

(S4,E8) Deus Ex Machina: Mark Wahlberg & the Catholic Influencers

I'm not religious, and I wasn't raised in a religious household. Absolutely stunning cold open there. Nailed it. Anyway... religious backgrounds in my family are very slightly complicated by the fact that at some point a Protestant married a Catholic. Everyone sort of tried to be Anglican for a bit but weren't very good at it, probably owing to the strong family ratbag streak. Now, we've mostly just watered down any faith-based leanings into superstitious inclination and a belief in ghosts that no one will really admit to.

I'm telling you all this to make it clear that I haven't ever had to really interact with everyday religion. And this is especially true of its attempts to digitise the faith. I don't really end up in the same realms as young, online religious people. Which is why stumbling into the world of Catholic influencers via Mark Wahlberg's Instagram partnership with a prayer app has been a little bit like being socked in the face with a brick. What you MEAN Catholic influencers? What the hell is a prayer app? Why would that need an app? WHY IS MARK WAHLBERG HERE? I'm dragging you along with me. We're finding out together.

I'm Alex. This is Pop Culture Boner – the podcast edition – and today I'm thinking about Mark Wahlberg's Instagram.

So, before I fully launch into exploration of digital Catholicism and Mark Wahlberg, let me just say quickly – I'm not here to bag on anyone's religious leanings. Faith is very personal, and while I don't get it, edgy atheism also isn't really my thing. I like the art and the stained glass and movies about exorcisms, but I'm generally just more of a 'do no harm' kind of guy. If you find something in a religious doctrine that resonates enough with you that you use it to make your patch of the world a better place, great. Go ham. Having said that, I also don't think we should ignore history, active harm or the machinations of capitalism when we talk about religion more generally. So, I will try to keep this focussed and avoid being flippant but do keep in mind the opening anecdote about the ratbag streak and the absence of a religious upbringing. Let's get into it.

Right... so Mark Wahlberg. You know him as either the singer of Good Vibrations, a former Calvin Klein underwear model, or the actor who starred in Boogie Nights, depending on how old you are and where your interests lie. You might also know him for being from Boston, committing hate crimes, having the workout routine of a man who cannot spend time with himself, or, my personal favourite, giving weirdly intense interviews about how he would have stopped 9/11 if he was on the plane. There's a lot going on

with ol' Marky Mark, which is a shame really because Boogie Nights is a modern classic.

His film career is prolific but quality-wise it's patchy at best, so I don't often really pay attention to what he's doing. But recently my friend sent me a video he'd posted on Instagram where he was posturing in front of a large cross, and in a thick Bostonian accent, telling me to "stay prayed up". I cannot give you the full effect on my own – my Boston accent is not good enough – here's a clip of him with television presenter Mario Lopez. To paint the scene - they're in front of a big cross, Mario Lopez is dressed like he teaches Sunday School, Mark Wahlberg is dressed like he is going to the gym. They do an awkward hug and handshake. Alright, roll the clip:

[Mark Wahlberg: "Me and my brother in Christ, my brother in life, we're about to get into that church and stay prayed up."

Mario Lopez: "Always."

Mark Wahlberg: "[unintelligible Spanish prayer, possibly "Gracias Jesucristo"]

Mario Lopez: "You gotta build spiritual muscle as well."

Mark Wahlberg: "Stay prayed up. God bless you."

Mario Lopez: "God bless."]

That post is captioned: 'Happy Sunday STAY PRAYED UP (cross emoji) @hallowedapp @mariolopez #HallowPartner'. According to its own marketing copy, Hallow is the "#1 app for Catholic meditation and prayer" and you can "download Hallow today to find peace, sleep better, pray more and deepen your relationship with God." The #HallowPartner in the caption is the disclosure required by the Federal

Trade Commission in the US to indicate that the post is sponsored content – the app is paying Mark to spruik them.

