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Still Crazy: An Unsung Homage to the New Testament

Abstract

This article argues that the British rock-and-roll comedy *Still Crazy* (1998) is based on the New Testament similarly to the way that *Clueless* is related to Jane Austen's *Emma*, or *The Legend of Bagger Vance* is related to the *Bhagavad Gita*. A detailed comparison of the characters, settings and incidents (as well as explicit references) in the film to elements in the New Testament and related Christian traditions is offered to support this thesis. Thus, *Still Crazy* is of interest to scholars of religion and film, and is particularly useful for teaching purposes.

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Still Crazy is a British rock-and roll comedy that attracted some acclaim when it appeared in 1998, netting two Golden Globe nominations¹ and winning two Evening Standard British Film Awards.² The reviews were mixed: Roger Ebert (Chicago Sun Times) gave it three stars, calling it a "kinder, gentler version of 'This Is Spinal Tap'";³ Janet Maslin (New York Times) found it "drab," "tepid," and excessively "wistful";⁴ Edward Guthman (San Francisco Chronicle) called it "raucous and surprisingly touching";⁵ Peter Travers (Rolling Stone) remarked that while *Still Crazy* couldn't compete with the "better, brighter comedies" of 1998, it still rated as a "prime piece of entertainment."⁶ Penned by veteran comic screenwriters Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais (*The Commitments*) and directed by Brian Gibson (*What's Love Got To Do With It*), the film was not surprisingly compared to other rock-and-roll movies like *Spinal Tap* (1984), *The Commitments* (1991), *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), and *The Suburbans* (1999), but also to *The Full Monty* (1997) for its nostalgic, uplifting, bittersweet quality.⁷

It will be argued below that an important aspect of the film that has been overlooked by its many reviewers,⁸ including Christian and "family-friendly" reviews,⁹ is that it is a sort of homage to the New Testament,¹⁰ related to the Christian scriptures as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) is to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, as *Clueless* is to Austen's *Emma* (1995), or, perhaps more aptly, as *Billy Elliot* (2000) evokes Hindu mythology, or as *The Legend of Bagger Vance* updates

the *Bhagavad Gita*.¹¹ Throughout the film, characters, settings, incidents and explicit references evoke the story of Jesus and the early church in a playful, postmodern way that for the most part is irreverent without being blasphemous. As such, it is of interest to scholars of religion and film, and a particularly useful addition to the repertoire of movies for analysis in "Bible and Film" courses.¹²

Plot Summary

History teaches us that men behave wisely once they've exhausted all other alternatives. For most rock bands, the pursuit of wisdom's a low priority, compared to fame, fortune and fornication. Such a band was Strange Fruit (Hughie, *Still Crazy*).

So begins the tale of the fraught reunion of Strange Fruit, a successful '70s rock group whose flagging career came to an abrupt end at the Wisbech Rock Festival where they were struck by lightning while on stage. Twenty years later, Tony (Stephen Rea), the band's former keyboardist, reduced to refilling condom machines in Ibiza, runs into the son of the Festival's promoter, who wants to organize a revival. Tony seeks out Karen (Juliet Aubrey), a combination manager, den-mother and groupie to the band in its glory days, now a divorced single mum working in a public relations firm. Together, Tony and Karen seek out the others: the bass player Les (Jimmy Nail), now happily married but working as a roofer and

hating it; lead singer Ray (Bill Nighy), a burnt-out recovering alcoholic married to a bossy and possessive Swedish model (Helene Bergstrom), bankrupt but playing out the rock star role in his Victorian mansion; and the flatulent drummer Beano (Timothy Spall), occupying a trailer on his mother's property and living in fear of an audit by the Inland Revenue. When the band has a reunion meeting at a pub near a druids' circle, Karen sadly reveals that Brian Lovell, the lead guitarist, is missing and probably dead, like his brother Keith, the group's original lead singer. Hughie (Billy Connelly), the band's boisterous former road-dog and the movie's narrator, also joins his old friends.

