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**CONTESTING THE DOMINANT CULTURE?
THE PROMISE KEEPERS AND AGLOW INTERNATIONAL
PARACHURCH MOVEMENTS**

In this essay I will focus on two contemporary Christian parachurch movements: one, Aglow International, directed at women, and the other, the Promise Keepers (PK), at men. Although the movements came into existence at different times in the second part of the 20th century, aim at different gender groups and vary in their main focus and certain forms of activities, they have a similar set of goals: the rejuvenation of the spiritual life of an individual through submitting one's life to Christ, moral improvement, strengthening family bonds, celebrating gender specificity and finding comfort in belonging to a community of like-minded believers. Both these religious groups stress the need to reinforce the Christian faith, promote conservative morality and advocate a return to the "traditional" family model; but at the same time they accommodate to the mainstream culture they seem to oppose. They are against what they perceive as the dangers of contemporary American culture: excessive individualism and preoccupation with the self, the corruptive influence of the media on morality, the decline of family and community bonds and the dissolution of traditional gender roles. Both PK men and Aglow women believe that in order to improve the situation, change must start in the heart and an individual should stop blaming others for his/her own failures and take responsibility for his/her own life. What is important, individual transformation is best sustained by belonging to a religious community of people of different ages and backgrounds, as "We no longer have the luxury of being

raised by an extended family.”¹ Both the Promise Keepers and Aglow advocate adherence to biblical principles and a return to traditional values and gender roles, and are hence seen by many as “backwards” and even a threat to liberal American culture. However, in certain elements of both their doctrine and practices they can serve as an example of not only resistance but also conformity to the very culture they seem to oppose. In this essay I will highlight these very moments of tension between the need to challenge liberal culture from a conservative position and apparent adaptation to the very culture’s contemporary modes.

The Promise Keepers

The Promise Keepers is a religious movement which is much better known to the general public than Aglow, as the mass rallies of Christian men gathering at sports stadiums and marching to Washington for the spectacular “Stand in the Gap” event on the Mall received much media coverage in the 1990s. The Promise Keepers, due to their public visibility, also proved to be an attractive subject for scholarly analysis: for example the 2000 issue of “Sociology of Religion” was almost solely devoted to the study of this particular group.²

The movement was launched in 1990 in Boulder, Colorado by Bill McCartney, a former Catholic who had switched to the charismatic Vineyard movement. Professionally a renowned college football coach, McCartney envisioned mass gatherings of Christian men in sports stadiums coming together for worship and bonding, intending to revive their faith and bring a positive change to their families and communities. The movement quickly grew, reaching its peak in 1998, when 450,000 men gathered at stadium and arena conferences across the United States. The PK official website states that the movement has directly reached over five and a half million men since its beginning in 1990.³

According to Rhys H. Williams, a sociologist of religion, the Promise Keepers movement is “a new phenomenon – men coming to terms with their own vulnerabilities and responsibilities.”⁴ In *The Power of a Promise Kept*, the first PK president Randy Philips enumerates the reasons why men join the movement:

¹ E. Burroughs, *A Garden Path to Mentoring: Planting Your Life in Another and Releasing the Fragrance of Christ*, (Birmingham 1997), quoted in M. Cagney, *Good News for Women? Inspired by Promise Keepers, Upeat for Women Are Flourishing While Avoiding Divisive Issues*, “Christianity Today” 1998, June 4.

² “Sociology of Religion” 2000, Vol. 61, No. 1. Recent publications on the subject include J. Newton, *Form Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men’s Movement*, Lanham 2004; J. P. Bartkowski, *The Promise Keepers: Servants, Soldiers, and Godly Men*, New Brunswick 2004; G. N. Lundskow, *Awakening to an Uncertain Future: A Case Study of the Promise Keepers*, New York 2002; *Promise Keepers and the New Masculinity*, ed. R. H. Williams, Lanham 2001.

³ *About Us: Overview*, www.promisekeepers.org/about, [2007, December 20].

⁴ R. H. Williams, *Introduction: Promise Keepers: A Comment on Religion and Social Movements*, “Sociology of Religion” 2000, Vol. 61, No. 1.

