

# Returning to the Fold

By Bob Evancho

Sooner or later, most of us return to the age-old



question: the big WHY? — the search for meaning in life, the

quest for something larger than ourselves.

Spirituality is that effort to live deliberately, aware that there is more to this mortal coil than our everyday existence. In this special section **FOCUS** traces the route that some Idahoans are taking on their spiritual journeys.

In terms of traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs, where are America's baby boomers headed? After years of indifference to religion and absence from church, are they renouncing their materialistic, self-centered ways and returning to the fold? Are these former iconoclasts who proclaimed "God is dead" during the 1960s and '70s becoming the churchgoers of the '90s?

"I would say there is increased spirituality in America today," replies Warren Vinz, chair of the Boise State history department and a specialist in religious history. "But it's there without people necessarily joining an organized religion. With fast-paced lifestyles, two-job families, increased mobility and other commitments, many Americans are going it alone in religious terms."

And as American society becomes more diverse, the roles that traditional religions play in the marketplace of ideas begin to blur. In a nation with nearly 1,200 religious organizations, mainline churches may be getting lost in the shuffle.

"There is an increased intensity of religious, cultural and ethnic pluralism," says Vinz, "and in addition to that, you have a multiplicity of interests: the government, the state, the town, the family, the church. You have all these different centers of authority competing for loyalty and what is called 'the crisscrossing of loyalties.' This phenomenon has intensified from the 1950s through the 1980s and this, in part, is



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why mainline religion, including mainline Protestantism, is having some difficulty today. ... Being called Protestant today doesn't necessarily provide identity for persons or groups like it used to. 'Protestant' has become amorphous; it's almost a meaningless term.

"Some religious groups which 40 years ago were not considered Protestant now call themselves Protestant. Sects often become 'mainline' in time."

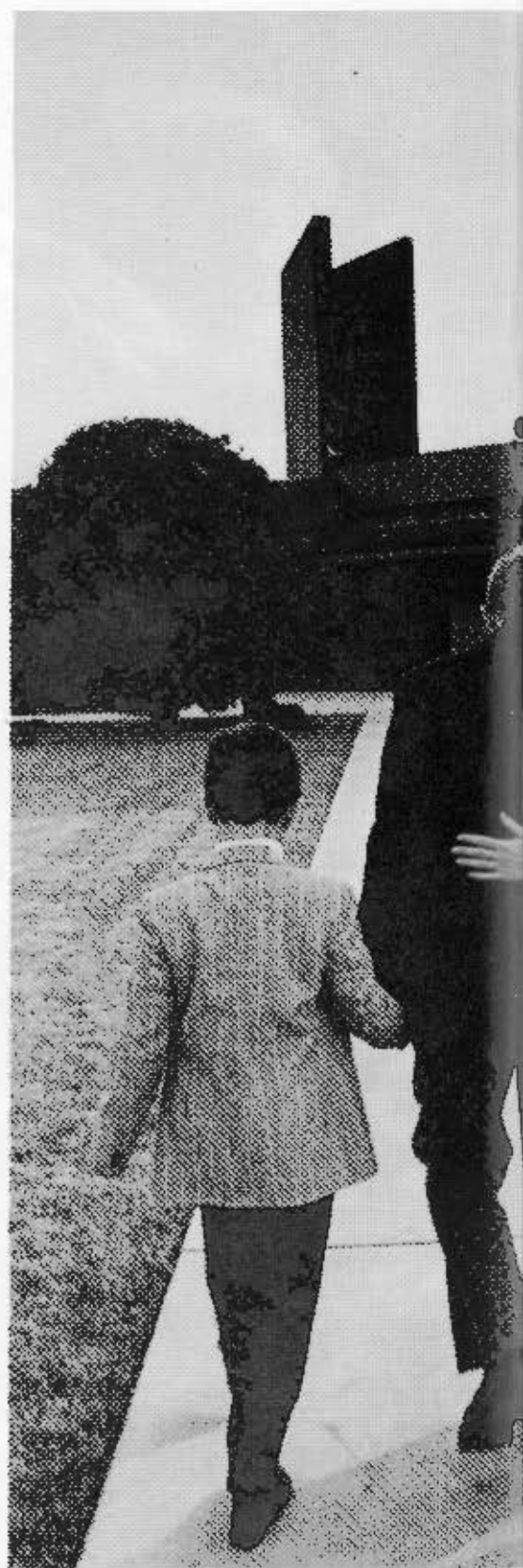
Religion has always been a highly private matter to most Americans, and the line that separates established Judeo-Christian faiths from other religious groups is often thin and indistinct, but two things are certain: Despite the ambiguities, (1) the United States is a religious nation and (2) the majority of Americans consider themselves followers of established Judeo-Christian faiths.

