

Not of the world . . . but like it

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 1, 1998](#) issue

Sports Illustrated has a “Go Figure” column of numbers trivia. The May installment included the item, “103 new sports magazines launched in 1997, a total surpassed only by the 111 new sex-related titles.” Thoughts rushed to my mind: (1) New magazines are being launched in a time when print is supposed to be disappearing and supposedly fewer people are reading. (2) Magazines, predicted to wane, are waxing. (3) Great forests will be felled for 214 sports and sex magazines. (4) I’d better find a religious angle for my column. I’ve got it: sports and sex are the religions of many Americans. (5) I can do better than that.

Recently I brought greetings to the 50th anniversary meeting of the Evangelical Press Association. My theme was “twigging,” also called niche publishing by the industry. Magazines like *Life*, *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier’s*, etc., that aspire to be “a whole tree” shading a broad variety of topics are not as successful as those that address just one twig of a subject or readership. I risked charges of violating PC by suggesting that publishers would do better “with a magazine aimed at left-handed Korean ex-nun lesbian boomer yachtspersons” than with one aimed at the general public.

On the way out I scooped up some copies of EPA-member publications and found certification not only of my twigging thesis but of *Sports Illustrated’s* reckonings. In my sampling was *Sports Spectrum*, a very polished *Sports Illustrated* clone published by “a non-denominational Christian organization whose purpose is to lead people of all nations to personal faith in Jesus Christ.” The featured athletes excel, pursue challenges and “live in Christ.”

Aspire is a clean, Christian version of *Cosmopolitan*. There is discreet cleavage on the cover, which announces articles on “Don’t Sell Yourself Short! A Nice Girl’s Guide” and “The Secrets Your Bible Tells About You.”

There’s also *Excellence* for “victorious Christian women,” mainly African-American evangelicals (an *Essence* clone?). In “Am I Undersexed or Is He Oversexed?” the author advises readers to “move to a more specialized study of your husband’s

body.” A recommended reading list mentions Solomon on Sex and Getting Your Sex Life Off to a Great Start.

Am I making fun of all this? No. I’m ambivalent. The ironist historian in me recalls that 30 years ago evangelical preachers denounced preoccupation with sports, sex, cosmetics and other nonspiritual distractions. Now they’ve switched, and evangelicals are the most worldly, materialist Protestants around.

About 40 years ago I criticized mainstream Protestants like Methodists and their *Together* magazine for not being prophetic and for trying to create a bourgeois Christian world within the worldly world. I advised that they challenge the world directly. But that world is not sitting out there waiting to be challenged. These evangelicals are creating a world-within-the-world which is more like the world than their parents ever envisioned inhabiting. Does adding “in Christ” to these themes excuse the fact that their treatment of them looks just like the world’s?

While I have reservations about some of the magazines’ accents and theologies, I admire at least some of their endeavors to connect faith and life for people who used to be told to be crabby and world-denying. Still, I’m nervous. Will they be able to counter the consumerism that marks the markets they emulate? This is all up for grabs.