- They desire a deep friendship with other men, but they don't know how to start the process.
- They try to balance their priorities, but they feel trapped by circumstances they can't change.
- They want deeper relationships with their fathers and children, but they don't know how to break negative patterns of communication.
- They face tough decisions of conscience and they feel they have no one in whom they can confide.
- They muddle through marriage knowing their wives are unhappy, but they don't know what to do about it.
- They think about bigger questions of life, like "Why am I here?" but are too busy to search for the answers.⁵

PK members see contemporary American culture as undergoing a process of moral decline, due to moral relativism, the negative influence of the media (violence, pornography, showing negative representations of fatherhood), changes in traditional gender roles, a crisis in the family reflected in high divorce rates,⁶ the spread of various addictions and racism. They are especially concerned with the fact that many contemporary American men have failed as husbands, fathers, community members and citizens.

PK members believe that change cannot be effectively introduced at the level of social institutions; it must start in the heart and mind. The most important step is to accept Jesus Christ as one's savior, take responsibility for one's life by admitting sins and failures, repent, and work continuously on self-improvement. To become "a Man of Integrity" an individual should accept and realize in his life the Seven Promises to God, other men, the family, community and church.⁷ PK le-

⁵ B. Bright, E. Cole, J. C. Dobson, *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, Colorado Springs 1994, quoted in: J. P. Bloch, *The New and Improved Clint Eastwood: Change and Persistence in Promise Keepers Self-Help Literature*, "Sociology of Religion" 2000, Vol. 61, No. 1, p. 15.

⁶ The divorce rate in 1990 was 47%, 42% in 2000 and 37% in 2004, Divorce Rates by State, 1990–2004, www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0923080.html, [accessed 2007, December 20]. Newest statistics indicate 36% divorce rate in 2007: Eldridge RI, Sutton PD, *Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for January 2007*, "National Vital Statistics Reports" 2007, Vol. 56, No. 1; www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr56/nvsr56_01.pdf, [accessed 2007, December 20].

⁷ The official PK site lists the following promises:

Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper

PROMISE 1

A Promise Keeper is committed to honoring Jesus Christ through worship, prayer and obedience to God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit.

PROMISE 2

A Promise Keeper is committed to pursuing vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises.

PROMISE 3

A Promise Keeper is committed to practicing spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity.

PROMISE 4

A Promise Keeper is committed to building strong marriages and families through love, protection and biblical values.

PROMISE 5

A Promise Keeper is committed to supporting the mission of his church by honoring and praying for his pastor, and by actively giving his time and resources.

aders argue that contemporary American culture would benefit from a return to the traditional model of masculinity and men would benefit from worship in the “masculine context.” Therefore PK participants gather at stadium and arena events for men, youth and clergy, where they pray and worship together. During these rallies Promise Keepers practice male-bonding, freely expressing their emotions, which may be articulated by jumping, hugging each other and crying. At such meetings conversions are frequent but participants are encouraged to go back to their original church or parish and continue the work by meeting in small men-only groups which are not only devotional in character but also largely therapeutic.

The Promise Keepers have been a spectacular movement, gaining a lot of supporters, but also receiving fierce criticism. The critique has come from both the Left and the Right, but browsing through the internet and press articles one may come to the conclusion that the PK has been most fiercely attacked by groups connected with Christian fundamentalism. Fundamentalists fear that despite the claims of PK leaders that members should deepen their faith by taking part in the life of their local congregation, the movement will draw believers away from their churches and involve them in sect-like activities.⁸ Attention was drawn to the over-inclusive character of the organization, affinity to the charismatic movement,⁹ little stress on doctrine and especially welcoming Catholics to join.¹⁰ Fundamentalist writers were also wary of the stress on small group activities and the fact that every PK member should be held accountable to a mentor, who has the right to inquire not only on the subject of one’s fight with his afflictions (about which a wife does not necessarily have to be informed) but also on financial matters.¹¹ One of the books initially endorsed by the PK movement, *The Masculine Journey* by Robert Hicks,¹² was especially targeted because of its borrowings from Jungian psychology (which

PROMISE 6

A Promise Keeper is committed to reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity.

PROMISE 7

A Promise Keeper is committed to influencing his world, being obedient to the Great Commandment (see: Mark 12: 30–31) and the Great Commission (see: Matthew 28: 19–20). Promise Keepers, 2007, Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper, www.promisekeepers.org/about/7promises, [accessed 2007, December 22].

