

# *Faith and the Creative Writer in a Secular World*

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In a society where belief in God is taken as a given—as a natural part of life—when faith isn't questioned publicly and reflexively—it would seem an absurdity to even need to approach such a subject. A believing society doesn't necessarily examine its writers' faith or lack of it; it is simply assumed that a sense of the sacred is a core of art, implicit in the work, and leave it at that. Except for the fanatics, who in any age will try to dissect literature or any form of the arts to see if they conform to the zealot's idea of God, literature is pretty much left alone to express or not express the Divine. Fanatics of course have attacked literature all through the ages—from 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritans who banned the theatre to 60's Bible-thumpers who tried to ban CS Lewis' Narnia series on the grounds it was too pagan, from the Ayatollah Khomeini putting out a death warrant on Salman Rushdie, to those who still think that JK Rowling is in league with the Devil, the enemies of the imagination, who think they are the champions of God, all share a depressing literal-mindedness and they can make things very difficult for writers.

But generally, in the past, when the zealots weren't in power, literature, like the other arts, was allowed to go on with its own business. It wasn't just that people were scared, in times when religion was central, to engage explicitly or directly with expressions of faith in their work. It was also that there was felt no need to do so. Elizabeth I famously said, 'I do not make windows into men's souls,' and that is fairly much the attitude in much pre-modern, natural-believing and non-fundamentalist societies who just assume it is par for the course that writers and other artists, being a part of their society, will share in that society's beliefs and understandings.

When religious characters were introduced in a work, it was not to affirm or challenge the existence of God but rather as some kind of device or occasionally a comment on the distance that sometimes occurred between religious belief and practice—the lecherous monk or greedy priest or hypocritical parson for instance. For in a believing society, it is hypocrisy and the distance between the religion's core and the activities of its members which are seen as the greatest threat to religion, and not questions of the existence of God, which is simply accepted.

Writers were certainly not expected to bring God into every or any work; the fact that Shakespeare, for instance, did not approach religion directly did not make anyone in his time think him irreligious. (the Puritans of course thought differently) Shakespeare's plays are steeped in religious imagery and suffused with spiritual understanding, and sometimes they deal indirectly with questions of faith, as in *The Merchant of Venice*, in which neither Jew nor Christian behaves particularly well—but it is not overtly God-bothering,

as it were. That is because it was written for the theatre, not the church. People understood those distinctions! But the lack of a here-I-stand credo in Shakespeare leads some literal-minded modern critics erroneously to assume he shared their atheism or agnosticism, which to me seems very far from the truth.

Elizabethan playwrights did not generally engage with explicit questions of faith because their works were, in a way, the novels of their day—essentially secular story-telling forms that could however implicitly or more directly touch on questions of faith. But poets often engaged directly with faith—think of people like John Donne and George Herbert, for instance, and Shakespeare himself, in poems such as the Phoenix and the Turtle.

Interestingly, poetry has continued to be an area of creative literary expression, through Milton and Blake and Gerard Manley Hopkins and countless others, that has kept a much more direct line to God, as it were. Maybe because of its association with song and ritual and ecstatic states it seems particularly well-suited to the direct expression of the internal experience of faith and the Divine. And that still holds true. Think of our own great poet, Les Murray. It is a strange but true fact that poets even these days in as resolutely secular a society as Australia's still are given a good deal more licence to express such things than are, say, novelists. But then perhaps that's because poetry, like religion, is seen as a fringe activity!

It is my feeling that the novel, which is my own chosen mode of expression, is a rather more secular form of literature than poetry, and more resistant to the direct expression of faith. On the face of it, that might seem odd, for sacred story is a central part of the three great monotheistic religions and of course Jesus chose to frame a great deal of his teaching in what you might call mini-stories, parables. But though the Bible has nourished the imagination of countless writers, it cannot be said to be a good model for the novelist!

Even in a later believing—but beginning to doubt—society like that of Victorian England, it was still generally taken for granted that writers believed in God and thus there was no need for them to approach religion directly. The condemnation of religious hypocrisy however was even stronger than in former times—think of the novels of Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, Wilkie Collins, and so on, and elsewhere, Tolstoy, Balzac, Dostoevsky, Hugo, to name just a few..As well, a new form of literature, children's literature, which began to make its presence felt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at least in English-speaking countries, taking over from the wonder tales and fairy tales and legends of the past, kept a very strong link to a sense of awe, wonder and enchantment which was very close to the numinous and mystical, as you can see for instance in the work of writers such as George McDonald and Charles Kingsley.