Despite Brian's absence, the surviving band members decide to carry on, and hire a young, flashy guitarist named Luke (Hans Matheson) to replace Brian. The Fruits are advised to go on a comeback tour of the Netherlands, which they do, with results that range from disastrous to encouraging. Gradually, the band regains their energy, sound and confidence, but the tour is marred by infighting between Les and Ray, Ray's relapse into addiction and an accident that nearly claims his life, followed by a temporary reconciliation. After a highly successful concert in Antwerp, they are offered a record deal, but a final brawl in the studio between the band members brings rehearsals to a halt, and the members go back to their former lives.

Shortly afterward, Karen and her daughter Clare (Rachel Stirling) visit the grave of Keith, where they find flowers and a note from Brian, who, Hughie later confirms, is emotionally fragile but alive after all, and quietly living in the sanatorium where he went for rehab. Karen, still in love with ex-boyfriend Brian, and Tony, in unrequited love with Karen, seek him out, and persuade him to help bring the band back together for the big concert.

The band manages to reunite in time for the Wisbech Festival, and despite residual bitterness between Les and Ray, Brian's last-minute decision not to go on stage, and Beano's temporary disappearance, they take the stage before an irritable crowd. Ray's attempt at the first number falters, but when Tony begins to play Les's composition, "The Flame Still Burns," Les begins to sing, and is joined by Ray. To everyone's delight, Brian ventures out on stage with his guitar, and Les, Ray and Brian sing the song together, as Karen apprehensively watches the sky threatening to storm. This time, however, the lightning doesn't strike, and, according to the epilogue provided by narrator Hughie, *Strange Fruit* is a rousing success.

Theological Frame

Still Crazy begins and ends with voiceovers by the omniscient narrator Hughie, who describes himself as having "an irresistible urge to chronicle human folly." The prologue's reference to the band's preference for "fame, fortune and

fornication" over "the pursuit of wisdom," at least to a biblical scholar, strikes a vaguely scriptural note (cf. Ps. 110:10; Prov. 9:10), as does the band's name, Strange Fruit.¹³ Hughie goes on to speculate that in his opinion, the group came to grief because "God just got sick of all that seventies excess." Hughie's final narration echoes the first:

I was wrong about God; turns out he likes that seventies stuff after all, so that it didn't piss down, and they played four encores. And with the Almighty in their corner, who knows what might happen? And how will the Fruits conspire to bollocks things up this time around? We wait with bated breath!

Thus, the band's misadventures are represented as being under divine protection, to comic effect.

The film is also bracketed by two explicitly identified "signs" that encourage the Fruits to carry on in the face of seeming disaster. After the band learns of Brian's apparent death, they wander through a meadow outside the pub, and a boy herding a large flock of sheep appears over a hill. The young shepherd is carrying a ghetto blaster playing the Fruits' hit "Tequila Mockingbird" - an apparition acclaimed by Tony as "a sign - a message from the gods of rock and roll!" On the way to Antwerp after the row between Les and Ray and Ray's brush with death, the tour bus breaks down and the discouraged band is met on the road by two beautiful blond girls. One is wearing her deceased dad's faded Strange Fruit T-shirt, and she tells them that her father thought the Fruits were the best group

ever. Tony proclaims that this meeting is another sign that the band should persevere; Ray adds, "Brian sent them ... thank you Brian!"

New Testament Characters and Roles

Karen, a single mother and the departed Brian's former girlfriend, is both a Mother Mary and Mary Magdalene figure. She first appears riding down a long escalator (as, in Catholic lore, Mary periodically descends from heaven to rescue the faithful), wearing a blue shirt and tie. In Catholic religious art, blue is a colour that has been associated with the Virgin Mary since the twelfth century,¹⁴ and throughout the movie, Karen often wears a blue scarf or other blue garment. Other classic Marian tableaux are a scene of Karen cradling her sleeping daughter on the tour bus (Madonna and Child), and a flashback to the young Karen embracing an unconscious Brian (Pietà). In the poignant scene where she, like Mary Magdalene, goes to meet her beloved Brian who is alive after all, the blue scarf reaches down below her knees, like a priestly stole.¹⁵ The meeting between Karen and Brian in the garden of the sanatorium where he is working as a gardener is reminiscent of the encounter between the Magdalene and the resurrected Jesus in John 11:11-18. When Karen first catches sight of her beloved (cf. John 11:14-15), transformed by age and his battle with addiction, he is kneeling among the standing stones of a rock garden, recalling Mary Magdalene's visit to the empty tomb.¹⁶ As she and Tony leave the sanatorium, Karen reprises the Madonna role when, still wearing her

