

Unorthodox religions gather followers in Capital City

Interest in beliefs other than those traditionally practiced in Nebraska is evident in a number of unconventional religions in the area.

These vary from relatively new sects to ancient Eastern practices to offshoots of established religions.

"The underdog of the underdogs," is how a worker in the Jews for Jesus movement described his group.

Jews have a history of persecution by Christians, and now Jews for Jesus are suffering similar abuse from many traditional members of the Jewish faith, according to evangelist Steven Cohen, 29.

Cohen said members of the organization have joined various Christian churches since they are no longer welcome in synagogues.

Cohen said his wife, who have recently moved to Omaha from New York City, are the only full-time staff members in Nebraska.

Christian Jew possible

It is possible to be Jewish and Christian at the same time, he said.

Cohen defined a Jew as a person born of Jewish parents, who thus inherits the covenant promised to Abraham and his descendants.

"According to strict Jewish law once a Jew always a Jew," he said.

A Christian is someone who consciously decides to follow Jesus, Cohen said, and it is impossible to be born a Christian.

"Being born into a Christian home doesn't make someone a Christian anymore more than being born into a bakery makes one a baker," he said.

Jews for Jesus is an organization of Jewish and non-Jewish people who believe Jesus is the Son of God and one must follow him to have a proper relationship with God, he said.

The conflict is that the majority of Jews have been taught that Jesus is not the Messiah.

2+2=5?

If one has believed all his life that 2+2=5, and then discovers that it really equals four, he will suffer an initial emotional response of resentment, he said.

"The real tension is not, 'can a Jew believe in Jesus?' but 'who is Jesus?'" he said.

Cohen plans to bring this message to the UNL campus in the form of Bible studies, literature, and contacts with campus Christian organizations.

One such organization is the UNL chapter of the Ba'hai faith, which has been on campus since 1967, according to Jeff Adler, coordinator of the group.

Adler, a senior English major from Long Island, said the group has dropped from 80 to 10 members since its founding. The organization's purpose is to introduce students to the Ba'hai faith, he said.

Fireside chats

The Ba'hai faith is based on the teachings of Baha'u'llah, Adler explained.

Ba'hais believe that Baha'u'llah received the spirit of God in 1853 while imprisoned in Tehran, Iran, and was transformed into a messenger of God.

The Ba'hai faith teaches that Baha'u'llah, Jesus, Mohammed and other past prophets are all the same spirit clothed in different bodies, Adler said.

The goal of the Ba'hai faith is to eliminate prejudice and unite all races, nationalities and sexes, he said.

Unlike some other religions, Ba'hais are forbidden to solicit or accept donations, Adler said.

Likewise, Ananda Marga, a Hindu meditation group, must rely on its members for financial support.

Ananda Marga teaches people to use practical techniques such as meditation to achieve their highest spiritual potential said Steve McElravy, 29, leader of the Lincoln group.

Movement, not religion

McElravy described Ananda Marga as a movement; something more than a religion which he thinks can be limiting.

"It's what I do instead of religion," he said.

Ananda Marga is divided into two areas; service to humanity, viewed as service to God, and discipline.

Relief operations connected with Lincoln Red Cross and health workshops for women are two local service projects.

Self discipline includes a vegetarian diet, fasting, daily meditation and yoga exercises.

Because Ananda Marga is based on the principle of a relationship between physical, mental, and spiritual health, diet and exercise are as important as meditation.

Followers meditate individually twice daily for a minimum of 20 minutes each time.

Positive addiction

"It becomes a positive addiction, he said. "It's so satisfying it awakens a desire in you to do it again and again. The purpose of my life is meditation."

The six Lincoln members also hold weekly group meditation sessions. These include spiritual singing and dancing.

"We're not just a bunch of individuals meditating. We're doing something daily and weekly to forge ourselves together."

Ananda Marga was founded in 1955 in India by Shrii Shrii Anandamurti Ji and brought to Lincoln by a meditation teacher in 1971.

Another relatively new religion found in Lincoln is The Only Order of Man.

The Order, founded 10 years ago in San Francisco, sponsors the non-denominational Christian House at 19th and R streets.

This community center and chapel is devoted to non-profit community service projects, said Deborah Beck, priest of the Lincoln Order.