Even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, you could still get throwback novels where the implicit presence of God is very strong, such as the extraordinary saga *Kristin Lavransdatter*, by the Norwegian writer Sigrid Undset, which recreates the world of 14<sup>th</sup> century Norway, complete with its religious life, in an utterly convincing and visceral way. But as the 20<sup>th</sup> century went on and the challenges to religion and belief grew stronger, things started to change. It was no longer religious hypocrisy only that was attacked now but the very notion of God himself and the entire validity of religion per se. And now a strange thing starts happening. The implicit nature of faith so present in older works begins to disappear in novels, except in areas such as children's literature and fantasy literature where a strong sense of the numinous and spiritual remains. Much more explicit works on the subject—whether for or against-- began to be written, ranging from the literary, such as the novels of Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Georges Bernanos, Muriel Spark, Flannery O'Connor, Shusaku Endo, Marilynne Robinson, Anthony Burgess, Salman Rushdie, Sally Vickers and Philip Pullman(to name just a few) to the mass-market, such as the Da Vinci Code, ex-vampire chronicles novelist Anne Rice's recent explorations of Jesus' life, Morris West's books, the Left Behind series, Susan Howatch's series on Anglican life, and Phil Rickman's crime novels with their strong flavour of religion. Some explore the interior religious experience, mysticism or struggles with conscience; others explore theology or religious philosophy, still others concentrate on the externals of religion, such as Church politics, history, etc.

Now that's all very well, and many of these writers do it very well, my own favourites being Bernanos' lovely classic, *Journal d'un Cure de campagne*, (Diary of a Country Priest), and Marilynne Robinson's recent novel, *Gilead*. Others such as the Da Vinci Code or the Left Behind series—well, the least said, the better.

All too often, in fact, in my opinion, the explicit religious novel doesn't work. The trouble is I think it takes not only a very, very skilled and sensitive writer, whether believing or not, to bring off a direct novelistic portrayal of faith without doing violence to the intrinsic nature of the art of novel-writing. The 50's and 60's novelists still operated within a society where religion was seen as a core experience—they may be writing about doubt, about struggles with conscience and crises in faith, but it still matters to them. But these days novelists struggle with that central concept as a valid thing. Writing about religion all too often seems to require a kind of deliberate choice, a sort of statement, which all too often militates against a convincing portrayal.

Too often the religious are seen as a curiosity, or else as a threat. Too often the portrayal of them and the spectrum of religious experience itself is brutally ignorant or clumsily artificial or prosaically missing the point or conversely like the croaking of a *grenouille de benitier* or font-frog, as the French saying pungently describes people of a mawkishly pious disposition. In a frank and very interesting dialogue with Philip Pullman a few years ago, Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, had this very insightful thing to say about the problem:

*'What you learn, I think, about absorbing a really serious piece of fiction is not a message. Your world has expanded, your world has enlarged at the end of it, and the more a writer focusses on a message, the less expansion there'll be. I think that's why sometimes the most successful "Christian" fiction is written by people who are not trying hard to be Christian about it. A bit of a paradox, but I'm thinking of Flannery O'Connor, the American writer, my favourite example here. She's somebody who, quite deliberately doesn't set out to make the points that you might expect her to be making but wants to build a world in which certain things may become plausible or tangible, palpable, but not to get a message across.'* (quoted in The Dark Materials Debate, published March 17, 2004, in The Daily Telegraph, UK.)

Too often there's no sense of expansion, just a paint-by-numbers job. And a tiresomely small range of core theme. Mawkish religious sentiment might have been popular in Victorian times; these days the mawkishness is usually expressed in novel after modern novel in which characters lose their faith. Coming to faith or simply getting on with it is a much rarer thing. And it's very rare indeed to read novels in which faith, this core aspect of human experience—which incidentally is vastly more common than atheism, the world over—is actually depicted in a way that rings true. Partly of course that's down to the idea Tolstoy encapsulated when he wrote in *Anna Karenina* that happy families are all alike but unhappy families are all unhappy in their own way. It's not really the truth, of course--any social worker or policeman can attest to the fact that unhappy families are often unhappy for depressingly similar reasons—but that doesn't matter to the novelist. Alienation is at the heart of the modern novel and so works like *Diary of a Country Priest*

or Gilead are very very rare, especially now, in the chaos of belief that characterises our times. Incidentally, the author of Gilead, contemporary American novelist Marilynne Robinson, whose beautiful, plain and utterly convincing depictions of profoundly religious smalltown Americans, have attracted many readers, and certainly not just Bible-thumpers—has also received much literary acclaim(yes, even in a secular world, such things are still recognised, when they ring true)

