

SIT IN YOUR OWN PEW

Even in these days of troubled times, one of the favorite American weekend pastimes is attending the church of your choice. "Church?!" I can just hear you yowling, "Booooooring! We wanna catch the football game and go out and wreck some fragile ecosystems with our dirt bikes." No sniveling, we're going to church and that's that. Your scrawny little undeveloped souls need it. How else are you going to grow up into a Soul Man, like John Belushi or Sam n Dave? No backchat, get dressed and brush whatever it is you've done to your hair and we're on our way. But first, for the terminally back-slidden, a brief rundown on why one goes to church.

The primary reason for attending church (and for being fairly uncritical about the propositions put forth there) is simple and monolithic. We're talking about Sin. The Big Book is quite explicit about the wages of Sin. And if you've ever tried making ends make on the wages of Sin, you know where that's at. Of course there are various types of sin. Cardinal Sin, for one; the kind learned in College. Or perhaps St Louis. Then there is your Venial Sin. Venial sins are no big deal and hardly worth the trouble of committing. Sloth and envy and coveting and such. No rep, no rap. Sins of commission (frequently incurred by salesmen) and omission (also a bugaboo of salesmen) figure in, but not prominently.

Some sins are a little archaic, like coveting one's neighbor's wife or ass or ox. When was the last time you looked over the fence at yon greener grass and found yourself thinking, "Hmmm, nice ox?" Don't tell me, tell your pastor or Dr. Ruth.

Perhaps the most daunting is Original Sin. Not some offshore knockoff. Not some sleazy signed, numbered edition of 666. Sin in it's original and uncensored version. Like unadulterated adultery. Penal envy. Covert coveting. Billy Idolatry. Some churches will tell you that Jesus died for your sins. I can relate to that--I'm dying for some good sin, myself. I prefer sins of the flesh, if anyone out there's interested--though I also dabble in gluttony and intemperance.

Which leads us to another sticky wicket propounded in Church--Hell. Not the Matt Groening kind with cute rabbits, either. The three-ring,

brass-bound, hellacious hell of fire and brimstone (whatever that is)--a churning urn of burning theological funk. A bottomless, endless pit of unquenchable fire in which sinners burn painfully through eternity like spiders flicked into a fireplace. Not exactly Club Med, you see. And, they will take pains to inform you, a must to avoid. This is where all the carousers and Hell's Angels end up. You can sin your ass off there, if you want, but you won't like it because you'll be suffering too much. Raw deal but hey, that's the Hell of it.

On the other hand, there is heaven, a place populated by Teen Angels, Earth Angels, St. Peter, Paul and Mary and, presumably, St. Mounds. They are said to have a hell of a band. Between hell and heaven, by the way, is Limbo, best known in this country as a dance invented for getting into pay toilets. And Purgatory, which was bought by Aspen corporation and turned into ski condos. These are half-way houses of the holy, where your soul can be stuck between planes for a temporary eternity. Best way to avoid this is to go to a church that has never heard of them.

The choice is obvious when put that way, of course; but a lot of people have trouble deciding and if you can't make up your mind by the time of the last trump, you go to Hell anyway. An angel named Gideon blows the last trump. Which, as any bridge player will tell you, can lead to your partner committing a Cardinal Sin. Not that any jury in the world would convict them. In fact, you'll note that Gideon has been assigned to the ignominious task of placing Bibles in motel rooms.

Fortunately, God, when not otherwise occupied with making little green apples and rain in Indianapolis is said to have devised methods for getting ringside tables in Heaven and avoiding off-season bookings in Hell. The best bet being Grace. No, not Grace Jones. I knew some oddwad would come up with that. Get serious, dammit, we're talking about your immoral soul here. No, we refer to Amazing Grace, the only kind with any real pull in the hereafter. So better figure out what you're here after or you'll be here after the last trump.

So, which church to attend? There are two main flavors in this country: Catholic and Protestant. Jews don't go to church--they go to synagogues. Besides, you have to watch what you say about Jews or you'll get in trouble. Crucified, maybe even. So suffice it to say that Jews eat kosher food, live in Ghettos, and are all trying to move to Zion (which ought to thrill the National Park Service to death.)

Catholics are strong on pomp, circumstance and multiphasic mindfucks. For instance, it is possible for Catholics to sin by despair. In other words (and you'll need to quit your infernal woolgathering and follow this closely) if you totally lose hope of heaven and feel you are too despicable a sinner to ever get it together, you have, in effect, low-rated the powers of Grace and therefore (you're gonna love this) committed ANOTHER SIN. Makes Catch 22 look small caliber, doesn't it?

