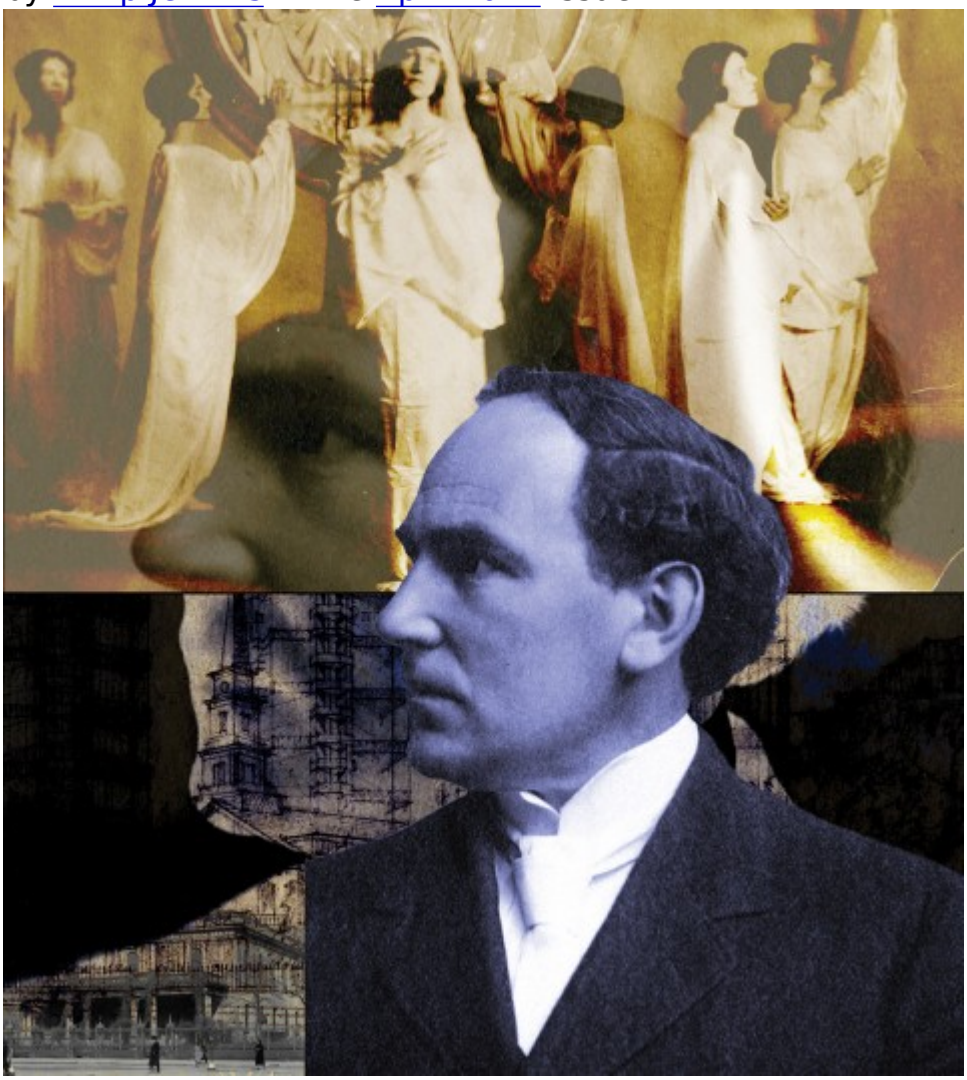
William Guthrie’s weird Christianity

The rector of St. Mark’s in-the-Bowery brought the church into relationship with the Greenwich Village avant-garde of the 1920s.

by Philip Jenkins in the April 2024 issue



William Norman Guthrie (*Century* illustration / Source images: Public domain)

John Stuart Mill declared that the crotchet of one generation becomes the truth of the next and the truism of the one after that. Over time, weirdness becomes normalized. Illustrating this point is the career of the distinctly crotchety Episcopal

priest William Guthrie, who in the 1920s regularly provided the newspapers with shocking stories of bizarre religious practices perceived as flagrant violations of the most basic tenets of faith and decency. A century later, Guthrie looks like a groundbreaking innovator, even a prophetic figure.

