

On Writing while Religious: Mmm, Yes

Alex Brianson

‘Jesus Christ...tells people to pray to God in the most intimate of fashions, with the word “Abba”, loving parent, as a child communicates with his or her parent...His Eros is manifest in his love of life, of people, of nature, of gisting, of hosting...He taught people to let their fears go so that they could truly relate erotically to the blessings of self, others, and existence...One might say that Jesus came to reveal the Eros of God, the intimacy God shares with creation and especially with the *anawim* of creation. How else could Jesus say that to feed the hungry is to feed the Creator?’

– Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983, p.303)

One of the unexpected blessings of my forties has been a new relationship with Christianity. It has arrived rather gradually, over a period of years, and is not at all what I expected when I started questing again at the start of my last new decade. In my teens, I learned to loathe as hypocritical and cruel both the desiccated religion of those around me who proclaimed their belief in Christ, and the Church of England, whose difficulty with the actual message of Jesus regarding peace, unconditional love, and the need to help the disadvantaged was so evident. It was an open and shut case: nothing to see here, move on.

For many years, I made no progress, because I didn’t see the need. If I felt religious I could use other traditions and paths, and I did. I had a few mystical experiences – not many, and brief, but important. They kept me going, when I didn’t forget them amidst bouts of depression and long, long, long periods of overwork. My teens and twenties were all focused on expanding the abilities of my rational mind, as were most of my thirties, and I came to view religion as little more than a distraction or a structure of repression, which, in its institutional forms, it has of course often been. For that reason, among others, I tended to see religions that in my society are minority or outsider perspectives as easier to access: Neopaganism, Buddhism, Hinduism. I came at them without knowing where the bodies were buried, which made things easier.

I still value the lessons I learned from them. Chief among these has been the celebration of creation, the relishing of the material world, that I found in Wicca and other forms of Neopaganism. The best illustration of this that I know is Kate Bush’s video for *The Sensual World*; if this doesn’t move you, or still you, then you need to go find the poetry in your soul that for some reason has been buried. Every time she sings ‘mmm, yes’ the universe dissolves and reforms in ecstasy. It does.

In more recent years, however, I have begun to find paths in Christianity that are similar. They begin with the Creation Spirituality of Matthew Fox, from whose book *Original Blessing* I quote at the beginning. His uncovering and evangelising of strands in Christian thought that show God as female and male, of the importance of the Spirit and the ongoing creation of the universe, of the joy that God takes in Her work and in which we are called to share, his insistence upon the need to take Jesus’ call for radical equality seriously, has come as a wave of purifying recognition. It gives me the authority to see the universe as holy, to see myself as holy, to see everything as holy. Reader, you may not need this, but I did, and do. It gives meaning and purpose to what I do, and helps me find words and identify feelings that used to be nebulous, inchoate.

This is why I continue to write. My academic work developed in its last fifteen years to be explicit in its search for new ways of thinking about political and social questions,

grounded in the attempt to improve them, make them more just, more sustainable. My fiction, more freshly out of the womb though it is, has a similar perspective, although it is less explicit.

I write to express myself, yes, and to fulfil certain debts to those who inspire me. But I also write to help some of those who feel, and are, on the margins of our society – the *anawim* in Fox's word, invoking the Hebrew - feel they are less so, that they are loved, that there is a place for them. For me, this is a way of being religious, of honouring the creative energy of God, however we think of Her. It's also a way of changing lifeworlds, helping people believe that, in the words of a recent US campaign against LGBTQI+ youth suicide, it gets better. I loved Armistead Maupin's work for doing this for me. And if ever my fiction is published, and it does the same for others, that will bring me great joy.

Reader, you may think me insane, or the victim of my depression drugs, or wrong-headed because I don't limit myself to the material world and empirically-observable, quantifiable phenomena. Or, if you are from a conservative religious mindset, you may think me wholly misguided, or even 'Lost', because I don't believe in the literal truth of the Bible, and take a universalist, ecumenical view of Christian traditions and other faiths. Certainly the Hitler Youth-belonging Grand Inquisitor, the former Pope Benedict XVI, excommunicated Matthew Fox for heresy. I used to live in Northern Ireland, where many people thought, and still think, that I am damned merely for being a homo, so I am not blind to the shortcomings of many so-called Christians and their religious organisations. I still have many reservations about the Church, and am not sure whether I identify as Christian rather than someone who loves God and tries to work with Her Spirit.

All I can say is that I have learned humility many times now – not the humblebrag, not the self-loathing (which I admit I still struggle with), but the sometimes-joyful, sometimes-painful fact or conviction I have been wrong.

I don't know where my quest will end; at the moment I'm attending a Quaker meeting, and learning to 'attend to what Love asks of me', to paraphrase from George Fox (no relation to Matthew F. as far as I know). I am learning to look for the Light, wherever it may be found. And to value 'that of God' in everything. As my fifties approach, I think I find myself emerging from the long spiritual midlife crisis that Jung recognised and religious paths of many kinds have identified as part of life's journey. I am a cliché yet again. But just as I was in my Stock/Aitken/Waterman-loving teens and twenties, I don't care. *Showin' Out* and Proud. And enjoying this time of creation.