

ENDLESS ABSURDITIES

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By James A. Haught

Pentecostalism - in which worshipers compulsively spout incomprehensible sounds called "the unknown tongue" - has become a major world religion. An estimated 300 million Americans and Southern Hemisphere residents now attend churches where glossolalia occurs. One report says one-fourth of all the planet's Christians now "speak in tongues." This faith is surging while most other branches of Christianity fade.

Santeria worshipers sacrifice thousands of dogs, pigs, goats, chickens, etc., to a variety of deities that are partly Catholic saints and partly African jungle gods. Bodies of the unlucky animals are dumped into waterways. Miami police patrol boats fish out the carcasses. Santeria ("way of the saints") is somewhat similar to Voodoo, but arose among Spanish slaves instead of French ones.

Many millions of Hindus pray over models of Shiva's penis. They make pilgrimages to a Himalayan cave where a penis-like ice stalagmite rises in winter. In San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, many worshipers pray at a phallic-looking traffic barrier.

About 5,000 fervent young Muslims have detonated themselves as human bombs in "martyrdom operations" to kill tens of thousands of "infidels." The phenomenon peaked on Sept. 11, 2001, when 19 suicide volunteers hijacked four airliners and crashed them like projectiles to kill nearly 3,000 Americans. The year 2007 had more than 500 suicide attacks worldwide -- well above one per day.

Another exception to Christian decline is a steady rise of Mormons. Latter-day Saints say an angel named Moroni revealed buried golden plates in New York state and gave Joseph Smith magical stones enabling him to translate writing on the plates. The plates and stones cannot be examined as evidence today, because Moroni allegedly took them back to heaven.

Thousands of witch-killings still occur in tropical Africa, rural north India, Papua New Guinea and other uneducated places. When disease or drought happens, superstitious villagers blame old female “witches” for causing the blight, and mobs murder them. Saudi Arabia still has a law against witchcraft, which results in periodic beheadings. Today’s killings almost rival those of the historic medieval witch-hunts, when up to 100,000 women were tortured into confessing that they copulated with Satan, flew through the sky, changed into animals, blighted crops, and the like - then were burned.

Cult suicides and murders were an epidemic in the late 20th century. More than 900 believers died in the 1978 Jonestown tragedy. Nearly 100 others perished at Waco’s Branch Davidian compound in 1993. Various smaller cult massacres occurred - and Japan’s Aum Shinrikyo (Supreme Truth) sect planted nerve gas in Tokyo’s subway in 1995, killing 13 commuters and sickening about 1,000.

Tibet’s Buddhists say that when an old Lama dies, his spirit enters a baby boy being born somewhere. So the faith remains leaderless for about a dozen years, until the supposed spirit-receiving boy is found and proclaimed the next Lama.

Jehovah’s Witnesses say that, any day now, Jesus will descend from heaven with an army of angels to clash with Satan and an army of demons in the long-foreseen Battle of Armageddon. After the destruction, only 144,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses will survive. This group is another that is growing while most of Christianity fades. Meanwhile, other sects await a somewhat similar scenario at The Rapture.

Advance-level Scientologists say every human contains “thetans,” which are spirits or souls that began as space aliens 75 million years ago and were sent to Planet Earth by an evil galactic ruler named Xenu. Scientologists pay money for therapy courses designed to “clear” excess thetans from their bodies.

The world’s 1.5 billion Catholics are told that the bread-like host wafer actually turns into the real flesh of Jesus - and the communion wine actually becomes the real blood of Jesus - by the miracle of Transubstantiation during mass (although they still look like bread and wine). Disputes over this doctrine of “real presence” helped spur the Hussite Wars of the 1400s and subsequent Protestant Reformation.

Creationists of the “young Earth” variety contend that this planet and the universe magically were willed into existence in six literal days, as Genesis says, around 10,000 years ago. They claim that humans and dinosaurs were created in the same week, and coexisted. They reject science findings that the universe is more than 13 billion years old. They reject evidence that dinosaurs went extinct at least 60 million years before the earliest humans developed. In fact, they reject any evidence of gradual development, insisting that all animals and plants were created instantly in final form.

“Cargo cults” grew in the southwest Pacific. During World War II, both Allied and Japanese armies built Melanesian island airstrips that received many tons of food, material and supplies. Primitive tribes nearby thought the arriving riches were gifts that gods and ancestors had intended for them. Believers cut imitation airstrips in jungles, fashioned life-size aircraft of straw, and marched with wooden guns in hope of receiving airborne gifts from heaven. Previously, during colonialism, similar backward worshipers saw foreign goods arrive by ship, so they built makeshift wharves and performed rituals to induce gods to send them wealth by sea. All the god-enticing failed.

In the mid-1800s, a Chinese man read Christian pamphlets and had a vision in which God told him he was a younger brother of Jesus -- and also told him to “destroy demons.” The vision-seer raised a religious army, the Taipings, which conquered much of China before being exterminated. The death toll is estimated as high as 20 million.

Aztec priests sacrificed an estimated 20,000 people per year to an invisible feathered serpent and other fantastical gods.

In the 1800s, followers of Thuggee in India believed that the many-armed goddess Kali wanted followers to exterminate humans, because Brahma the creator was making lives faster than her consort, Shiva the destroyer, could end them. Thugs strangled an estimated 20,000 people yearly, until British rulers tracked them down and halted the carnage.

The Bible says that anyone who works on the Sabbath “shall surely be put to death” - and brides who aren’t virgins may be stoned to death on their fathers’ doorsteps - and gays must be killed - etc., etc.

Religious absurdities are too numerous to count: Shi'ites who whip themselves bloody with blades on chains because their hero, Muhammad's grandson, was killed by a Sunni army fourteen centuries ago - Appalachian fundamentalists who pick up rattlesnakes (sometimes fatally) because in the Great Commission, Jesus said believers "shall take up serpents" - Philippine Christians who have themselves nailed to crosses at Good Friday, with real nails through palms and feet - Sufi "Whirling Dervishes" who trance-dance and spout strange sounds - Christian Scientists who let their children die of simple fevers because they think disease is imaginary - other believers, perhaps mentally ill, who beat their children to death to "drive out demons" - Bible prophecy zealots who repeatedly set Doomsday dates, but nothing happens (spurring headlines, "The Final Days are Here Again") - and on and on, ad infinitum.

It's often said that everyone should respect the "great truths" contained in all faiths. If you see any, please let me know.

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