Another theological kneeslapper--the words of the Pope (ex catheter) are infallible. Some dimbulb Pope in one of the less inspired centuries declared that this was not so, but it was later decided that (you guessed it) that pope was mistaken; actually a pope cannot be mistaken. Catholic churches are good for people who like Dungeons and Dragons...or lots of period props and costumes.

Protestant churches, on the other hand are somewhat disorganized, like most protesters. The original sect were the Lutherans, named after Martin Luther the king of the protest thing. God knows what he had to protest in those days. Catholics, mostly. But it also might have been something called the Diet of Worms, which is also understandable.

Then there are Baptists, who celebrate belief by holding people underwater. This is said to create the belief that one is being drowned and may have something to do with the rise of Credence Clearwater Revival. Whereas Catholics believe in celibacy of clergy, Baptists believe in celibacy for EVERYONE. And no dancing, card playing or cosmetics, if you please. Baptists girls, who believe they are already damned for having danced, can have refreshingly relaxed attitudes towards further explorations of Sin, by the way.

Methodism was started by Stanislovsky, and emphasizes method, as opposed to madness. Decended from Calvinists and Hobbsians, Methodists believe in the doctrine of the elect (even after elections) and in predestination (even without reservations). They have nothing to do with methadrine, methadone, or Calvin Klein. Neither do Baptists. Episcopalians are formal and tight-assed, and generally called "High Church" by those not yet hip to Rastafarians and Mormons.

Mormons, in fact, are also known as the LSD church; the only American-made church and it shows. These knuckleheads were wandering around the the desert trying to escape the problems caused by having more than

wife (which right off shows you they were a few bricks shy of a load) and, as you might guess, starving. Eating whatever shrubs or cactus they might find in the desert. You get my drift? Suddenly they have a big vision of some Indians giving them some tablets and a bunch of Kosmic Trooths. Does this sound familiar? Or did you sleep through the sixties? And the best part is, their main dude is called Moroni. They got into Moronic things like building temples to seagulls, forming the Moron Tabernacle Choir and coming on with the Osmond Brothers. Mormons are sobersided, chaste and tenacious. They will not intermarry with Catholics (for fear of ending up with basements full of Original Sin).

The thing is, Mormonism works. It's probably the religion you'd want your kids to have--especially if they're girls. Check it out. Get those Indians to lay some tablets on you and if you start seeing seagulls, say "Jonathon Livingston, I presume."

There is also a smorgasbord of smaller, one-trick churches available for special needs. Seventh Day Adventists, for instance, have church on Saturday--a good bet for NFL fans. There are Christian Scientists, who believe in prayer instead of Doctors (it's also your only hope against lawyers); Muslims, who beleive Salman Rushdie's life is worth \$2 million; Quakers, who don't beleive in war; and Budhists, who don't even beleive in reality.

Or, you can just pick a church by the music. Black Protestant churches are best; they've got great choirs, a lot of soul, and most of all, they've got rhythm. Unlike Catholics, which is probably why there are so damned many Catholics. You can also choose a church with a big, impressive pipe organ, but there is actually no proven relationship between organ size and pleasure.

There is a certain etiquette in church-going. Tip the ushers for a seat up close, on the left so you can see the pianist's hands. Specify Apocalypse or Non-Apocalypse section. When they pass the plate for money, try not to take too much; there is often barely enough to go around. Many churchs have little slips of paper in the seats. Write song requests on these and hand them to the ushers so they can take them to the organists. Periodically everyone will stand up and start singing songs you've never heard of. Just fake it with anything approp[riate you know. "Stairway to Heaven" is a natural, but would be in poor taste sung backwards. Say something to the preacher on the way out to show him you stayed awake

through his sermon. Let him know you share his concerns about current immorality, but don't offer to give demonstrations. Don't be too cute--ecclesiastics almost never say things like, "Let's do communion."

Religion provides the opportunity to profit from the thoughts of a unique blend of wise, loving saints and dangerous, genocidal crackpots. In recent years, it has lost prestige; people preferring to believe in politics, nature, magic, and science--disciplines even more dangerous, fascist, lethal and loony. Church still appeals to those with more confidence in God than their senators, shrinks or bank accounts. There are no screaming blue messiahs, black sabbaths or white weddings; no first causes, second comings or third worldisms--just folks hooked on a feeling and high on believing. So, until next week, may the good lord bless your pointy little head.