

Young Catholics in crisis?

Young Catholic men's response to the 'masculinity crisis' through religious self-help programmes.

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Abstract

This study explores the motivations, experiences, and outcomes of young men participating in *Exodus 90*, a 90-day Catholic spiritual exercise focused on prayer, asceticism, and fraternity. Through in-depth interviews with five young Catholic men, I investigated the impact of the program on their spiritual, psychological, and social lives and religious and gender identity. The study found that the programme did not drastically alter the men's lifestyles, regardless of their motivations, but strengthened existing lifestyles and beliefs. Findings highlighted that fraternity was essential to commitment to the programme. Furthermore, despite the centrality of their Catholicism to their identity, the men expressed a personal relationship with their faith, compared to an outward presentation of their masculinity.

Introduction

Exodus 90 is a 90-day programme at the beginning of each year which encourages young Catholic men to pursue an ascetic lifestyle, with an emphasis on self-control in the face of modern temptations. Exodus 90 cites some of the main reasons for its existence as 'alcohol,

pornography, [and] social media¹. Through a regimented programme of fasting and prayer, Exodus 90 aims to allow men to be ‘free’ of these problems. A daily routine includes avoidance of snacks, exercise, half an hour of prayer, and cold showers.

Given that Exodus 90 is global, it is organised centrally through a subscription app, and ‘fraternity’ meetings are online. This is one of the three main pillars around which participants unite: prayer, fasting, and fraternity. Exodus 90 is a growing trend: the programme claims to have had over 100,000 participants worldwide since 2015². Furthermore, as shown in the time series figure below, online interest has hugely increased since 2019.



Google searches for ‘Exodus 90’ worldwide since 2004, peaking each year in January

My research aimed to investigate whether Exodus 90 (and similar programs) were linked to possible perceptions of a ‘masculinity crisis’, especially among young Christians. To date the literature has been sparse: research into masculinity and Christianity focuses predominantly on Evangelical Protestants or young seminarians³, or specific demographic groupings⁴. However, for the first time, men in the U.S. are more religious than women⁵ to such an extent that the correlation between gender identity and religious identity cannot be overlooked. In part, this can be attributed to a growing social conservatism among young men, in an ideological gender gap more pronounced than ever. A third of women in the U.S. identify as LGBTQ+, whereas young men are drawn to right-wing spokespeople such as Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson, and right-wing organisations such as the Catholic church, the most ‘spectacular patriarchy in the world today’⁶.

Moreover, there is a documented trend of ‘self-help’ or self-discipline programs in the 21st century among young men.⁷ Therefore, Exodus 90 may appear to provide a route for young, socially conservative men, to respond to the ‘masculinity crisis’; I wanted to investigate how the Catholic church’s views on gender roles influenced young men’s response to the crisis of masculinity in the context of an abstinence programme.

However, my interviews revealed that the young Catholic men participating in the Exodus 90 programme were not motivated by a desire to respond to any perceived ‘gender war’, nor did

¹ <https://exodus90.com>

² (Sweeney, 2024)

³ (Barnes, 2022)

⁴ (Choi, 2012)

⁵ (Graham, 2024)

⁶ (Connell, 2005, p.252)

⁷ (Svensson & Hallberger, 2023)

the programme especially enhance their own feelings of ‘masculinity’ in the way they defined it. Instead, motivated to join the programme by personal reasons of self-discipline and faith, the participants’ views on masculinity adhere to those typically espoused by the Catholic church and were not altered by participation in Exodus 90.

This study aimed to address two primary research questions.

1. What are the motivations of young men pursuing Exodus 90?
2. How do religious self-help programmes impact personal relationships with gender identity and religion?

Methodology

I chose a semi-structured interview format over video call; in a one-on-one setting. Due to the personal nature of the interviews, participants were required to fill out an informed consent form beforehand. All participants have been anonymised and will be referred to by pseudonyms; only transcripts of the conversations have been kept.

Although Exodus 90 claims to have had tens of thousands of participants, it seems as though the programme is primarily advertised through word of mouth. This led to difficulty in finding participants, especially since Exodus 90 emphasizes avoidance of social media and non-vital communication. Therefore, my interviewees were primarily drawn from a small group of men who had completed the Exodus 90 programme together.

Interviews were divided into two halves to address the two research questions. I firstly asked a series of questions about the participants’ experience doing Exodus 90 and their motivations for completing the programme. The second half of the interviews focussed on the participants’ views on masculinity and religious identity. I found that the semi-structured interviews allowed for the men to speak more freely and spontaneously; nevertheless, the participants returned to the same themes independently.

Analysis

‘Alex’, 22, attended a Catholic school and was raised Catholic. He attends Mass every Sunday, but does not take an active role in the parish or in religious life other than this. He signed up to Exodus 90 in 2023 but did not continue with the programme.

‘Brian’, 20, was raised and educated as a Catholic, and has completed Exodus 90 three times. He currently takes a leading role in Catholic men’s youth groups.

‘Charles’, 20, was raised and educated as a Catholic, and is still practicing.

