

Banging My Head Against the Garage Door of Religion

by Con Chapman

Among the memorable scenes in "Mondo Cane 2" was that of a group of Italian villagers smashing in a garage door with their heads in an annual ritual. Some bleed from the ears and mouths, go into convulsions, and have to be carried off. Once inside, the men and the rest of the villagers eat until they're sick.

Obituary of Gualtiero Jacopetti, creator of the "Mondo Cane" movies.



A little self-flagellation isn't going to hurt you.

Sunday morning, the time when, according to some of my relatives, I should be in church. Instead, I worship at the altar of physical fitness, riding twenty-five miles on my mountain bike. On my way home, I pass a Catholic church like the one of my youth and see a man and his wife entering; he is a guy I refer to by the grandiloquent title "Most Boring Man on Earth." When I see him on the train into Boston I instinctively move away, because not only does he go on and on and on about himself, his vacations, his work,

his clients, his kids, his wife ad nauseam, he does so at a volume that can be heard two cars away. Pride goeth before a fall, but I'd rather not have to listen to him while I wait around for his fall.

Up the street is the Congregational Church that all the "nice" families in town belong to. We tried it out as a family a few times, and were set upon by parishioners wielding jars of jam for months afterwards, urging us to join. As Will Smith playing "Trent" in "Six Degrees of Separation" noted, WASPs swap pots of jam the way Hawaiians say "Aloha." It can mean "hello," "good-bye," "thank you" and "The required minimum contribution to join our snooty church is \$10,000, but here's a nice jar of jam to eat while you're writing the check."

We passed on that one, although I was subject to some heavy lobbying on the part of my Protestant better half. It turned out to be the right decision, however; every couple we knew who belonged got divorced after the husband had an affair. Must have been something in the jam.



We made one last mutual attempt to give our kids religion shortly after the 2001 execution of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, whose fertilizer-based bombing resulted in the death of 168 people. The church was Unitarian-Universalist, the non-denominational, non-liturgical compromise for many New Englanders who consider themselves too smart to fall for traditional religions, but who still want an independent third party to instill the fear of God in their kids. As the old joke around here goes, the last time anybody heard the words “Jesus Christ” in the Unitarian Church was when the janitor fell down the stairs.

With everybody dressed in their Sunday best, we were treated to a sermon by a young minister on the theme “Why Timothy McVeigh is in Heaven Today.” Our kids looked at us as if we'd urged them to try drugs.



Growing up, religion in my family was so important we kept two brands around, Protestant and Catholic. Sort of like having both Colgate and Crest in the upstairs bathrooms, in case those extravagant claims about Crest being an effective decay-preventive dentefrice when used in a conscientiously-applied program of oral hygiene and regular professional care turned out to be false. With two choices in the house, you knew that neither possessed the ultimate truth.

So I didn't set out to be an agnostic, it was thrust upon me. And yet as I reach what I hope will be the last third of my life, I find myself seeking the comforts of religion again. As Jonathan Swift said, human beings seem to need the comfort of fairy tales when they are young and when they are old.

It's just that the alternatives around me are so tepid, and the music in white Protestant churches is so lousy. I watch the Bobby Jones Gospel Hour on Sunday nights to get the taste of an experience I know I couldn't survive in person; a half-day sitting in a black church fanning myself while my wife looked at her watch. It ain't gonna happen. I want something ecstatic, not the panty-hose and pleated pants crowd of your typical WASP congregation.

No, as Joseph Conrad says in *Nostromo*, religion is for women, god is for men. I want the real thing, with no more mediation between me and the divinity than the width of the tissues the women in black churches use to wipe their eyes when the Holy Spirit is upon them.



That's why I was intrigued by reports of a cult of men who bang their heads against garage doors in Italy until blood runs out their mouths and ears. Now *that's* the spirit! I said. None of this interfaith ecumenicism, no germ-spreading hand-shaking in the middle of the ceremony, no walks for understanding with everyone carrying a bottle of Evian, the bottled water whose name is "naive" spelled backwards.

Like Judaism, there are three levels of garage-door-based religion. In "liberal" congregations, people just push the button on their garage door openers—fast, simple, painless. In "reform" congregations, if you want to open your garage door in order to achieve enlightenment, you reach down, grab the handle and open it manually. A little stricter, perhaps, and it can result in back strain, but nobody ever said the path to heaven was going to be an easy one. But neither of those options appealed to me. No, I wanted to hook up with some real orthodox religious crazies, the kind who would bang the door in with their heads. They seemed to me more sincere, more serious, more *genuine* than the others.



The easy way out.

