

WIMPY PATRIARCHY

This article by Professor Molly Worthan at the University of North Carolina discusses the form of religion taught by Bishop Robert Barron. Worthan says that Barron operates Word on Fire, a ministry that uses social media to preach a tough version of Catholicism that appeals to men, especially young men.

This [tough view] is not the message that [Barron] got as a young Catholic. "To be frank about it, when I was in the seminary, it was more of a feminized approach," he recalled. "We did a lot of sitting in a circle and talking about our feelings."

Whatever is in his Instagram and YouTube videos, which I, of course, won't watch, it seems to appeal to younger men, as his audience is over 60% male. Worthan says that among college grads under age 40, 69% of men claim a religious affiliation compared with 62% of women.

Male resentment

Worthan offers this possible explanation.

Some pundits argue that as gender norms shifted and women started outnumbering men in universities and the white-collar workforce, men have grown resentful and nostalgic for patriarchy—so they seek it in traditional religion. J. D. Vance is the country's most famous Catholic convert, and the story of his rightward shift might seem like a template for all Gen Z and Millennial men interested in Christianity.

This explanation says that men respond to the success of women by asserting their superiority as the men of the patriarchy. Historically men were dominant and women were subordinate. For

many this cashed out as men have all the power and women are submissive. Historically, this system was enforced by the state and by religious authorities. Today it's a part of all religions, and is a central aspect of all fundamentalist religions.

Seeking a solution to the apparent superiority of so many women in the Patriarchy is an example of what C.S. Peirce calls the method of authority, one of his four responses to doubt. From his 1877 essay *The Fixation Of Belief*,

Let the will of the state act, then, instead of that of the individual. Let an institution be created which shall have for its object to keep correct doctrines before the attention of the people, to reiterate them perpetually, and to teach them to the young; having at the same time power to prevent contrary doctrines from being taught, advocated, or expressed. Let all possible causes of a change of mind be removed from men's apprehensions. Let them be kept ignorant, lest they should learn of some reason to think otherwise than they do. . . .

Males Adrift

Worhan offers her own explanation:

Many young men feel unmoored—lonely in a time of weakening social institutions, unsatisfied and overworked by an accelerating professional rat race, alienated by political tribalism. “Men my age, we don’t have the social organizations that our fathers or grandfathers did,” Torrin Daddario, a Barron fan who converted to Catholicism from a Protestant background, told me. “We’re adrift.” Over the past decade, both the left and the right have tried to fill the void with morality tales that treat unfettered individual freedom

as sacred and split the world into victims and oppressors. Those stories are getting stale.

Worthan explains that these young men get much of their information from YouTube and other social media. She says they might check out Jordan Peterson, for example, leading to Christianity, and the algorithm leads them to Barron.

This is an example of Peirce's third possible response to doubt, which we might today call the method of common sense.

Let the action of natural preferences be unimpeded, then, and under their influence let men, conversing together and regarding matters in different lights, gradually develop beliefs in harmony with natural causes. ... [Systems of metaphysics] have been chiefly adopted because their fundamental propositions seemed "agreeable to reason." This is an apt expression; it does not mean that which agrees with experience, but that which we find ourselves inclined to believe.

Listening to random people who don't have better information than you do is a recipe for failure. Listening to people hawking the old solutions, including patriarchy in its many forms, has the same result. You don't get answers that are useful in our society. You get contemporary versions of answers to questions our ancestors asked centuries or millennia ago. We living people have different questions based on radically different societies from those of our ancestors.

Beyond Atheism vs. Religion

All this gets boiled down into a discussion of atheism vs. religion. In the US, this debate is between people like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins, the New Atheists on one side; and the

Bishop Barrons and aggressive groups like Opus Dei and Christian Dominionists. It almost always is understood as atheism vs. Christianity, ignoring the teachings of other religions. It deals with untestable beliefs like the existence of a Supreme Being or the proper form of worship, and never the moral teachings. This kind of simplistic dualism pervades all public discourse on almost any issue. I am very skeptical of all dualistic framings, especially dualisms originating in the distant past.

The feelings Worthan describes are common among large numbers of people at especially after the First World War. The result was the origination of secular theories of humanity that seem to me to transcend arguments about the existence of a Supreme Being and forms of worship.

One example is Existentialism. Those adrift young men listening to Barron might recognize themselves in the ennui expressed in Sartre's play *No Exit*. The most famous line in the play is "hell is other people". The three "other people", condemned to hell for their sins, will torture each other through eternity. The play concludes with the words: "Well, well, let's get on with it. ..." But is that the answer to the problem they face? Wallowing?

Sartre doesn't think so. Neither do the other existentialists. Look at *The Plague* by Albert Camus. The hero is the doctor. In the face of a deadly plague he does his best to tend to the sick and dying, advise the living how to protect themselves, and find a cure. The other characters display other responses to the plague, some modestly useful, others worthless. Camus tells us we have to act, to help, to fight the inevitable, to resist the meaninglessness of the universe by finding meaning in other people.

The odd thing, of course, is that traditionally the fundamental character of the masculine was action, while the feminine was characterized by passivity. Men find their place in society by accomplishment. Women find their place in the home and in child-rearing.

How ridiculous is it that men respond to women's
action in the world by becoming passive wimps?
Or by asserting an invented superiority not
arising from personal accomplishment?

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Image; Ruth Bader Ginsberg in her Columbia
academic regalia, 1959