‘Dan’, 19, attended a state school and is a practicing Catholic, having come from a similarly strong Catholic background. Dan completed Exodus 90 in 2022.

‘Evan’, 20, attended a Catholic school and was raised Catholic. He describes himself as a practicing Catholic, attending Mass every week. Evan completed Exodus 40 in 2022, a shortened version of the programme lasting forty days, while living in a residence among other young Catholic men.

Brian recommended Exodus 90 to both Charles and Dan; they were part of the same fraternity group in 2022. All of the participants were raised and currently live in the UK.

Theme 1: Fraternity is the best policy

The most cited motivation for joining Exodus 90 was self-discipline, especially reduction of social media and in one case, alcohol usage. However, it appears that despite their initial reasons for participation, of the three pillars of the programme, (fraternity, abstinence, and prayer), fraternity had the most impact on the participants' engagement with the programme. Within groups of eight to twelve men, each participant has an 'anchor' with whom regular meetings are vital; each anchor within the pair encourages the other to adhere to their regimen.

This fraternity was best achieved in a face-to-face setting. The participants noted a lack of involvement with the app, which costs \$10 a month, and which was primarily a way to source each day's readings (although these were able to be circulated). Exodus 90 is able to provide a structured plan and overarching reasoning, but the real value of the programme lies in face-to-face meetings (recognised by all as far better than online calls) and regular in-person accountability. Alongside their acknowledgement that fraternity is a vital part of the programme, it seems as though Exodus 90 works best for those whose lifestyles already reflect the programme's goals. Alex and Evan, who both began Exodus 90 but did not complete it, said that being exclusively online reduced the 'fraternity' aspect of the programme and therefore their engagement with it.

When asked whether the single-gender programme was a motivating factor, both Charles and Brian replied 'definitely', while simultaneously confirming it as the most important 'pillar' of the programme. Alex said it was 'not particularly important, but attractive' because he could 'relate more' to men while Evan noted that while it wasn't the most crucial aspect ("I would hesitate to have the stress on the male bond"), he had more 'freedom' to discuss certain topics with men which they would not be comfortable discussing with women, such as pornography and sexuality, which he said could be "taboo" in mixed-gender settings.

Dan also acknowledged an increased 'freedom' in single-gender settings, even though he would readily have a "deeper conversation" with his female friends, with men, the basic assumption that "no-one likes each other romantically" allows for discussion of more "personal" things.

Since Exodus 90 describes itself as a way for men to be 'uncommonly free', it appears that the freedom is a result of the single-gender setting, while abstinence and self-discipline measures, while helpful, were viewed less as an opportunity than a chore; although the self-discipline aspect appealed to all, Dan described this as 'submission to a program'. Since none noted a particular addiction as a motivation (aside from Charles, who wanted to reduce his alcohol usage although is not an 'alcoholic') this may be why none mentioned the 'freedom' which Exodus 90 promotes gained from reducing substance dependency.

Overall, participation in Exodus 90 appeared to be a direct reaction to needs: social media usage, alcohol, general self-discipline, but also as a way of increasing faith. However, the participants who seemed to gain the most satisfaction from the program acknowledged the importance of fraternity and described this as core to completion of Exodus 90.

Theme 2: The 'ideal man'

The portrait of the ideal man which emerged was strikingly consistent: 'humble' 'provider' 'protector' 'strong' 'gentle' 'reliable' were repeated by each participant independently. What became increasingly clear was their view of masculinity as a spectrum; taken too far, stereotypical masculinity results in 'abuse of power', often physical, towards women. Alex, Brian, and Charles all mentioned Andrew Tate as the archetypal negatively hyper-masculine man, described by Brian as having a mindset of 'you can take whatever you want', and by Charles as 'exploitative' and lacking a 'complete respect for women' which is central to masculinity. Although no participant expressed a direct correlation between the Exodus 90 and a more masculine self-perception, Brian's words indicate that men's self-discipline programmes reflect a positive masculine ideal of restraint. Men possess the physical power to achieve something but control over these desires is crucial.

On the other hand, the inverse was equally 'dangerous' or 'evil'. Brian had the strongest reaction to effeminate men, describing them as equally 'evil' as the Andrew Tate archetype, while all agreed that effeminacy in men was 'dangerous'.

Dan and Alex both recognised the 'pressure' of living up to a masculine ideal. For Alex, this pressure was self-imposed, while Dan stated that those who wish to avoid the pressures placed on them by traditional views of masculinity by (for example) wearing makeup, are 'going about it in the wrong way', since it diminishes the spectrum of what it means to be a man. This was the most concrete example of effeminacy in men, but all appeared to have an instinctual (although vague) understanding of the respective perceived threats of hyper-masculinity and effeminacy: "when I see it, I don't particularly like it, so I don't copy it. It's a strange way of living".

All acknowledged that the words relating to positive masculinity, such as 'provide' and 'protect' were equally applicable to women, but in different ways, although the exact ways in which the positive values of each gender differ were vague. The participants mostly followed the view of the Catholic church that men and women are 'different, but equal'.

