by Chris Nashawaty — many of our readers have likely heard stories about people who, upon visiting the Holy Land, become emotionally overwhelmed and grow mentally unstable to the point that they are convinced that they are one of the characters mentioned in the Bible. This feature profiles Dr. Pesach Lichtenberg, head

of the men’s division of psychiatry at Jerusalem’s Herzog Hospital — “one of the world’s leading experts on [this] peculiar form of madness ... a psychiatric phenomenon known as Jerusalem syndrome.” Nashawaty includes numerous examples.

“There’s a joke in psychiatry: If you talk to God, it’s called praying; if God talks to you, you’re nuts. In Jerusalem, God seems to be particularly chatty around Easter, Passover, and Christmas — the peak seasons for the syndrome. It affects an estimated 50 to 100 tourists each year, the overwhelming majority of whom are evangelical Christians. ...

“Lichtenberg estimates that, in two decades at Herzog, the number of false prophets and self-appointed redeemers he has treated is in the low three figures. ...

“Lichtenberg says that during times of uncertainty and conflict (not infrequent in Israel), admissions to his ward spike.” *Wired*, Mar ‘12, pp112-119. (The first few pages of the article are available at <www.bit.ly/H6Q0KQ>.)

MORMONISM

“The Perils of an Open Canon” by BYU graduate, Benjamin E. Park, who seeks “a deeper look at how the Mormon tradition conceives of and defines its own ‘canon.’” He opens with evidence of ongoing racism related to “the Mormon Church’s restriction of the priesthood from black members” — even though the practice was abolished in 1978. In view of this, Park laments that “though the priesthood restriction was lifted, the specific ideas were never specifically repudiated — and indeed, even with the new statements by the church, they still haven’t been officially renounced.”

Next, Park considers the LDS emphasis on having a living prophet at the head of their church and how its “missionaries exuberantly proclaim to anyone who will listen the importance of a capital ‘P’ Prophet on the earth who can speak to God, proclaim new doctrine, and hold the same authority as the biblical prophets.” Park reflects on “the audacious belief that Thomas S. Monson, a man currently living in Salt Lake City (continued on next page)

MORMONISM (continued)

who wears a three-buttoned suit, attends Utah Jazz games, and tells stories about his pigeon collection, can legitimately claim the exact same prophetic tradition as ancient figures....

“If prophets of the past have already declared definitive truths, must current and future prophets maintain those same truths as binding? If the prophet today proclaims new doctrine, what does that mean for past prophets who taught different ideas and for future prophets who must perceivably follow that same trajectory? ...

“This tenuous relationship between past, present, and future, as well as a lack of defined boundaries, has led to such ambiguity that some critics compare identifying Mormon doctrine to nailing Jello on the wall....” (For more on this, see <www.bit.ly/Y30lw>.)

“Similarly, the lack of a systematic dogma forces some observers to say Mormonism claims a history in lieu of a theology. ...

“In the end, Mormons have yet to formulate a way to understand their doctrinal canon that acknowledges the messiness of the past....” Patheos.com, Mar 1 ‘12, <www.bit.ly/HGpO8d>

STATISTICS

American Religion: Contemporary Trends, by Mark Chaves¹ — “In this brief book sociologist Chaves (Duke Univ.) traces changes occurring in religion in the US between 1972 and 2008. For his conclusions he draws from data obtained through the General Social Survey and the National Congregations Study, both conducted out of the University of Chicago. In separate chapters he examines (1) religious diversity in American society and ethnic diversity within congregations; (2) the status of traditional beliefs (such as biblical inerrancy and life after death); (3) level of involvement; (4) congregations (styles of worship, use of technology, educational levels); (5) leadership trends (ministry as a career choice, public confidence); (6) liberal Protestant decline; and (7) polarization (increasing political and social conservatism of the

religiously active). Chaves demonstrates that the overall picture of religion in the US is one of continuity and stability rather than dramatic change. Nevertheless subtle changes are occurring, and this book does an excellent job of sifting through the data. Every chapter contains tables and graphs illustrating the various trends. A quick but informative read.” *Choice*, Feb ‘12, n.p.²

SOURCES: Monographs

1 - *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, by Mark Chaves (Princeton Univ Prs, 2011, hardcover, 160 pages) <www.tinyurl.com/6moornc>

SOURCES: Periodicals

2 - *Choice*, <www.choicereviews.org>

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