⁸ A. Chaitkin, *Promise Keepers’ Mind Control Techniques*, „Educate Yourself” 2004, June 11, educate-yourself.org/mc/promisekeepersmctechniques11jun04.shtml, [accessed 2005, June 28]. On the critique of the PK’s ambivalent relationship with local churches see G. Rugh, *Promise Keepers: A Pastor’s Perspective*, Lincoln 1998, pp. 19–20; *Promise Keepers*, „Watch Unto Prayer” 1997, www.watchpair.com/promise.html, [accessed 2005, June 28]; and A. Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion*, New York–London 2003, p. 60–61.

⁹ *Promise Keepers: Ecumenical “Macho-Men” for Christ?*, “Biblical Discernment Ministries” 1999, No. 8, www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Psychology/pk/pk.htm, [accessed 2005, June 28]; *Many Christian Leaders Warn of Promise Keepers*, “Way of Life”, www.wayoflife.org/special/spec0022.htm, [accessed 2005, June 28]; R. G. Colas, *Promise Keeper Assembly*, “National Mall” 1997, October 4; *An Eye Witness Report*, May 15, 2003, www.gpp-5grace.com/graceproclamator/pp0498pkew.htm, [accessed 2008, January 7].

¹⁰ *Promise Keepers: Ecumenical “Macho-Men” for Christ?...*; *Many Christian Leaders...*

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² R. Hicks, *The Masculine Journey: Understanding the Six Stages of Manhood: A Promise Keepers Study Guide*, Colorado Springs 1993.

is considered by Christian fundamentalists as occult), misinterpretations of the Bible, a lax attitude towards homosexuality and a generally New Age air.¹³ On the other hand the PK has been interpreted by many feminists, especially the National Organization for Women, as the “patriarchal backlash”, or “patriarchy with a human face”, especially because of the statement of one of the PK leaders announcing that men have to reclaim their role as family leaders.¹⁴ The PK has also been criticized because it does not approve of abortion and gay rights (here the statements and actions of the PK founder Bill McCartney were especially significant) and many of the movement members support the Republican agenda.¹⁵ The movement was accused both of being too political and, because of its focus on “the change of the individual heart”, not political enough. It was also accused of being intolerant of gays but at the same time too understanding.¹⁶ Moreover, certain PK materials and teachings were deemed to be dangerous to true masculinity or promoting feminization of spirituality, as members were often instructed to express their emotions and not be afraid of their “feminine side”.¹⁷ Academic literature on the subject presents a more complicated picture: among the authors of the books analyzing the phenomenon we may find a male author criticizing the PK for its patriarchal attitude and a feminist one positively evaluating the movement’s effort to transform the meaning of manliness so that it better serves the family.¹⁸ Some newspapers (such as the “Charlotte News-Observer” or the “Dallas Morning-News”) have presented the Promise Keepers as sincere, religious men trying to be better husbands, fathers and citizens, and noted that PK members’ wives were thrilled with their men’s transformation, or even send them to PK meetings themselves.¹⁹

My argument is that the Promise Keepers both oppose and adapt to contemporary sociocultural trends, which is visible on the levels of the ideology of the leaders and the behavioral practices of “rank and file” members. This is especially perceptible in the PK use of popular psychology, its attitude towards gender and race, its attempt to be a movement which does not offend anybody’s feelings and its skillful employment of popular culture formats and the new media.

¹³ M. and D. Bobgan, *Promise Keepers & PsychoHeresy* (Including: *Response to Promise Keeper’s Support of The Masculine Journey*), “PsychoHeresy Awareness Ministries”, July–August 1996, www.pamweb.org/pk&psych.html, [accessed 2007, January 7]; *Promise Keepers: Ecumenical “Macho-Men” for Christ?...*; A. Chaitkin, *Promise Keepers’ Mind Control Techniques...*

¹⁴ *Promise Keepers and the New Masculinity...*, Introduction, p. 1.

¹⁵ National Organization for Women, *Myths and Facts about the Promise Keepers*, www.now.org/issues/right/promise/mythfact.html, [accessed 2005, June 28]; D. D. Hackett, *Promise Keepers and the Culture Wars*, “Religion in the News” 1998, Vol. 1, No. 1.

¹⁶ *Promise Keepers and the New Masculinity...*

¹⁷ A. Dager, *Promise Keepers: Is What You See What You Get?*, Redmord 1994; H. Pivec, *The Feminization of the Church*, “Biola Connections” 2006, Spring, www.socalscb.org/The%20Feminization%20of%20the%20Church.pdf, [accessed 2008, January 8].

¹⁸ M. A. Messner, *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements*, Thousand Oaks 1997; J. Newton, *From Panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the Men’s Movement*, Lanham 2004.

