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Inside Look at Those Elite Religious Groups

Their ranks are small, but a handful of key societies count as members some of the most influential Americans.

While the Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority draws most of the public attention, other religious groups are quietly trying to influence the nation's elite.

Their names are unfamiliar to most Americans—the Knights of Malta, Opus Dei, Moral Re-Armament, the Christian Reconstructionists. Yet their principles, which include strict adherence to Christian values, are the guiding force in the lives of some of the most powerful people in the U.S.

Despite coming from different faiths, members share a common belief that a small number of dedicated people can indeed change the world.

Still, these groups aren't without their detractors. Outsiders often question the recruiting methods and veil of secrecy surrounding some of these organizations. Critics contend, too, that these societies are as much bastions of conservative politics as they are religious in nature.

Oldest of these groups is the Knights of Malta, a Roman Catholic organization that dates back to the time of the Crusades when members fought Moslems in the Holy Land. With headquarters in Rome, the group is recognized by some 40 countries as the world's only landless sovereign nation. In that role, the Knights mint coins, print stamps and issue passports to their diplomats.

American network. The U.S. membership of about 1,000—70 percent men—accounts for one tenth of the worldwide total. Nearly all are prominent in business, government or professional life and include such well-known figures as Chrysler Chairman Lee Iacocca and Central Intelligence Agency Director William Casey. At least two U.S. senators also are members: Republicans Jeremiah Denton of Alabama and Pete Domenici of New Mexico.

Other members active in conservative politics include former Secretary of State Alexander Haig, former Treasury Secretary William Simon and columnist William F. Buckley.

The president of the Knights' Ameri-

can branch is J. Peter Grace, chairman of the W. R. Grace Company, which provides a national focus for the organization by including seven other Knights on its board.

The main purpose of the Knights is to honor distinguished Catholics and raise money for charity, especially hospitals. But the close personal ties among members contribute to what some observers call a potent old-boy network of influential decision makers dedicated to thwarting Communism. The annual induction ceremony for new members at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City is the only function of the U.S. chapter open to nonmembers.

Because many Knights and recipients of the order's honors have worked in or around the CIA, critics sometimes suggest a link between the two. But members deny any connection, noting that the pattern of conservative members with overseas ties emerges naturally from the order's role as an international defender of the church.

Pope John Paul II also has praised the work of the Knights in a special proclamation, just as he has another sometimes controversial group called Opus Dei—Latin for "the work of God."

Founded in 1928 by a Spanish priest, Josemaria Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás, the group's central tenet is that all human work should be done "with the greatest perfection possible" to "help shape the world in a Christian manner."

By JAMES MANN with KATHLEEN PHILLIPS

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