long, blue scarf, she breaks into tears (Mater Dolorosa). In the final concert scene, as lightening appears in the sky and the clouds threaten to burst, Karen shows her special relationship to the divine by addressing the heavens with an affectionate "Don't you dare!"

Tony, the keyboardist, plays the role of the Beloved Disciple among the band members. He is frequently paired with Karen (cf. John 19:25-27, where Jesus exhorts the Disciple to adopt Mary as his mother), and is chastely in love with her (at one point, he assures her that he is living in "a profound state of celibacy"). Together with Karen, he brings the band back together, alternatively exhorting, encouraging and coddling the other band members. It is Tony whom Karen sends to comfort Ray after their first, unsuccessful concert in Holland; in the awkwardly touching scene, the two middle-aged men express their love for each other, with a cross on a wall-mounted medical box hovering in the background. Throughout the film, Tony wears a cross around his neck.

The perennially bickering Les and Ray are the Peter and Paul figures of the piece. Working-class Les is an original member of the band, devoted to Brian and his brother Keith, the former lead singer, and to the straight-ahead rock-and-roll style of his idols. After one of Les's fights with Ray, Tony scolds, "You know what your problem is, man - you see yourself as the keeper of the fucking flame - for all these reasons your anger - Ray's style, Ray's taste, Ray's lyrics . . ." Ray, an upper-

class wannabe, joined the Fruits as a replacement for Keith, whom he never met. Ray's Glam Rock persona is radically different from Keith's; he deals with his addictions with a combination of AA meetings and New Age spirituality. He is repeatedly shown posing in front of lavatory mirrors in increasingly outrageous costumes, nervously reassuring himself that he's "The Man."

The comparison between Peter and Paul is patent. Peter the fisherman, personally called by Jesus, Rock of the Church (Matt. 15:18), and hero of Jewish Christianity, championed adherence to the Law and, according to Paul's account in Galatians, found it difficult to deal with the Gentile form of Christianity heralded by his colleague (Gal 2:11-14). Paul, an educated, urban, Hellenistic Jew, never met Jesus in the flesh, preached a new version of the gospel, and encountered the exalted Christ in visions experienced throughout his career (Gal 1:12, 22; 2 Cor 12:1-4). One bitter argument between Les and Ray echoes the spat between the two Apostles in Antioch: "But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; . . . I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'" (Gal 2:11, 14):

RAY: I know what you're up to, Les, I've known it since day one, I feel your eyes on my back every time you go on the stage. Why can't you just get your notes right and remember the fucking lyrics?

LES: I hate your fucking lyrics!

RAY: Oh, they're not meaningful poetry like Brian's, right?

LES: For him the music was enough, before the hair and the limos . . .

RAY: All I remember about Brian is missed cues, missed gigs, his brother died in a little shed - you worshipped the ground he vomited on. It's not because they're great, it's because they're dead. Maybe if I was dead I'd get more respect.

LES: It would be a start!

After the fight, which takes place on his dreaded fiftieth birthday, the depressed Ray stumbles out into the street, and hesitantly accepts a drug hit from a dealer lurking in a doorway. At the end of a tree-lined road, he walks out onto an icy canal, which cracks under his weight. Before he is rescued by Karen's daughter, he is submerged in the water, where he has a vision, which he later relates to a contrite (and sceptical) Les: "You should know this - last night, as the icy waters closed over me, I saw Brian . . . he was sending a message, and the message was positive, man!" Ray's near-death experience (a sort of baptism and resurrection) belies Hughie's disgruntled pronouncement that "People don't change; there's no blinding flash on the Road to Damascus" (cf. Acts 9:1-6). Ray has a second mock-visionary encounter when, meditating in the lotus position on a riverbank near his estate, he opens his eyes to see Brian, whom he doesn't yet know is alive: "I can see you Brian, so clearly . . . do you have a message?"