¹⁹ *Promise Keepers and the New Masculinity...*, Introduction, pp. 1–2; D. D. Hackett, *Promise Keepers and the Culture Wars...*

Strategies for a Successful Promise Keeper

In fact, as Jon P. Bloch states in his analysis of the books endorsed by the movement, “PK literature is no different from mainstream pop-psychology”²⁰. The influence of popular psychology is visible not only in the titles of PK workbooks (such as *Romancing Your Child’s Heart* or *The Married Guy’s Guide to Great Sex*²¹), or the content of the books, but also in the form. The self-help books and study guides used by the PK focus on the “here and now problems” of “the average Joe”: difficult family matters, problems in communication, overcoming various addictions, fighting with different traumas from the past and difficulties in expressing and controlling emotions. Although the literature makes frequent references to the Bible, this source is often treated in such a way that the reader can utilize the biblical teaching to solve his immediate problems. The men from the Bible are often presented in a contemporary context: for example Saint Paul is referred to as “Somebody who’s willing to share his successes and his failures – in other words, what he’s learning in the laboratory of life”²² and Jesus is depicted as a leader of a ‘small group’ teaching his disciples the value of teamwork.²³ Much more popular than biblical stories are ‘real life’ examples of men trying to come to grips with such problems as the growing distance in a marriage, job insecurity, and difficult relationships with one’s father or children. Much like in popular self-help guides attempting to gain quasi-scientific legitimacy, PK literature introduces different typologies and categorizations and stresses the credentials of the authors presented as experts because of their professional and academic background or experience or both. Moreover, the books often contain exercises for individual or small group use and questions for general discussion.²⁴ Another example of PK practices being attuned to the contemporary culture of self-improvement are the “accountability groups”. These groups meet about once a week in local churches; they consist of a small number of men only (5 to 15) and have a largely therapeutic character. Apart from praying together the participants discover their “feminine side” or “inner child”, discuss unresolved traumas such as violence in the family or child abuse, learn better communication skills, discuss how to fight addictions to various substances, infidelity and masturbation, and practice male bonding.²⁵ Such a focus on the personal problems of a contemporary male in the religious context is nothing new, as one author

²⁰ P. Bloch, *The New and Improved Clint Eastwood...*, p. 15.

²¹ M. Swan, D. Biebel, *Romancing Your Child’s Heart*, Sisters OR 2002; C. Penner, J. Penner, *The Married Guy Guide to Great Sex: Building a Passionate, Intimate and Fun Love Life*, Carol Stream 2004.

²² B. Bright, E. Cole, J. C. Dobson, *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, quoted in: P. Bloch, *The New and Improved Clint Eastwood...*, p. 18; G. Gorsuch, D. Schaffer, *Brothers! Calling Men into Vital Relationships: A Small Group Discussion Guide*, quoted: *ibidem*.

²³ G. Gorsuch, D. Schaffer, *Brothers! Calling Men into Vital Relationships: A Small Group Discussion Guide*, Colorado Springs 1994.

²⁴ P. Bloch, *The New and Improved Clint Eastwood...*

²⁵ A. Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion...*, pp. 62–63.

claims “the American religious experience – liberal or conservative – historically has featured a present-tense orientation.”²⁶ However, the preoccupation of the Promise Keepers with the idea of self-improvement coupled with the extensive use of popular psychology shows the group’s adaptation to the preoccupation with the self characteristic of the contemporary American culture, so aptly described in such classic books as *The Culture of Narcissism* and *Habits of the Heart*.²⁷

The PK against Prejudice

Although the Promise Keepers movement is rooted in conservative Christianity, it tries not only to cut across denominational lines but also to attract members from different social groups, a trend reflected in “a growing racial, ethnic and economic diversity among the Promise Keepers leaders and participants.”²⁸

Bill McCartney recollects that during the first ever PK conference, in Boulder, Colorado in 1991, he noticed that the crowd in front of him was almost entirely white. Feeling that the Holy Spirit was prompting him he declared that if the following year “we fail to gather a fair representation of all God’s people, God will not join us.”²⁹ Although this mention of the racial issue resulted in some hate mail, and subsequent messages about the necessity of racial reconciliation were often greeted by silence on the part of the PK audience, McCartney never backed off his original statement.³⁰ Moreover, PK speakers and authors often stress the need to overcome racism, claiming that this has spiritual roots.

