

editor's letter



Presumably, faith has been around since there were organisms that could think and feel. So, why is it that faith suddenly seems hip again? In the late '80s Madonna (*like* a virgin, not *the* virgin) was professing "when I get down on my knees, it's not to pray," but now, she won't even sing on Friday nights for wont of breaking the sabbath. And celebrities aren't the only ones jumping on the bandwagon. Scientology may have seen a 22% increase in followers since the '90s, but it's nothing compared to Islam, Hinduism, New Age, Baha'i, and others, who have seen their populations more than double in that same period. In fact, the only affiliation that seems to be on the decline is Judaism. Even the number of people self-identifying as Secular has been booming.

But faith obviously reaches far deeper, and much broader, than a red Kaballah string. Every day we see it bringing people together (a pledge of allegiance, group prayer, march on Washington), and also creating rifts and distinctions between them (elections, symbolic religious attire, a slanderous cartoon). In this issue, we asked four prominent women with very different backgrounds (4 for 4, p.44) what it would take for people to have faith in a feminist movement, and surprise surprise, their answers were miles apart. Even when united in a singular goal, our individual beliefs span a spectrum as various as the interpretations of the Bible.

In this cacophonous choir of angels, there are new members joining each day, new trends each minute, and new soloists on the hour. Why does faith seem like it's gaining speed? Maybe it's because faith has slowly been slithering into every crevice of our daily lives, from *The Wall Street Journal* to *US Weekly*, and from Washington D.C. to our own homes. Gone are the days of separation of church and state; we're throwing our faiths into everything from political leaders to modern medicine and the stock market. But why? The much-talked-about rise of the religious right? Need for direction in an age of rising fear? Possibly. Or maybe clear-cut ideas like "separation of church and state" just don't compute anymore with the ways in which we believe. Maybe faith feels ubiquitous because in contemporary society, we seem to hang our hearts anywhere there's a hook—on religion, the government, family, possessions, celebrities, science. Questions of faith are no longer isolated to the normal arenas where you might expect to find them; they're everywhere.

Trying to put ourselves in the eye of the storm, we constructed this issue of *iris* as a small cross-section of the whirlwind of faith going on around us every day. The articles "Called to Birth" and "All the Real Witches" probe into the growing interest in midwifery and paganism respectively. "Called to Birth" examines the power of women having faith in other women to guide them through the birthing process and the reasons why it is still today a celebrated feminist act in a diversity of communities. "All the Real Witches" probes into the origins of Paganism's revival, and why it has become one of the fastest growing religions in the country. "Femme Faithfalle," on the other hand, takes a close look at Catholicism, and asks, "Where have all the young nuns gone?" While the Catholic Church in America has over 65 million members, only 2% of its nuns are under 40 years old. "From Disco to Ashram" takes a more intimate gaze across the generational divide at the relationship between a daughter, her mother, and her mother's guru. And "With a Hijab and a Microphone" reports on the powerful new voice of Muslim women comedians in the world of American stand-up. Finally, "Madame President" looks into the future and conjectures about what it would take to shatter the proverbial glass-ceiling and get a woman into the White House. Also in this issue of *iris* are fantastic interviews with intelligent design thinkers on both sides of the debate, as well as an interview with LGBT rights activist, Candace Gingrich. And as always, this issue includes fabulous works of poetry, fiction, reviews, and more.

In just one issue of *iris*, it is impossible to give even an overview of what faith looks like in contemporary society. However, hopefully we are able to at least convey our observation that in an age of supposed increased alienation, we are still willing to wear our hearts on our sleeves (or as the cover suggests, our skin), and that just might be something to have faith in.