William Norman Guthrie (1868–1944) was born in Scotland to American parents and educated in the US. In 1911 he became rector of St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery in New York, holding the position until 1937. His exact religious beliefs were unclear. On occasion, he seemed to deny the literal existence of God, and he described the Book of Common Prayer as a "beautiful museum piece," declaring himself a "Catholic Futurist, not tied to any age." He saw little hope for his own mainline tradition, when educated elites had so completely defected from the churches: as he warned, "not only are the Protestants doomed, but they are losing at the top." When he took over at St. Mark's, his congregation consisted of just 18 older women.

To counteract this decline, Guthrie sought massively to expand the church's cultural awareness and sensitivity. He formed close connections with Greenwich Village's avant-garde artists and thinkers, which also meant being in dialogue with the esoteric ideas then so thoroughly entrenched in that world. Guthrie himself dabbled in the esoteric, publishing *The Gospel of Osiris* and writing the introduction to a once-influential collection of lost and apocryphal scriptures, *The Forgotten Books of Eden*. Prefiguring much modern scholarly opinion, he thought it impossible to understand the world of Jesus without knowing the book of Enoch and the odes and psalms of Solomon.

Cultural celebrities flocked to his cause. The committee he appointed to promote the church's cultural outreach included Kahlil Gibran, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Vachel Lindsay. The church became a beacon for advanced culture and particularly for experimental modernism. By the end of the decade, St. Mark's had offered a platform to such distinguished speakers as novelist John Cowper Powys, poets Amy Lowell and Carl Sandburg, mystical artist Nicholas Roerich, and astrologer Evangeline Adams. In 1920, dancer Isadora Duncan delivered the church's Christmas Eve sermon.

Guthrie was devoted to what would later be known as interfaith outreach, and on a grand scale. Reportedly, he had more than 80 different rituals translated from their original languages in order to be presented in the church, usually by practitioners of the faiths in question. As the *New Yorker* reported, it was a 1922 service by a Parsi

priest that “caused appreciable numbers of wealthy Episcopalians to look on Guthrie as the Wild Man of Borneo.” The swelling ranks of critics included the very conservative bishop of New York William T. Manning, who launched a series of futile attempts to prevent each of Guthrie’s new extravaganzas.

Even without the alleged syncretism, Guthrie’s services were memorable affairs, including, as *Time* noted, “incense, colored lights, gongs and other cinematic musical effects.” A 1923 liturgy finalized the breach with Manning. According to sensational newspaper reports, a troop of “bare-leg, bare-hip” female dancers had undertaken a ritual dance in the church’s chancel, implying a cross between a black mass and a vaudeville show. *Time* wrote of “maidens in ‘gowns of a flimsy character,’ dancing, prancing lightly in the nave of St. Mark’s-in-the-Bouwerie, glorifying God and the American girl.”

What had actually happened was far more sedate: a group of six Barnard College students, fully covered in robes, had performed an elegant liturgical dance. But even that account challenged the standards of the day. Not only were young women prominently involved in leading a service, but they were actually moving their bodies (and admittedly, yes, they were barefoot). The congregants cut their contributions to nothing, and Manning cut St. Mark’s off from the cycle of episcopal visitation and thus from holding confirmations.

Guthrie never gave ground or repented. The dances and interfaith services continued, and in conservative eyes they grew even more scandalous. It was bad enough having Baha’is and Hindus hold services at St. Mark’s, but at least many White Americans would acknowledge these as authentic religions, however inferior. Celebrating “A Devotion for Buddha’s Birthday” might just be acceptable at a far stretch.

But Guthrie’s sympathies extended powerfully to Native Americans, who seemed quite beyond the pale to his critics, and he protested the theft of Native land. Here Guthrie was reflecting the enthusiasms of his Greenwich Village circle, many of whom had visited the Taos colony headed by Mabel Dodge Luhan. Quite suddenly, White intellectual elites were taking Native spiritualities very seriously in their own right, rather than just seeing them as sad relics of primitivism. Just before Thanksgiving 1924, Guthrie invited two Mohawks, clad in full traditional garb, to recite prayers in their own language.

In 1924, a pastor who opened his arms to other faiths and supported Native Americans, who welcomed liturgical dance led by women, and who brought the church into inextricable intimacy with avant-garde secular culture was a figure of public mockery, presumed to be of dubious sanity. A century later, his modern-day counterpart would be quite close to the mainstream, with a clear niche at a leading seminary. He would likely have a regular column in the *Century*.