However, it is not only spiritual means such as prayer and biblical teachings that are used to overcome the problem; there are attempts being made to gain the support of black churches, black speakers are invited to meetings and every PK member is encouraged to develop one-to-one relationships with men from different racial or ethnic groups (and also men from a different social class). Although PK leaders stress the spiritual and individual causes of racism, many PK participants locate them in a broader context of historical circumstances, suppressed fear of otherness and economic barriers.³¹ Even though some PK members express their frustration at what they perceive as too strong an emphasis on the racial issue and

²⁶ P. Bloch, *The New and Improved Clint Eastwood...*, p. 14.

²⁷ Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, London 1991; R. N. Bellah et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Berkeley 1985.

²⁸ B. McCartney, D. Holbrook, *Sold Out: Becoming Man Enough to Make a Difference*, quoted in: “Christianity Today” 1998, No. 6; G. Smalley, J. T. Trent, *The Hidden Value of a Man: Created to Lead, Empowered to Succeed*, quoted in: W. H. Lockhart, ‘We Are One Life’, *But Not Of One Gender Ideology: Unity, Ambiguity, and the Promise Keepers*”, “Sociology of Religion” 2000, Vol. 61, No. 1.

²⁹ B. McCartney, D. Holbrook, *Sold Out: Becoming Man Enough to Make a Difference*, Nashville 1997.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ L. Dean Allen II, *Promise Keepers and Racism: Frame Resonance as an Indicator of Organizational Vitality*, “Sociology of Religion” 2000, Vol. 61, No. 1.

complain about the fact that too many Spanish songs are sung at PK gatherings, the movement persists in its efforts to embrace men from outside the white middle class. For example, at the Clergy Conference in 1996 there appeared on the podium representatives not only of different ethnic and racial minorities, but also deaf persons and Messianic Jews, and public apologies and prayers of repentance to other races featured too.³² At PK rallies musical styles are chosen in such a way as to reflect the diverse racial, ethnic and age diversity among the members.³³ Moreover, PK promotes unity across denominations: it not only invites all types of conservative Protestants (fundamentalists, charismatics, confessional churches and mainline evangelicals), but Catholics too, and in 1997 the PK statement of faith was modified in order to accommodate to the doctrine of this group.³⁴ The PK also stopped endorsing, in response to fiery criticism from conservative evangelicals, the controversial *Masculine Journey* by Hicks, although at the beginning PK members were given a free copy.

The efforts of the PK movement to accommodate different minorities can be interpreted as stemming from the leaders' wish to gain the broadest support possible, yet they also demonstrate how the organization adapts to the contemporary climate of political correctness and understands that in the USA even a religious movement with a conservative background has to function in a highly diversified society.

The Issue of Gender

The PK stand on the issue of gender equality is one of the most complicated issues to be addressed in analyzing the movement. On the one hand the PK seem to support the concept of 'masculine Christianity' and propagate the biblical model of the husband as the leader of the family. On the other, as one sociologist of religion studying the phenomenon of the PK indicated, "the ideals to which PK men strive often reflect the influence of women in Christianity as well as the influence of feminism on US society."³⁵ For example, William Lockhart found in his examination of conservative Protestant books on domestic masculinity four dominant approaches: the traditionalist, the psychological archetypes, the biblical feminist, and practical counseling. However, when concentrating on PK literature he discovered that it fits only the last category, namely "pragmatic counseling".³⁶ This approach presupposes that it is not that important to clearly define what the meanings of masculinity and femininity should be or who should hold most of the power in a family; the essen-

³² W. H. Lockhart, *We Are One Life*'..., p. 83.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

³⁵ P. Bloch, *The New and Improved Clint Eastwood*..., p. 25.

³⁶ W. H. Lockhart, *We Are One Life*'..., pp. 73–92.