Mostly Catholic

Beck said the order does not stem from any mainline church but most closely resembles the Roman Catholic faith.

Promotion of a Christian way of life is the major goal of the order, she said.

She said the difference between the order and other churches is the order's acceptance of women as ministers since its beginning.

There are approximately 300 vowed members of the church nationally. Vowed members are similar to monks and nuns in the Catholic church but are not forbidden to marry, she said.

Beck said the Lincoln Order includes two or three UNL students as members.

University Muslim students can participate in religious and social activities with the Muslim Student Association.

In addition to weekly meetings, the association sponsors religious discussions, dinners and parties, club president Said Martan said.

300 Muslim students

Of the almost 300 Muslim students at UNL, 40 students are regular members of the association, Martan said. Most of these are graduate students, he added.

Martan said the association has been on the UNL campus for 20 years. He has noticed more interest in the club in recent years, he said.

Homelands of student members include Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Martan said.

Moonie calls church a movement

Perhaps the most controversial religion ever to appear in America is the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, which was brought to the country in the early 1960s from Korea.

The church has been called a cult, a movement, a religion, an ego trip and a business venture; has been compared to the Hitler youth movement and accused of brainwashing its members.

But two Lincoln Moonies; Diana Deines and Renee Stueckrath, both of 6510 Holdrege, Apt. 3; said that such negative publicity is a result of communist smear tactics.

The two roommates discredited accounts of unethical practices by the church, saying they don't feel members are exploited in any way.

They described the church, which is based on a series of revelations to Rev. Moon from God called the Divine Principle, as a blend of Judeo-Christian and Eastern religions.

Moon teaches that Jesus was the son of God, but he didn't complete his mission to establish a Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, Stueckrath said. This means a second savior will be sent by God to eliminate evil, she continued.

She said the church feels that this means Moon is now a profit, and if he succeeds in his mission he will be considered the Messiah.

Communism represents Satan

This mission is to unify all nations and religions and eliminate communism. The church believes that communism must be eliminated because, through its denial of God, it represents Satan, Stueckrath said.

Both members said their involvement in the Unification Church does not affect their membership in Christian churches.

There are about six moonies living in Lincoln who occasionally travel to the only Nebraska center in Omaha, for workshops and meetings.

Deines explained that it is no longer necessary to live in the centers or donate all of ones possessions to belong to the church.

Money raising is beginning to take a smaller role in the life of Moonies. The urgency of the mission called for the method of fund raising used, said the coordinator of missions for the church.

Dan Fefferman said the church is progressing into more normal means of fund raising such as contributions from members.

Church is movement

The \$30 million income reported by the church last year was reinvested in a university, seminary, fishing industry, many small businesses and land purchases.

"As we have progressed and grown stronger, we've treated Moon with the respect and dignity we feel he deserves as our spiritual leader, Fefferman said.

This includes Moon's \$650,000 home in the U.S. and two \$250,000 yachts at his disposal.

"We don't give him first rate treatment and he does not take advantage of his position, in fact he works harder than anyone else," he said.

Fefferman has been a Moonie for 10 years and considers the church the basis for a movement rather than a religion.

"It is a movement used by God to prepare the world for the second coming of Christ," he said.

Fefferman said Moon is the third coming of the

prophet Elijah and just as John the Baptist, who was the second coming of Elijah, was sent to prepare the way for Christ, Moon was sent to prepare the way for the second coming of Jesus.

Ex-moonie says Moon not divine

The Unification Church, however loudly it proclaims its good intentions and innocent methods, is not without its critics.

Chris Elkins, an ex-Moonie who was once a top official in the church, said he felt Rev. Sun Myung Moon as deceiving the public and his followers.

Elkins joined the church because he was led to believe it was a Christian organization, he said.

He said he later decided he could not accept the Moonies as being Christian, because they are taught that Moon is the true savior. According to Moon, Jesus was just an ordinary human being, with nothing divine about him, Elkins said.

This is not necessarily what Moonies will tell others, because they don't want to scare away prospective members, he said.

Another deception practiced by the Moonies is the idea that the church is a movement rather than a religion, he said.

Moonies worship Moon

Elkins said this is not true because they obviously worship Moon.