Mostly, though, it's as if someone who has never been in love or is tone deaf is attempting to describe love or music. You are aware of the strings, of the scenery—you do not enter into the heart of the story, whether that purports to explore the interior or exterior landscape of religion. And that is because the writer cannot enter into the heart of the character they are attempting to bring to life. If they believe, they cannot express it in words except ones that are cliched or conversely. If they don't believe--and they do not know anyone who does—and they move in circles where belief in God is seen as backward and embarrassing, the sign of a lower, unenlightened intelligence—then religious people are to them like shadow-puppets or stick-figures, unable to act except in cliché and stereotype, unable to take part in any story that doesn't carry a heavy freight of moralism, whether for or against religion. On both sides, people too often want to make a point, to send a message—about fundamentalism and extremism, or guilt, or Church corruption and hypocrisy, or whatever. And it kills the story, and the characters, just as much as the overtly ideological or political novel does.



For me this modern trend to explore religion in novels has only confirmed my instinctive feeling that it's usually best to keep too much *explicit* discussion of religion out of creative fiction, and that the old way—the *implicit* way—is best and does most justice both to the novelistic and the numinous, to Art and to God. And that still happens. Two modern Australian authors who spring to my mind immediately as characteristic of the implicit way of conveying spiritual and religious experience are Christopher Koch and Tim Winton. Religious themes such as redemption, forgiveness, guilt, conscience and mysticism are all there in their novels but just like Rowan Williams said, they become palpable, tangible, living and real.

I'd like to move from the general to the particular now and talk a little about my own experience and religious background. I'm a writer who's mainly written for children and young people, because that's what I love most, and also because as I mentioned before, that central sense of wonder, enchantment, joy, awe, hope and discovery which characterises the best children's literature is not so very far from the numinous and the mysterious. It answers directly to my nature, both emotional and spiritual. Though I've carried a strong vision of God within me for as long as I can remember, I have very rarely explicitly approached questions of faith in my work, apart from a realistic novel called *The First Day*, which explored varieties of religious experience directly, and a fantasy novel called *Snow, Fire, Sword*, which is partly about the effects of religious fanaticism, and my most recent novel, a mystery story called *The Madman of Venice*, which deals, in part—but only in minor part—with religious prejudice.

Each of those novels have approached these things obliquely, though, through the medium of a story which didn't always do what I thought it would do.

But by far most of the religious and spiritual ideas and feelings I have expressed in my work have been implicit within the work itself. Partly, that's to do with my nature; partly with my upbringing, which was, I suppose a bit of a throwback!

Like most writers, as far back as I can remember, I loved stories: to read them, to listen to them, to enter into them. I loved stories of adventure, of mystery, of drama and terror, but my favourites of all were those that dealt with that enchanted otherworld that is sometimes called fairyland. The world beyond the wardrobe, in the cracks of the floor, through a river, across the sea, in the hollow tree, through the looking-glass: this world has often beckoned those like me. Whether we were escaping a horrible boarding-school, or painful memories, or in my case, a complicated and passionate family maelstrom, this world offered both space and time. It offered possibility. More than that, it offered the chance of transformation, so that one could re-emerge into the world re-invigorated, newly ready to cope, understand, and overcome.

Now it may be thought by some that escaping into fairyland is a rejection of God, but I strongly affirm it is not so. As I said earlier, a sense of wonder and enchantment is not that far removed from a sense of the numinous and the divine, and very far removed indeed from the dead hand of materialism. The great fantasy writer-and devout Catholic--Tolkien once spoke of the difference between escape and desertion, and pointed out that only gaolers fear escapees. In that land beyond time and space and the constraints of mundane reality, countless children have found both consolation and armour against the slings and arrows of the world. As well, paradoxically, they have refound the world, with different features, a world both distanced through story and more immediately accessible, because it grows from the unconscious of dreams and visions. It is, in fact, a kind of spiritual experience, and it can lead to remarkable things.