Brian, clearly the Christ figure of the piece, appears both in flashbacks as a charismatic young musician, and, after his appearance to Karen, as a thin, gentle,

dreamy-eyed middle-aged man with shoulder-length hair. The damaged, frangible Brian is portrayed in the mould of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12), "bruised for our iniquities" (Isa 53:5; cf. 42:3). As Ray and Tony observe, Brian "was fragile . . . and we crushed him." Later, the roadie explains explains to Karen that he knew Brian was alive, but was afraid to expose him to the other band members. At a news conference before the Wisbech concert, when Beano jokes that he's "Posh Fruit," a reporter wounds Brian when she tactlessly asks him if he's "bruised fruit."

Beano is *Still Crazy's* Judas figure. A comic character, Beano is nicknamed for the malodorous farts for which he is famous (cf. the tradition in Acts 1:18 that Judas bought a field with his ill-gotten gain, where he fell over and "burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out").¹⁷ Ray describes the vulgar, jocular Beano as a spiritual and emotional "flatliner," who hasn't developed as a person in twenty years. Just before the Wisbech concert, a drunken Beano "betrays" the band with a cranky TV interview, much to the band's dismay. Throughout the film, he is pursued by a sinister woman in black (the film's Satan figure; cf. Luke 22:3; John 13:27), whom he fears is an income tax inspector. During the pre-Wisbech news conference, the film's Last Supper scene,¹⁸ Beano spots the woman among the reporters, and flees the table in a panic (cf. John 13:27-30). The mystery woman turns out to be an obsessed fan whose Methodist father forbade her ever to go to

another rock concert after her first exposure to Strange Fruit; she and Beano share a sexual moment that constitutes the film's (admittedly rather tasteless) crucifixion scene.

Perhaps to avoid telegraphing the New Testament subtext of the film too overtly, the names of the characters generally do not echo those of their biblical archetypes. Two exceptions are Luke, the youthful guitarist hired to give the band a younger sound, as the evangelist by that name, a Christian of a new generation, updated the gospel with a Hellenistic flair. More subtly, the Christ-figure's name is Brian, perhaps alluding to another Gospel takeoff, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*.¹⁹

Other New Testament Elements

Apart from those discussed above, many other references, incidents and settings resonate with early Christian history. Before she quits her job to devote herself to the band, Karen is told by a colleague that a group of Mitsubishi delegates she is responsible for are wandering about "like lost sheep" (Luke 15:3-7).²⁰ In Ray's first scene, he is hosting his daughter's wedding, where he recites (to the mild dismay of the wedding guests) a love poem of his own composition (much as Paul's famous hymn to love in 1 Cor. 13 is regularly read at Christian weddings). Tony carries a sacred relic - the tooth of rock legend Jimi Hendrix - to cash in should an emergency arise. Hughie observes that Ray and Les singing together is a miracle

tantamount to the Immaculate Conception.²¹ Rather than making their comeback tour in the U.K., the Fruits are sent to Europe to stage a revival - to the strains of their hit "All Over the World" (cf. the Great Commission [Matt. 28:19]). In Groningen, the Fruits serve as a warm-up act for a band called the Blind Fish (like the early Christian ichthys symbol, which looks like an eyeless fish).²²

Churches frequently figure as settings in *Still Crazy*. Tony's initial meeting with Les takes place atop a church; Tony leans against a large rooftop cross as he invites Les to return to the band. At the wedding, Ray takes Karen and Tony to the chapel on his Victorian estate to discuss the reunion scheme.²³ When the Fruits regroup for a rehearsal, they practice in a church hall. Before the tour, Ray pointedly confides in Karen that he'll need to go to a "meeting" (of Alcoholics Anonymous); in a later scene, Ray mistakes an Overeaters Anonymous gathering (held in a church) for AA. His mistake is only revealed as he begins his testimony to the assembled brothers and sisters.