Now, it's not unusual for celebrities to be promoting something on their Instagram – it's an engaged audience and it's (very slightly) more trackable than traditional media partnerships (don't get me started on the actual efficacy of influencer marketing... it's a minefield and I have opinions). Anyway, a cursory glance tells me that Mark Wahlberg is actually promoting some of the usual celebrity suspects on his Instagram feed including his own tequila, a sportswear brand he co-founded, and F45, the training program for which he is Chief Brand Officer. Because of course he is. What is unusual is the deus ex machina – the presence of God in the marketing machine. While lots of celebrities will thank God in their awards speeches or in the occasional social media post, very few of them will tell you how often they're in church or which flavour of Christianity they're attached to, let alone promote an explicitly religious product as part of whichever suite of brands is making it onto their Instagram grid.

Mark Wahlberg has always been relatively open about the fact that he is Catholic. You can find articles all the way back to the mid-2000s of him referencing the fact that he keeps the same church schedule as a devout Irish grandmother. That is to say: he goes daily and on Sundays he's there twice. This has gone mostly uncommented on by his secular audiences, probably because his other eccentricities are so... well... eccentric. In 2018, for example, he posted his daily routine on Instagram, which included

carving out 20 minutes in the morning for prayers. But the prayers barely registered in the online commentary that followed because he also said that he started his morning routine at 2.30am, fitted in a round of golf between his twice daily workouts and had 90 minutes allotted for cryochamber therapy, a thing you can only be subjected to for 10 minutes at a time because blasting your partially clothed body with air that's -100 degrees Celsius for any longer than that will literally kill you. Presumably unless you are Mark Wahlberg, I guess. So, aside from working out in a way that implies he needs to get better at spending time with his thoughts, his daily dedication to his Catholic faith makes him a solid brand alignment for Hallow.

Hallow was founded by Alex Jones – not “they’re turning the frogs gay” conspiracy nut Alex Jones... a different one – and his buddies Erich Kerekes and Alessandro DiSanto in 2018. According to the company lore, Jones was raised Catholic, but shied away from his faith as a teen. But he felt a gap in his life that he struggled to fill. He took up guided meditation in a Buddhist tradition through the app Headspace but found his mind wandering to God and faith. He talked to a Catholic priest who told him that what he was doing was very similar to the Catholic practice of Lectio Divina where you read, meditate, pray, contemplate, and repeat. From there, he wanted to share his experience of app-based devotion by building something specifically for Catholics. His friends Kerekes and DiSanto experienced a similar straying away and return to faith. Now, let's put a pin in the fact that anyone who was as disengaged with faith as

Jones says he was prior to meditating, probably doesn't have 'consult a priest' high on their priority list and look at a what a prayer app does. Hallow offers audio-guided Bible stories, prayers, meditations and Christian music, as well as things for the very digitally dialled in like prayer challenges, curated praylists (like playlists but for prayers), a prayer scheduling option and journaling prompts. It does offer some free content but it mostly operates on a two-tier subscription model - \$9.99 a month or \$69.99 per year. The web design cycles through soothing cool pastel tones, with simple vector illustrations reminiscent of an early Spotify Wrapped.

As I said, I've never needed to digitally interact with the Church, so I wasn't necessarily aware of this, but apparently there's a bit of a web-design gap for Catholics. Where some of the more enterprising faiths – particularly those big on the prosperity gospel and located close to centres of wealth and influence like Los Angeles – have been quick to jump on trendy branding that appeals to those with money, taste and a spiritual void to fill, Catholicism... somehow hasn't? Despite having a patron saint for the internet (St. Isidore of Seville, who died in 600 AD, in case you were curious) and cornering the market early on art that is a little bit horny (but feels guilty about it), apparently a common complaint among digitally-savvy Catholics is that all their online resources look as though they were designed in 1997.