A nationwide survey of religious groups in the United States conducted last year by the City University of New York Graduate Center showed that more than 90 percent of all Americans identify with a specific church or denomination — this in a society considered highly secular. And according to the poll, 66 percent of all Americans say they are either Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or Mormon.

Those numbers, however, can be deceiving. Americans with mere lineal ties to or an interest in some sort of doctrine are included among the vast majority aligned with some sort of religion—even if formal worship in a church is not part of their faith.

"There is a large number of people whose religious beliefs and practices are just their own," says Tom Mayes, director of the Boise State Survey Research Center and a former Episcopal priest. "They have very little outward manifestations in traditional forms or in traditional organizations. Sometimes their beliefs and practices conform very much to traditional forms and practices, but in America a large number of folks fall into the [non-churchgoing] group."

Still, more than 40 percent of Americans do attend weekly religious services. And although some Americans have embraced unconventional New Age practices or less



*Recent statistics say the largest portion of the nation's*

traditional evangelical, fundamentalist and Pentecostal religions, the largest portion of the nation's churchgoers worship at the altar of mainstream faiths.

"My perception of New Age spirituality and various aspects of it is that it seems to be growing in awareness and popularity," says



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Mayes, "but it still reaches only a very small segment of the population."

Throughout much of the 1980s, the U.S. was considered to be in the midst of a religious revival. And while some mainstream churches are not staying in step with the nation's overall growth, religious belief con-

tinues to be a growing, moving force in America. According to Vinz, Mayes and representatives of the Boise religious community, certain economic and demographic developments are influencing this trend.

First, in times of crisis there is often a renewed interest in religion. ("There's nothing like a good war to increase our congregation," a minister said during the Gulf War, perhaps only half in jest.) And the current recession is a possible factor in the growing number of baby boomers who are returning to religion.

"I think there is a close connection between religion and the [nation's current] economic condition," says Mayes. "If the economic pressures in our country continue to grow, the traditional equation is often of people losing faith and becoming more preoccupied with getting food on the table and getting the bills paid. But there is a flip side: Whenever there has been a crisis, there is usually some type of outbreak of religion."

The Rev. Earl Barnard, pastor of Boise's Redeemer Lutheran Church, agrees. "That's a natural tendency," he says. "You never ask God for a lot of help when you're fat; it's when you're down and out that you ask for help. Hard times bring people around to acknowledging that everything is a gift from God."

Another factor is that the baby boomers are now parents themselves. Eager to instill in their children the moral strength that they hope will deliver them from today's social ills, parents are more inclined to embrace a religious ideology.

According to Gary Beckstead, director of the LDS Institute of Religion at Boise State, as parents assume more responsibilities, they are more apt to seek the stable values that churches can provide.

"There is nothing quite so sobering as trying to raise another individual," Beckstead says. "When you have children and you see how dependent they are on you, I think that creates a desire for parents to do their best."

In some instances, says Beckstead, that "desire" becomes a rediscovery of religious values that the parents were taught as chil-

dren. "I think in many cases that when parents come to this realization, they often reach back for things that were used to give them a good start in life — and religion would be part of it," he says.

Barnard notes the same trend. In many cases, the people who return to his church are parents of young children who have not formally practiced their faith in a number of years. "When their kids start hitting the age when they go to school and see the permissiveness in society, the parents start looking for something for the kids to hold on to," he remarks. "That's one of the reasons they return to church. They are looking for something with some moral values and moral teaching."

Although the responsibilities of parenthood are often a factor, the Rev. Joseph da Silva, pastor of St. Paul's Catholic Center at BSU, says a person's spiritual renewal is often just a personal choice.

"Most of the people I talk to who have come back have found that Catholicism has changed over the years, and for one reason or another they are trying to tap back to their roots," da Silva says. "Some people who were active or were forced to be active and called a halt to practicing their religion in the institutional form for five, 10 or 20 years have decided to re-examine their faith."

But, da Silva suggests, such a decision should be voluntary. "I feel uncomfortable doing it any other way," he says. "It has to be from his or her own heart. You can't lure people back. It has to be more natural."

Parental concerns and economic trauma may be among the reasons some baby boomers are returning to religion. But maybe there is something more profound — something more "from the heart."

Perhaps it's because they are uncomfortable with what they consider a random existence. When the illusion that we are masters of our own fate begins to fade, they develop a need for something else.

"I think man is basically religious," says Barnard. "It provides him with something to hang his hat on and make his life worthwhile: something that says, 'Yes, there's a point to my being here.'" □