The Wisbech concert is *Still Crazy*'s Pentecost scene (Acts 2:1-4).²⁴ After a false start, Les and Ray begin singing together, sharing a microphone in a pose reminiscent of Orthodox icons of Sts. Peter and Paul.²⁵ As the departed Brian returns to the stage, Ray kneels down before him and clasps his hands in an attitude of worship. When the frail, wispy Brian takes his place with the other two singers in a Trinitarian tableau, fire descends from the heavens in the form of lightning to

the strains of Les's biblically evocative composition "The Flame Still Burns"²⁶ as Karen looks up and familiarly addresses the heavens.

Conclusion

The number, detail and subtlety of the New Testament allusions in *Still Crazy* make it clear that they are deliberate, knowledgeable and ingenious. Thus, the film is an unusual, interesting and so-far unheralded example of the pervasiveness of the bible's influence on western culture, and a very useful and illuminating addition to a bible and film course. The failure of its many reviewers (including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; see n. 9) to notice the scriptural underpinning of the film illustrates the widespread biblical illiteracy described by pollster George Gallup in *The Next American Spirituality* and decried by church leaders.²⁷

For some viewers, recognizing the implicit comparison of the Fruits to Jesus and the disciples may make *Still Crazy* more meaningful. Others, like some of Christian reviewers referred to above, may find the film even more offensive for its ingenious and lighthearted midrash on the sacred text. However, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, the biblical subtext will enhance their enjoyment and appreciation of this film about friendship, reconciliation and recaptured dreams.

¹ For Best Motion Picture - Comedy/Musical and Best Original Song - Motion Picture (for "The Flame Still Burns") (1999).

² For Best Technical/Artistic Achievement and the Peter Sellers Award for Comedy for actor Bill Nighy (1999). It was also nominated for Best Original Song ("The Flame Still Burns") and Best Supporting Actor (Bill Nighy) by the Golden Sattelite Awards (1999).

³ Roger Ebert, "Still Crazy," *Chicago Sun Times* (http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1999/01/012202.html).

⁴ Janet Maslin, "'Still Crazy:' Middle-Aged Rockers Milk the Past for a Life-Renewing Blast", *New York Times* on the Web (<http://www.nytimes.com/library/film/012299crazy-film-review.html>).

⁵ Edward Guthmann, "Rock of Ages in 'Crazy,'" *San Francisco Chronicle's* SFGate.com (<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=c/a/1999/01/22/DD89913.DTL>).

⁶ Peter Travers, "Still Crazy," *Rolling Stone* ([Http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie?id=5947433&pageid=rs.ReviewsMovieArchive&pageregion=mainRegion&afl=imdb&rnd=1089817736160&has-player=true&version=6.0.10.505](http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie?id=5947433&pageid=rs.ReviewsMovieArchive&pageregion=mainRegion&afl=imdb&rnd=1089817736160&has-player=true&version=6.0.10.505)).

⁷ In addition to the reviews above, see reviews at, AMCTV (<http://www.amctv.com/show/detail?CID=59591-1-EST>); Movie Reviews (http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/movies/s/still_crazy.html) and Fantasy Film League (http://fantasyfilmleague.com/page.php?page_id=218).

⁸ See, e.g., the 49 External Reviews listed by the Internet Movie Database (<http://imdb.com/title/tt0149151/externalreviews>).

⁹ These generally found the (R-rated) film more or less objectionable for sexuality, language and drug content; see *The Movie Reporter* - Movie Reviews from A Christian Perspective (<http://www.moviereporter.com/index.htm>); United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Movie and Family Video Reviews (<http://www.usccb.org/movies/s/stillcrazy1999.htm>); Screen It! Entertainment Reviews (http://www.screenit.com/movies/1998/still_crazy.html); and Kids-in-Mind (http://www.kids-in-mind.com/s/still_crazy_1998__538.htm).

¹⁰ I owe this insight to my M.A. student Arlene N. Stevens (University of Saskatchewan), who highlighted the relationship between the figure of Mary and the character of Karen Knowles (and other NT elements in the film) in a term paper. Many thanks to Arlene for reading and commenting on a draft of this article.