tial thing is to develop fulfilling relationships and learn how to solve problems. Bill McCartney believes that the quality of a man as a husband is reflected in his wife's face, and if there is no contentment in her eyes, the man has to admit his failure, ask his spouse for forgiveness and work on improvement. PK leaders often claim that they are not in favor of male supremacy in a marriage, but of "mutual submission". For instance, Smalley and Trent, in their best-selling *The Hidden Value of a Man*, focus not on the "positional" power of a man as head of the household but on his "personal" power: the ability "to do whatever it takes to strengthen our families and find the help we need to overcome any strains in our marriages."³⁷ Another PK writer, Gary Oliver, states that traditional "myths of masculinity" have created "a generation of men who define themselves by the negative."³⁸ Instead he advocates emotionally expressive masculinity through which men can learn "how to be human, how to feel, how to love, how to be better husbands, fathers and friends."³⁹ Although PK men are challenged to reclaim their role as family leaders, they are also taught the value of sacrifice and humility. Following the biblical example they are encouraged to wash their wives' feet in order to symbolically express the idea of leadership through servanthood. *The Power of a Promise Kept* presents the example of Sam, who tried for years to gain admittance to a medical school. When his dream finally came true he realized that undertaking the studies would take too much time away from his family. Supported by his PK group he decided to give up the education he had dreamt of.⁴⁰ A similar example was provided by Bill McCartney himself, who in 1993 broke a lucrative coaching contract to devote more time to his marriage⁴¹. Ten years later he resigned from the presidency of the PK movement in order to take care of his ailing wife⁴².

Arlie Russell Hochschild argued that we are experiencing a stalled gender revolution, as women have changed but men have failed to adjust.⁴³ Surprisingly, it seems that the "new man" – compassionate, not afraid to express his emotions, able to sacrifice for the family – is emerging, but from a direction the feminists would perhaps not expect – the Christian Right. However, the PK still hold to the idea of

³⁷ G. Smalley, J. T. Trent, *The Hidden Value of a Man...*, p. 14.

³⁸ G. Oliver, *Real Men Have Feelings Too*, (Chicago 1993), quoted in: J. P. Bartkowski, *Breaking Walls, Raising Fences: Masculinity, Intimacy and Accountability among the Promise Keepers*, "Sociology of Religion" 2000, No. 1, p. 37.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ G. Lewis, *The Power of a Promise Kept*, (Colorado Springs 1995), quoted in: P. Bloch, *The New and Improved Clint Eastwood...*, p. 19.

⁴¹ L. Goldstein, *A Marriage Gone Bad Struggles for Redemption*, "The New York Times" 1997, October 29, www.query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F01E7DE1331F93AA15753C1A961958260&sec=&spn=&pagewanted=all, [accessed 2008, January 9].

⁴² B. McCartney, *People – president of Promise Keepers resigns to care for ailing wife*, Brief Article, "Christian Century" 2003, October 4, www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_20_120?pnun=2&opg=109132344, [accessed 2008, January 9].

⁴³ A. R. Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and Revolution at Home*, New York 1989; A. R. Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*, Los Angeles–London 2003, pp. 28–29.

male leadership within the family, a concept which will not please many liberally minded women.

The PK's accommodation to popular culture

Apart from the issues discussed above, the accommodation of the PK to dominant culture is visible in the use they make of popular culture formats and the new media. During their stadium and arena events PK celebrities deliver inspirational speeches, popular contemporary music of different genres is played (members can purchase special CDs prior to the event so that they can join in the singing, and download sample music from the PK website), huge screens are used and the atmosphere is generally upbeat. A visitor to the PK website, apart from gaining information about the history and mission of the PK, can learn about the events scheduled, see where he can find a small group in his region, or visit the PK online store where various items can be purchased: PK apparel (T-shirts, head gear, sweaters, vests), books, CDs and DVDs and various gadgets such as pens, mugs, calendars, posters and even "prayer dog tag necklaces".⁴⁴ Recently members have also been able to listen to the PK "Family Night Guy" radio program⁴⁵ or download PK radio and video content on their iPods.⁴⁶ In its usage of pop culture formats and the newest technology, little stress on doctrine and reliance on psychology, the PK movement resembles the contemporary megachurches whose leaders try to attract as many members as possible, regardless of their denomination, race or ethnicity. Moreover, both these phenomena illustrate well the adoption of contemporary American religiosity to the modern culture in which they function, which was well described in Alan's Wolfe recent book *The Transformation of American Religion*.⁴⁷

Aglow International Fellowship

In contrast to the Promise Keepers, the Aglow International parachurch organization for women has received little media attention, and there are also not many academic studies devoted to the subject. Moreover, the Aglow website fades in comparison with the state-of-the-art PK one and does not provide much information. This comparative lack of recognition of the women's movement stems from the fact that the Promise Keepers have managed to become visible in the public sphere, while Aglow, despite its international reach, to a large extent still operates in the private one. Pentecostally based, Aglow is much older than the PK; it started

⁴⁴ Promise Keepers, 2005, <http://www.promisekeepers.org/genr.12>, [accessed 2005, October 21].