One of the only clear comparisons between the genders which arose was the 'directness' versus 'indirectness' axis, especially in communication. Dan referenced Melkor (the primary antagonist of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*) who uses "cunning and deceit...by turning his enemies against each other with lots of little lies and mistrust. I think there's something not masculine in that." What is more feminine is "subtlety", and noticing things which men do not; "there's a great quote: 'Mary treasured all these things in her heart (Luke 2:19)'".

I noticed that the 'directness' in speaking was largely represented by the interviewees themselves; they had a measured, non-sarcastic speaking style which only tended to stumble when the participants addressed topics which they felt may be considered controversial (for example, when Evan spoke about pornography, or when I asked them to generalise about gender differences). This reflected the 'freedom' in conversation which they had discussed as a key part of the pillar of fraternity.

Theme 3: The performance of identity

For all the participants, their faith was a crucial part of their identity. Despite this, the men recognised a difficulty in exhibiting their religious identity in the world. Alex said that “faith is personal...don’t force [your views] on other people...you can live how you wish but I draw the line at accusing me of being wrong because of how I live”.

It is more difficult to outwardly be Catholic than to outwardly present as traditionally male; only Alex expressed any pressure to live up to an ideal of masculinity, albeit ‘self-imposed’, while Charles readily admitted that he doesn’t ‘fit into a masculine archetype’ but showed no discomfort about this. They displayed no difficulty in reconciling their faith and Catholic teaching with their own self-perception.

Conversely, with regards to showing their religion, Dan said that ‘if someone knows you’re Catholic within two minutes of meeting them... you’ve done something wrong’. Evan described Exodus 90 flippantly as ‘not a culty Catholic thing’ acknowledging that it could be perceived that way and stated that “faith is quite a personal thing...I don’t advertise it because I don’t want to open up that discussion”. Dan’s reasoning for his reticence to advertise his faith was that people can be “dismissive” of Catholic views on gender and see them as “Victorian”, but that his community does not emphasize gender roles as much as “living out the gospel”.

Catholicism also takes precedence over masculine identity, since, as Alex noted, his faith ‘determines [his] morals, more internally, who [he is]’, whereas being a man is ‘how I act’. Understandably, the men saw no conflict between their identities both as Catholic and as men. Where conflict arises with other aspects of their identity – for example, their political leanings – the Catholic identity unquestionably took precedence (for Charles compared to his membership of the Conservative party, being a Catholic is ‘infinitely more important...the party can burn up and die, if the church said to leave it, I would in a heartbeat’), especially on matters of policy. Dan is not ‘political’ but votes in accordance with the party which best represents the morals of the Church.

Conclusions

The participants did not drastically alter their lives during the programme and mostly did not continue with the more difficult parts of the abstinence regimen after the programme ended. Exodus 90 provides an opportunity for young Catholic men to think more deeply about their faith and identity, and the rate of return indicates that ‘you get out as much as you put in’; those who had strong groups and anchor pairings were more likely to redo Exodus 90 the following year, and express a desire to redo it in the future, while lack of fraternity led to non-completion. Therefore, in answering research question (1), ‘what are the motivations of young men pursuing Exodus 90?’ I found that while self-discipline was expressed as the primary motivator, fraternity provided ongoing motivation throughout the programme.

Secondly, research question (2) ‘how do religious self-help programmes impact personal relationships with gender identity and religion?’ revealed that the Exodus 90 programme, instead of being a guide to masculinity, positively reinforced the values and beliefs which the men already held. The programme did not cause them to drastically change life paths but

provided structure to their current way of life. No participant said that the abstinence regimen contributed to an increased sense of masculinity, although, as noted, self-discipline programs typically attract young men, and this aspect of Exodus 90 aligned with the participants' views that an ideal man exhibits self-control.

It also appears that individual action in response to the 'masculinity crisis' is less helpful for socially conservative young men than being surrounded by positive examples of masculinity, both at home and in media, such as film or the Bible, but not on social media⁸. This is perhaps why those not coming from a strongly Catholic background turn to controversial figures such as Andrew Tate, whose beliefs were completely scorned by these participants. Avoidance of social media contributes to a less extreme, but still delineated, view of masculinity.

Reflections

While the UK reflects the social ideologies of the U.S. in many ways, it is not clear that the experiences of these young men reflect the growing gender imbalance in religion in the US. No participant is a convert to Christianity, and their avoidance of social media suggests that they are not susceptible to same causes which attract young men to socially conservative religions in the US. Another study might investigate a wider sample from more countries to see whether the thoughts and experiences of the UK participants mirror those of international ones.

Furthermore, due to the small sample size, trends were less obvious, but I was able to examine the responses more deeply; however, the interviews, which lasted between 40 minutes to an hour, were not long enough to build complete profiles of the men, although this was to be expected in an exploratory study. Further investigation might look at their religious identities in professional settings (at work and at university) more closely and at the impact of the participants' views on gender on their personal relationships. Equally, more research on women's equivalent self-help programmes (such as Exodus 90's female counterpart, Magnify 90) or non-religious self-help programmes might uncover interesting points of comparison.

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⁸ (Connell, 2005)

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