So, they're obviously trying to appeal to a younger and increasingly techie market, but how did they get Marky Mark money? The app's been downloaded 2 million

times... is that enough on a subscription model to secure the of strong devotion and Bostonian twang? Not quite. Hallow secured an initial \$12 million in funding from venture capital firm, General Catalyst in 2021. Katherine Boyle, who heads up investment at General Catalyst is a practicing Catholic who saw Jones' presentation of his app on a pitch day at Stanford, where he was completing his MBA. She liked the design element and when she saw the app's downloads skyrocket in the pandemic she decided to invest. She told The Pillar, a digital Catholic publication, she believed that the pandemic was the prompt people needed to rediscover spirituality in America. She said, "It does seem like people are turning to ancient religions and traditions and Hallow is a company that very much supports that movement." According to an article from Lucinda Shen in Fortune, religious start-ups were not high on the priority list for Silicon Valley, securing only \$18 million of the \$136 billion that was flying around in 2019. So, with the average investment sitting at around \$2 million, the \$12 million for Hallow was a big deal.

In 2022, Hallow received a further \$40 million in Series B funding. If you, like me, do not understand venture capital firms or start-up terminology, Series B funding is a second stage of funding where a start-up has proved itself to be somewhat functional as a business, it's hit its milestones and its looking to scale up. The money has allowed Hallow to make some more drastic moves, like start translating its content into other languages, provide free long-term trials for frontline healthcare workers and begin adding extra voice options.

Great stuff. All's well that ends well. Absolutely nothing to see here. Just the totally normal workings of late-stage capitalism.

Except when I started thumbing through some of the talent on the Hallow line-up after receiving the Instagram video, one name threw up a big red flag for me – Jim Caviezel. You might not immediately recognise that name, but he played Jesus Christ in notable anti-Semite Mel Gibson's 2004 film Passion of the Christ. Now, I'm not damning Jim by association – he's done that all on his own by going full QAnon. He was most recently spotted at a rally in Vegas doing the Braveheart speech to inspire the people into literally fist fighting Satan for the souls of the children being trafficked by the Democratic Party. There's a great episode of the podcast QAnon Anonymous on everything he's been up to. I'll link it in the show notes, but the name alone was enough to set my gears whirring. Plus, I still wanted to know where the money was coming from. Whenever large sums of money start hovering around religious spaces, I get suspicious. The only thing I know about the Bible was that Jesus threw the merchants out of the temple... it's like the one religious thing I've retained.

A cursory Google brought me to a Vice article by Sophia Smith Galer from March of this year, titled Catholic Prayer App Hallow Platforming 'Fringe Elements' on the Catholic Right. In it, Galer notes that some of the \$40 million in Series B funding had come from billionaire Peter Thiel and J.D. Vance's venture capital company, Narya Capital. Peter Thiel is a piece of shit for a lot of reasons, not least of which is the amount of money he dumped into

the Trump campaign. J.D. Vance is the US Senator for Ohio. You might know his book, *Hillbilly Elegy*, which blamed the poor for being poor and wooed political centrists. He took an even harder swing to the right, supporting Trump's election fraud theories and recently advocated for women to stay in abusive marriages because divorce was bad.

So that's not a great start, in terms of who's throwing money at it. But what of the other Catholic influencers? Aside from people like Wahlberg, Caviezel and Lopez there are prominent Church leaders with large social presences and an array of Catholic micro-influencers. Now, there's too many of them for me to go extremely deep on, so to give you a little top-line flavour. The app includes speakers from the Chastity Project and I've spent some time thumbing through their website. The Chastity Project, founded by Jason Evert, was designed to counteract the 'lustful' urges of teens and drive them towards a chaste and pious life. They have online resources covering what God thinks about porn, STDs and birth control, dating, marriage, family planning and the gays. Here's a sample – a blog called 'Please don't call me gay' explains that using that adjective is putting yourself before your relationship with God and a chaste life will allow you to avoid the sin of acting on your queerness. Another blog called 'Contraception won't empower you but this will' likened the use of birth control to being treated like "an unruly animal who cannot control itself" and promoted the euphoria of becoming attuned to your natural cycle – something I'm sure we're all familiar with, right? Love to experience the euphoria of violent cramping and PMS.

Anyway. Another one is titled '4 myths about women and the 'M' word'. The M word is masturbation, and it recommends turning to sisterhood if you're struggling with the sin of jerking it too much. Do you want lesbians, Chastity Project? Because that's how you get lesbians.