¹¹ See Thomas Kerkhoven, "Shiva on the Durham Coalfield: On the Pertinence of Hindu Myth to the Film *Billy Elliot*," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 4 (Summer 2003) (<http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art4-billyelliott.html>); Steven J. Rosen, "Legend of Bagger

Vance: How the *Bhagavad Gita* Landed on a Golf Course," *Hinduism Today* (March/April 2001) (http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/2001/3-4/16_bagger_vance.shtml).

¹² I recently used the movie with good results in an undergraduate Bible and Film course taught at the University of Saskatchewan (Intersession, 2004).

¹³ "Strange Fruit" is the title of a disturbing blues song composed by Abel Meeropol (Lewis Allan), originally sung by Billie Holiday; the lyrics of this protest against lynching ("Southern trees bear strange fruit, Blood on the leaves, Blood at the root, Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze ...") seem unrelated to a comedy like *Still Crazy*. Since the band is referred to as "The Fruits" throughout the movie, the slightly comical rendering of a phrase in the King James translation of Matt. 7:20 (cf. 7:16) - "by their fruits ye shall know them" - seems like a more plausible allusion.

¹⁴ See the Discovery Channel's slide show "From Virgin Blue to Royal Blue" (<http://dsc.discovery.com/anthology/biblestories/mary/blue/blue.html>).

¹⁵ For traditional portrayals of the Virgin wearing priestly vestments, see Womenpriests.org (<http://www.womenpriests.org/mrpriest/gallery.htm>).

¹⁶ Cf. the earlier scene where Karen and Clare, like the Synoptics' women at the tomb, visit Keith's grave (Mark 16:1; Matt. 28:1; Luke 24:1, 10).

¹⁷ A second-century tradition attributed to Papias of Hierapolis says that after Judas died, the stench was so horrible that it endured "to this day"; Papias, *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord* as quoted in Apollinaris of Laodicea, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 323-34.

¹⁸ The band members are seated behind a long table on a platform, faced by the reporters.

¹⁹ In view of the subtlety of some of the allusions in the film, it might not be too much of a stretch to speculate that the character's surname, Lovell, alludes to the theological virtue of *agapē* ("divine love"); "El", of course, is a Hebrew word for God.

²⁰ Later, Beano wryly speculates that the band might get a "shepherd's pie" out of the comeback.

²¹ In a Bible and Film course, this reference provides a sterling opportunity to discuss the difference between the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the New Testament accounts of the virginal conception of Jesus.

²² See Symbols in Christian Art and Architecture (<http://home.att.net/~wegast/symbols/symbols.htm>).

²³ Ray keeps his gold records in the crypt.

²⁴ In the confusion before they take the stage, Tony observes that the crowd is "bayin' for our blood" - like the crowds demanded the blood of early Christian martyrs.

²⁵ E.g., Come and See Icons, Books & Art (<http://www.comeandseeicons.com/phn18.htm>).

²⁶ *The Flame Still Burns* (Mick Jones, Marti Fredericksen, Chris Difford)

I live a life that's surreal
Where all that I feel I am learning
For life has been turned on the lathe
Reshaped with a flame that's still burning

And in time, it's all a sweet mystery
When you shake the tree of temptation
Yeah, and I, I know the fear and the cost
Of a paradise lost in frustration

And the flame still burns
It's there in my soul for that unfinished goal
And the flame still burns
From a glimmer of then, it lights up again
In my life
In my life, yeah

I, I want my thoughts to be heard
The unspoken words of my wisdom
Today, as the light starts to close
Tomorrow who knows who will listen

But my life has no language of love
No word from above is appearing
Or the time, and time is a fire that's stoked
with the reason of hope and believing

And the flame still burns
Yeah, it's there in my soul for that unfinished goal
And the flame still burns
From a glimmer of then, it lights up again
In my life

Keep a rollin', keep that flame still burnin'
Keep a rollin', while the world keeps turnin'
Yeah, keep a rollin'
Yeah, keep a rollin' . . .

Source: Sometersetsongs.com

²⁷ George Gallup and Timothy Jones, *The Next American Spirituality: Finding God in the Twenty-First Century* (Chariot Victor Publishing, 2000).