

Trusting the Spirit, by Richard Cimino

reviewed by [Wayne A. Holst](#) in the [September 12, 2001](#) issue

Historian Paul Johnson compares religious organizations to icebergs. They move slowly and the changes in them are not easily seen. Yet, as Richard Cimino demonstrates in his study of six renewal movements, the most effective reform of these institutions may come from cyclical, rejuvenating forces configured into groups that slowly adapt themselves to change.

Cimino critically assesses one Jewish, two Roman Catholic and two Protestant organizations, as well as an ecumenical renewal force, and makes careful predictions about their long-term influence. He describes three types of renewal at work within denominational structures. Each has a core identity: the evangelical/charismatic focuses on the personal and experiential; the liturgical/contemplative stresses worship, prayer, meditation and mysticism; and the progressive/liberal emphasizes freedom and relevance.

The author asserts that gradual, internal reformation nurtures and enhances denominational heritages. Concerned people join renewal movements because they fear that the purposes and effectiveness of their tradition is being threatened by slippage and waywardness. These true believers are convinced that the strengths of their church are worth recovering and enhancing. They want their denominations to come alive again.

Cimino presents snapshots of people involved in renewal groups. His approach is a creative mix of journalism and sociology, of in-depth interviews and reports combined with ethnographic research and personal observation of group activities and gatherings. Although bias sometimes sneaks into the analysis, he is generally objective, and he is at his best when offering intuitive assessments based on his reconnaissance.

Catholic Charismatic Renewal and the United Church of Christ's Biblical Witness Fellowship stress the church's revitalization through the individual faith of members. Lay empowerment, intimate worship and Bible study fostered by an evangelical community characterizes both. These groups avoid confrontational tactics and

oppose the conservative forces at work in their denominations.

The publications of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau and the quiet revival sparked by the Taizé Community are liturgical, contemplative initiatives. The Lutheran group views itself as a counterforce to both rationalism and pietism. It is characterized by inter-Lutheran cooperation, an impressive liturgy and priestly distinctiveness. Taizé avoids controversy and is committed to the reconciliation of Christians and to working for peace on earth. Its scriptural emphasis comes from Protestantism; its use of icon-focused prayer from Orthodoxy; its Eucharist from Roman Catholicism. Taizé is a "sign of contradiction" to the world. It aids spiritually questing youth and sets the stage for mystical encounters with God.

Call to Action and Jewish Renewal are social and spiritual liberationist movements within Roman Catholicism and American Judaism respectively. The Catholic group has a history of confrontation with the Catholic hierarchy, and its tactics have marginalized it and made it notorious. But the church has assimilated, repackaged and redistributed some of the group's more palatable ideas. Jewish Renewal downplays traditional faith and focuses extensively on the "spiritual" aspects of Judaism. It imbues ancient teachings with a kabbalistic, mystical, modern meaning and borrows spiritual practices from other faith traditions. Jewish Renewal rejects secular Judaism and deals with issues relevant to modern seekers.

What can denominations learn from these renewal groups? That effective groups are intentional about reform. They work within the pluralism of American religious institutions. They focus on spirituality, not on the culture wars. They make good use of ritual, liturgy, literature and cyberspace. They build bridges of solidarity with like-minded people in other faith traditions. They focus on education and youth formation. And they emphasize that religious "virtuosity" is crucial to the future of reform.