⁴⁵ www.promisekeepers.org/family-night-guy, [accessed 2007, December 22].

⁴⁶ www.promisekeepers.org/podcast, [accessed 2007, December 22].

⁴⁷ A. Wolfe, *The Transformation...*

in 1967 as a women's variant of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship, a Pentecostal/charismatic organization.⁴⁸ In time Aglow became an independent, interdenominational moment, promoting evangelism and Christian values. Today, Aglow is one of the biggest international organizations of Christian women; it has chapters in both Americas, Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Aglow fellowships can be found in countries as diverse as Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Burkina Faso. In the USA there are about 1,100 Aglow local groups, in which about 20,000 women participate.⁴⁹ Aglow women meet in large groups to worship or to hear a speech and in small groups to pray, study and support each other, and also organize conferences and retreats. They reach out to single mothers, women in inner cities, prisons, senior homes, mental institutions, and donate money to various charitable causes. Moreover, they aim to recreate community bonds by initiatives such as "Love Your Neighbor", where Aglow participants are encouraged to befriend and pray for their neighbors.⁵⁰

Aglow's success in the United States can be at least partly attributed to one of the reasons which contributed to the popularity of the PK, namely the need for social bonding, which is especially hard to achieve in contemporary society with its fast pace of life, high mobility, dissolution of local communities and decline of the extended family model. In such circumstances it is hard for many men and women to receive support and nurture outside of the close family and intimate relationships. Movements such as Aglow or the PK offer their participants a sense of belonging to a larger community of like-minded individuals and a purpose and meaning in life based on common religious beliefs.

Aglow, like the PK, both challenges and reflects the culture in which it functions. These processes are visible mainly in two areas: the change in Aglow's doctrine of male spiritual leadership in the family, and the reinterpretation of the doctrine by Aglow's members as the movement reacted to the second wave of feminism and the influence of the therapeutic culture.⁵¹

Marie Griffith, the author of extensive research on Aglow women presented in scholarly essays⁵² and the book *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, claims that the movement's participants reframe the doctrine

⁴⁸ www.aglow.org/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=13, [accessed 2007, December 22].

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ For general information about Aglow see the official site of Aglow International, www.aglow.org; and N. L. Eiesland, review of *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* by M. R. Griffith, "Sociology of Religion" 1998, No. 4, www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0SOR/is_4_59/ai_53590314#continue, [accessed 2005, October 23]; M. S. Van Leeuwen, review of *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* by M. R. Griffith, "Theology Today" 1999, April, www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3664/is_1999904/ai_n9948693/print, [accessed 2005, October 10].

⁵¹ S. Van Leeuwen, review of *God's Daughters*...

⁵² M. Griffith, *Submissive Wives, Wounded Daughters and Female Soldiers: Prayer and Christian Womanhood in Women's Aglow Fellowship*, [in:] *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. D. D. Hall, Princeton 1997, eadem, *The Affinities Between Feminists and Evangelical Women*, "The Chronicle of Higher Education" 1997, October 17.

of wifely submission in such a way that they draw from it such psychological benefits as improved self-esteem and the feeling of empowerment.⁵³ The testimonies found in the “Aglow” magazine analyzed by Griffith show that women who had experienced suffering from abusive fathers and disengaged husbands and were often at the brink of despair found comfort in prayer, submitting to the will of God and accepting the family headship of their husbands.⁵⁴ These decisions to submit, followed in many cases by action, led to a positive transformation of family life giving the women a sense of having the power to change the negative *status quo*. In Aglow testimonies and literature even women who are married to men who are non-believers are encouraged to submit to the will of their husbands in worldly matters, pray and leave the space for God to act. After all no human relation can be ideal and utterly fulfilling: the perfect relationship, love and nurturance is to be achieved in relating oneself to God and Jesus Christ. Another source of support is to be found in the “family” of Aglow women often referred to as “sisters”. The message of Aglow is similar to that of the PK, in that it stresses not political or institutional change but individual transformation, as in the famous 1970s slogan “You can’t change the world, change yourself!” The women testifying often realize that they cannot change the circumstances they are in (such as the personality of their husband, number of children or a traumatic past), but by changing their attitudes and taking responsibility for their lives they may turn from victims into victors. A changed attitude can even help to cope with such trivial matters as boring chores: treated as worship they may bring pleasure and a sense of fulfillment.⁵⁵