Now, most of these things might fall in line with things you sort of vaguely know about religion through cultural osmosis – no gays, no masturbation, every sperm is sacred, etc. But I think it's important to note that it is conservative. In her article, Galer spoke to Dr Dheepa Sundaram, scholar of performance, ritual, and digital culture at the University of Denver, who said that the app offered "a religion marketing strategy that leverages the devotional needs of adherents to promote ideological and political ideas as part of authentic religious devotion". Galer also spoke to Jamie L. Manson, who runs Catholics for Choice, a Catholic abortion rights group who pointed out that young Catholics often felt overlooked by the Church and the far-right had rushed into the digital space to fill that ideological gap. She said, "These views, which are vastly out of step with the beliefs of the majority of Catholics, are part and parcel of the Christian right-wing crusade against abortion – and they won't ultimately feed young Catholics or bring them any closer to finding the true spiritual nourishment they seek."

So, where does the Marky Mark of it all come in? Most high-profile Christian actors get a little vague when you press them on the specifics of religion because, like sex or politics, it's the kind of divisive topic that might turn off a fan-base. Being explicit also invites scrutiny

– Christianity implies a certain moral position, but more conservative elements of the faith are also increasingly at odds with a broadly secular society. So, you have to be both morally beyond reproach and also flexible enough in your faith to push back on socially contentious issues that the Church could be seen as out of step on, like LGBTQ+ rights, or abortion. Which puts Mark Wahlberg in a tricky position.


From a secular perspective his public track record includes literal hate crimes. In 1986, a teenage Wahlberg and friends chased a group of black children yelling death threats and racial slurs, and then extended that harassment over a couple of days when they ran into one of the children on a school fieldtrip and repeated the treatment with additional rock throwing. Then in 1988, Wahlberg assaulted two Vietnamese-Americans. He knocked Thanh Lam unconscious with a wooden stick, hitting him so hard the stick split in two. He then hid from police behind Johnny Trinh, before attacking him and puncturing his eye. When police arrested him he kept up the tirade of racial slurs. He was tried as an adult and sentenced to two years, though he only spent 45 days in prison. Unsurprisingly, this came back to bite him in the ass when he was announced as a partner for Hallow in April of 2022. People started getting served ads for Hallow with Wahlberg in them, and immediately took to the internet to point out that beating a Vietnamese man half to death absolutely counted as a sin.

He's also not shielded from criticism in the Catholic bubble. If you look at the comments on the social posts there are

floods of comments telling him to not worship false idols. And if you delve even further into the realms of Catholic digital media – again, a thing I was completely unaware of before writing this – you'll find that conservative Catholics actually despise Wahlberg. He supported the push for gay marriage and framed it as a matter of equality, which was enough to really upset them. When he MCDed an event with the Pope in Philadelphia in 2015, Twitter user @CatholicSat tweeted: "Disappointed, Mark Wahlberg (supporter of gay 'marriage') is MC #FestivalOfFamilies #PopeInPhilly I want know how much he & Aretha were paid" before saying that Aretha Franklin was disrespectful of the pope and that her rendition of Amazing Grace was bad. The audacity.

So, why would Wahlberg open himself up for this level of criticism at all? Here's the thing, I think this is actually a matter of faith for Marky Mark. I think he does think that you and I would all be better if we 'stayed prayed up' or whatever. It's a natural fit for him. But what about Hallow and Alex Jones? You might remember earlier this season, when I was talking about the wellness-to-white-supremacy pipeline, where I talked about finding soft on-ramps. People get into QAnon because they're concerned about children and then they end up storming the Capitol. I think that's what's happening here. Mark Wahlberg is a soft on-ramp for an app with an overwhelmingly conservative agenda. And if you're not careful you could go from prayed up to a fringe pro-life rally in a matter of months.

Right. That's the episode. This one actually made me sad. I read so many



blogs in the LGBTQ section of the Chastity Project talking about how they felt better now that they'd stopped hanging with the queer community and gotten right with God. Which is such a bummer I can barely come up with a zingy outro. If you want to... stayed prayed up... but probably to some alternative entity... like Satan, Kylie Minogue. Talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!

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Episode written and narrated by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey. Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))

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