We've assembled at the house of "Giuseppe," a holy man of sorts; his forehead bears the scars of many a garage-door banging pilgrimage. I am told that he retraced the route of Jesus up Mt. Calvary, banging in every garage door but one, a reinforced steel

replacement model from Home Depot, capable of withstanding hurricane-force winds.

“What’s up, guys?” I say. My wife has urged me to wear one of our kids’ Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle bike helmets for my baptism by head-bonking, and the assembled garage door bangers eye me with looks of contempt.



“You *can’t* be serious,” Giuseppe says to me, channeling the youthful John McEnroe.

“Well, I . . . uh . . . like to try out a religion before I make a commitment,” I say, somewhat abashed. “I thought there’d be like CCD classes for converts at first.”

“No—you must go all in, first time,” a wiry young man named Giacomo says. “You want milquetoast religion, go over to the Methodist church—it’s about time for coffee hour.”

The others laugh, and it is locker-room-style laughter at my effeminate approach to salvation.

Okay, fine. Time, as a former coach of mine once said, to suck up my guts and play football.

“Are there any prayers first?” I ask as I take my helmet off, hoping to delay the moment of impact.

“We pray that there will be food inside,” a heavy-set man named Tomaso says. “God always provides.”

That’s good to know. “I’ll bet you work up quite an appetite banging in a garage door with your heads!” My “can-do” spirit does

nothing to change the glum demeanor my fellow worshippers have put on. They take this stuff seriously.

We line up and Giuseppe allows his eyeballs to roll back into his head, then he makes a “dash for the door” (as accounts in tomorrow's Extreme Religious Sports pages will recount).

“Hey—no touch!”

“Oww,” he moans as he falls to the ground. I move to help him up, but Tomaso restrains me. “No touch,” he says, a phrase I've heard from fruit vendors in Boston's Haymarket. “If he does not get up by himself, he is not a true believer.”

Giuseppe rolls over and slowly gets up on his hands and knees, then just his knees, then with one hand on the ground, he stands unsteadily erect.

“He is risen!” Giacomo says, with an exultant, transcendent note in his voice.

“My turn!” Tomaso says, and we step aside to allow the man with the tight-end style body to have a go at it. The unspoken hope—at least in my mind—is that he'll crash the door down, sparing us the pain of martyrs.



Tomaso gets down into a three-point stance, and Giacomo counts off the cadence. “Red—24 right—wildcat. Hut, hut, HUT!”

BOOM! The big guy crashes into the door and we step up to see the damage he's done. The door has been dislodged from its guidance rail, and the light on the box overhead is flickering weakly.

“Way to go!” I say admiringly. “That door never saw what hit it!”

Giacomo sneers at me. “The door, she cannot see. We alone have eyes, we alone suffer from the impact. Do not anthropomorphize a stupid fixture of residential housing construction.”

This guy's got it out for me for some reason. “Sorry.”

“Who's next?” Giuseppe says, still groggy but capable once again of forming simple two-word sentences.

“This guy here,” Giacomo says, pushing me forward.



"Hey kid—your mom's Protestant. Cut it out!"

"But—I was behind you," I say, looking to Tomaso for confirmation.

"Each of us has his time," Tomaso says with a look of resignation at the inscrutable ways that God makes himself manifest among men.

I look to Giuseppe, he indicates by a nod to go ahead. Or maybe his neck's broken, I can't say for certain.

The moment of truth has arrived. It's simple, elemental—*mano a garago dooro*.

I steady myself, square up my shoulders, make the Sign of the Cross the way I used to do in Little League in imitation of Roberto Clemente until my dad took me aside and told me we weren't Puerto Rican.

"We will see if he has the heart of a man, or of a chicken," Giacomo says with a sneer.

I give Giuseppe one last look, then charge.

I feel the pain upon contact, then an inner vision of cream and orange-colored stars flashing across a brownish-purplish background formed when I close my eyes.

"You did it!" Giuseppe yells as the others clamber over me, eager to chow down on our post-head-banging repast. I have apparently

knocked the door down, and a happy party of females behind a table covered with casseroles, pasta and Jello deserts awaits us.

“That was awesome, man,” Giacomo says, a bit sheepish that he has so cruelly mistreated the man with the head that crashed through the gates of heaven. “How you doin’?”

“Okay,” I say, although my neck hurts. “I think . . . I’m pretty sure I saw God.”

“You did?” an old woman says as she races around the table, crossing herself as she comes. “What does he look like?”

“Like,” I grope for words to express the ecstatic vision that came to me. “Like one of those Jimi Hendrix Psychedelic Jam Throw Rugs they used to sell at the Missouri State Fair.”