In the example above the spiritual is mixed with the therapeutic, as often happens in the case of contemporary American religious movements. Aglow, again similarly to the PK, relies on self-help books and small group activities to help members cope with the problems of everyday life. Much like PK books, Aglow literature provides advice on how to improve one’s marriage and cope with childhood traumas.⁵⁶ Much attention is paid to boosting women’s self-esteem, which can also be done by taking care of one’s appearance, make-up, hair-do and attractive clothes. Wolfe notes that in 1992 Aglow organized an outreach program entitled “Ladies, It’s Your Day”, where before meeting with a prayer counselor women were offered a free appointment at a beauty parlor. This is especially significant when we take into account the fact that Pentecostals traditionally considered not only too much interest in one’s appearance but also Christmas trees, Valentines, visits to the zoo, and meeting acquaintances on a Sunday as sinful.⁵⁷ Paying attention to one’s looks

⁵³ Eadem, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, Berkeley 2000; eadem, *Submissive Wives...*; eadem, *The Affinities Between Feminists and Evangelical Women...*

⁵⁴ Eadem, *Submissive Wives...*

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ B. Yagel, *Building Better Relationships*, Gospel Light Publications 1998; H. H. Kopp, *Daddy, Where Were You?: Healing for the Father-Deprived Daughter*, Lynwood 1991; K. C. Miller, *Healing the Angry Heart: A Strategy for Confident Mothering*, Lynwood 1984.

⁵⁷ A. Wolfe, *The Transformation...*, pp. 157–158.

reflects not only the changing approach to sin in American religion but also the accommodation of even traditional Protestantism to the cult of youth beauty and the psychological well-being.

Aglow adapts to changes not only in mainstream culture but also in other spheres. Griffith observes a shift since the mid-1980s in Aglow literature and the opinions of the movement's leaders from the doctrine of wifely submission to that of 'mutual submission'. For example, the 1985 edition of the popular Aglow Bible study *God's Daughters* contains the following statement: "submission to our husbands does not make us 'second class citizens' or those who are ranked lower on the 'totem pole' as lesser beings than the husband. As viewed by God, we have a side-to-side relationship. He looks at us as equally important but each is designed to function for His glory in his or her role."⁵⁸ Also, Aglow authors have since the 1980s had to modify their message, as a large part of their readership no longer fits the traditional wife-homemaker model, so these authors started providing advice and models for career women.⁵⁹

Ministry Watch, an independent Christian evangelical organization presenting information on financial efficiency and transparency and offering critical assessment of different ministries, suggests that Aglow's recent "focus on gender reconciliation within the Church seems to involve accepting women's ordination to pastoral ministry", which might be judged by some Christians as unbiblical. In fact, many women occupying a leadership position within the movement, including Aglow's President and CEO Jane Hansen, are ordained pastors.⁶⁰ In addition, as in case of the Promise Keepers, Aglow's ecumenical openness towards Roman Catholics might be of concern for a number of evangelical Christians. Ministry Watch is also concerned with the movement's accommodation of therapeutic culture, noting that Aglow is too much occupied with pop psychology and too little with Christian doctrine.⁶¹

Both the PK and Aglow, like the evangelical revival which started in the 1970s, are examples of a "psychoreligious culture". On the positive side it is worth noting that these movements seem to satisfy the strong need of their participants for both individual and group identity and self-esteem.⁶² They also aim at moral improvement. On the other hand, the question may arise as to whether the groups pose a threat to the achievements of liberal democratic culture. Do they represent the backwards attitudes of fundamentalist groups trying to dominate the public discourse by claiming they are the "moral majority"? As Howard L. Mencken once observed, for every complex problem there is a solution that is simple, straightfor-

⁵⁸ E. V. Goodboy, *God's Daughter: Practical Aspects of a Christians Woman's Life*, (Edmond 1985), quoted in: M. Griffith, *Submissive Wives...*, p. 188..

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ Ministry Watch.org's Summary Report on Aglow International, "Critics Might Say", www.ministry-watch.org/mw2.1/F_SumRpt.asp?EIN=237275330, [accessed 2007, December 22].

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² P. Bloch, *The New and Improved Clint Eastwood...*, p. 21.

ward and wrong.⁶³ Both the Promise Keepers and Aglow can be located within the tradition of evangelical social and moral concern. However, taking into account their stress on individual change and not political transformation at the level of institutions, it seems doubtful that these movements will have a significant impact on the present *status quo*.

⁶³ R. H. Williams, *Promise Keepers...*, Introduction, p. 1.