

Religion Lite

Editorial
April 2004

Religion lite took a hit recently in the small suburban town of Wilsonville, Oregon where hundreds of religion lite followers were accustomed to gather for regular worship. The hit came in the announcement of a \$20 million debt that has crushed the lite out of the Living Enrichment Center (LEC), for years a popular gathering place for New Age followers and other lost, searching souls.

One particularly burdened soul (to the tune of \$600,000 owed by the LEC) expressed his disappointment with the LEC to the media by saying that he'd never been a believer in organized religion, so the failure of the New Age congregation was especially disappointing. By now it has no doubt occurred to him and others that a little organization can be a good thing.

But perhaps that's too easy. Oregon is, after all, also the eye of the West Coast storm of controversy for the hyper-organized Catholic Church's sex abuse cases.

What is it with religion and Oregon?

Maybe it's not just Oregon. In a *New York Times* column David Brooks wrote recently about "soft core spirituality," or "religion that's all about you." In his column Brooks cites author Christopher Lasch who wrote in "The Culture of Narcissism," about a mentality he describes as "an anti-religion that tries to liberate people from the idea that they should submit to a higher authority, so they can focus more obsessively on their own emotional needs."

The Clinton era/baby boomer-inspired politics of feeling have morphed into religion by feeling, education by feeling, government by feeling. The whole of Oregon seems to rely more on feeling than structure, more on personalities than principle.

Not coincidentally, Oregon is home base to international terror groups, domestic terror groups (of which you may read more in this issue), anarchists, and a panoply of touchy-feely organizations.

Strong institutions are frowned upon, strict processes are thought too restrictive. Oregonians love to boast about their individual free-spirited natures. Translate that, for many at least, to mean, "Leave me alone—your institutions have no meaning for me unless I feel that they do."

End result? County governments where commissioners defy the rule of law because they *feel* it is wrong, a school system that eliminates standardized grades because it's better to know how teachers *feel* children are performing, a governor who takes his advice from backroom advisors rather than the elected legislature because he *feels* more simpatico with their views, and a public who flocks to quasi-spiritual gatherings because centuries-old religious institutions make them *feel* cramped.

Well, institutions do have their cracks and flaws but most have stood the test of time and stand as demonstrations of the combined wisdom of centuries of good men and good judgment. *When cracks appear, better to repair them than turn away from them.*

Why?

Because individuals, and their feelings—as some very unhappy Oregonians are discovering—can and will fail us too. And when they do, if there's no institution to turn to, there is no recourse at all. None.

Fly by night spiritual leaders may take our money, and yes priests or pastors may fail us too. But in which case will we have an institution to whom we can bring our appeal for justice?

Commissioners may break the law to suit themselves and backroom insiders may get the big breaks and big jobs from government. But will we have a working judicial institution to protect us?

It's a simple lesson. Individuals with all their human flaws often fail. The results can be catastrophic. Given this, Oregonians, right now, have some hard work in front of them repairing and restoring our institutions. In the long run they are all that stand between us and deceit, between us and corruption, between us and totalitarianism.