He said Moonies also try to infiltrate and subvert Christian congregations by getting involved in other churches and community service programs.

Also, the church doesn't pay taxes on its yearly earnings of \$60 million, because it has declared itself to be a religion, he said.

Moon is not relying on strictly spiritual means to fulfill his purpose; he is politically very active in Washington, Elkins said.

In fact, Moon has been "trading favors" with U.S. senators and congressmen for some time, he said.

Moon has been involved with Tongsun Park, the Korean businessman accused of bribing members of Congress, Elkins said.

Moon influenced presidents

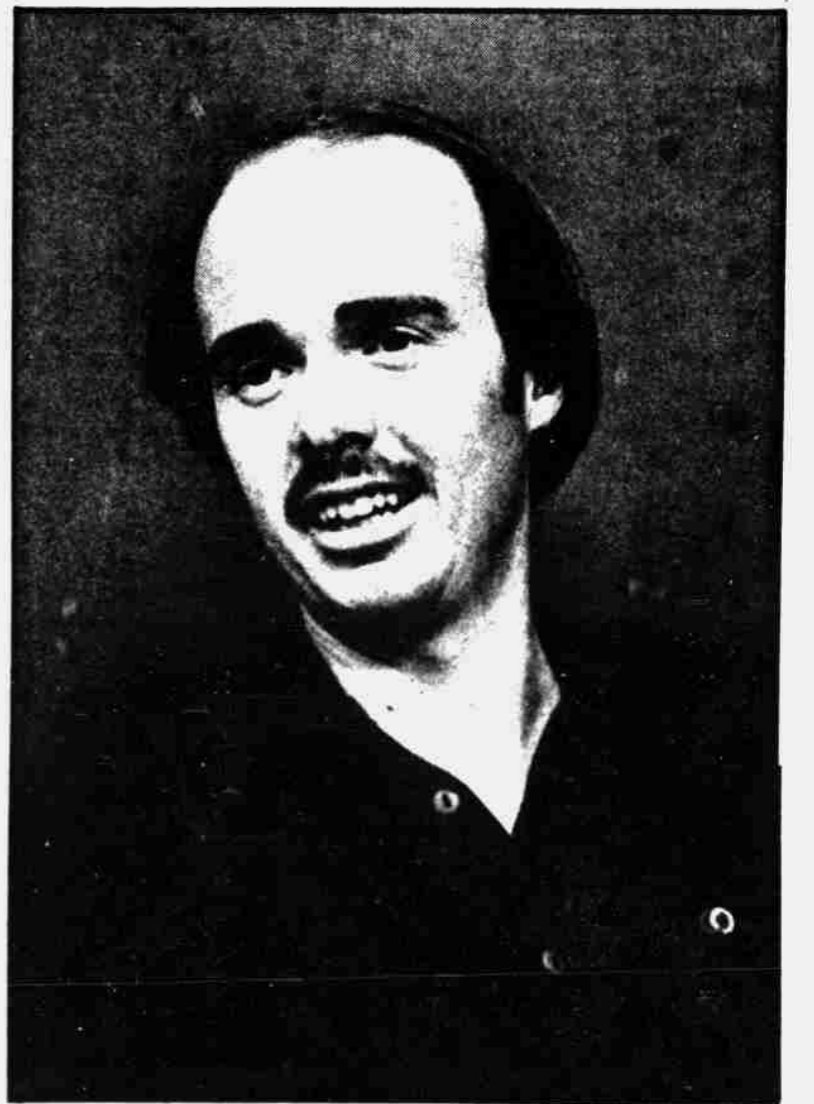
In addition, he said Moon has influenced presidents Gerald Ford and Richard Nixon; and that Nixon invited Moon to the White House to pray together.

Elkins said Moon was a very staunch supporter of Nixon, in the hopes that Nixon would survive Watergate, and want to reward him for his support.

Stories by

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Daily Nebraskan photo
Chris Elkins, ex-Moonie

Elkins said he has heard Moon pledge to "subjugate and conquer the world."

Furthermore, the Freedom Leadership Foundation, consisting entirely of Moonies, is briefed regularly by the Pentagon, he said.

Elkins estimated that Moon was worth at least \$150 million; and is presently negotiating through the church to buy the Empire State Building.

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