When I was a child, one of the ways I coped with the interminable shouting matches, the transcontinental quarrels and coldnesses and just as passionate makings-up of the family, and the strict edicts of my parents, was to remove myself in spirit. Not only by reading or dreaming, but through a strange willed sensation. I would look at a stone, or a piece of wood, or a pattern on the ceiling, a piece of paper, anything really, focus on it till I felt as if I could crack its essence, and emerge into a parallel reality. It was an actual physical reaction, this sensation of being in another world: a kind of dreamy dissolving of the limbs, a swimming of the head, and yet a great clarity of mind, and a delight that was piercingly sweet. And yet it was the time when I was also most aware of the world itself; of its thrilling beauty—and of the great golden Presence within it, the loving Presence that from as far back as I can remember I *knew* was there.

Now I am not afraid to say that presence was that of God; not afraid to say it wasn't a question of simply believing in him, but that I actually *knew* he was there. Knowing it—knowing He was there--was just a natural part of things, like the fact I knew I had two eyes and not three, or more basically even that I was alive and not dead. Sometimes I felt His presence as a kind of golden funnel in the sky; sometimes as a kind of silent singing; sometimes as a breath in my ear, sometimes as a knowledge of something—someone—speaking in my heart. It was something that never went away, even when some of the things I merely *believed* in as a child—the existence of Santa Claus, the idea that one day fairies would grant me three wishes, or that if I had a nightmare and told someone about it, it would come true—faded from my mind as a teenager(though I still loved stories about all those things and could make up stuff about them!).

I did not know it was a grace, this knowledge; I did not even know, until I was well into my teens, that greatness, that love, that heart-filling Presence, was God. Or at least, I knew, but did not dare to say so out loud, to explain, to articulate it, for not only could I literally not do so—words failing me--but I was afraid of what my parents would say if I spoke to them about it.

My parents were—still are—very much God-botherers, in the sense that religion is an absolutely central part of their lives. Their bookshelves were lined with books on all sorts of aspects of religion. At home, they talked often about God, and about our Catholic faith. But being very different sorts of personalities, they expressed very different things.

My father, a fervent, mystical but also deeply sensual man, has always been very interested in the fringe and the esoteric, in short, the heretic. Though in no sense a wowser—indeed, passionately in love with my mother, he is also a gourmet, wine lover and appreciator of beautiful music, literature, art, and nature—he also has a strongly pessimistic side. Restlessly curious and questioning, fearful that hope was in fact hopeless, he constantly sought and still seeks certainty, even if of a negative kind. A reader of romantic adventure novels and poetry, he also told us lots of fairy stories and ghost stories, but he was also someone whose childhood had been both privileged and tormented, haunted by humanity's capacity for inhumanity and cruelty. He feared that the world was ruled by the Devil and that God either could or would not help you when evil came calling. The second world war and a deep, terrifying accompanying family trauma had shattered his childhood and led him to become, in a sense, an exile. Naturally rather a loner, he also did not accept the mainstream, the orthodox, the common knowledge, because he felt set apart by his family's situation. It predisposed him to fear that he was a heretic at heart, and yet to glory in that. For him, what resonated most clearly was the story of hopeless causes, of fierce courage and certainty crushed by a greater power. This was one of the reasons, too, why for a long time he was interested in the heretical religion of Southern France, Catharism. The religion's central tenet—that the world was the creation of the Devil, not of God, and that all of us were exiled spirits yearning for our true home in heaven, that our flesh only imprisoned us in evil and fear—resonated emotionally with him in a way I found astounding, for it seemed to run so counter to his appreciation of that very same world. He admired the last Cathares who after their last stronghold in Montsegur fell, were offered mercy if they converted back to Catholicism.

Most refused and went stoically to their deaths at the stake.

I was moved very much by their story, especially as Dad told it to us, but I was also repelled by the fearful knowledge that people might choose death over life. I loved life myself, for to me the world was beautiful and rich and filled with hope and thrill, suffused with that loving Presence, but I still unconsciously understood how such a death was possible.

Because I knew that for my father, it, was all very real. He could see himself being led out to the stake, or fighting to the death. For him, the thought of death constantly validates life, the grand rejection of compromise is what moves him.

But my mother is completely different: much more orthodox, less wildly emotional in her Catholicism than my father, she is also much more suspicious, too, of the romantic appeal of such things as Catharism. Being moved by such things was like the tremors of emotion induced by ceremony, magnificent music, beautiful words; very real, and yet not enough to sustain a faith, in her opinion. Logic and analysis were much more likely to do that, along with fidelity to doctrine, ritual and prayer. Much more analytical than my father, she was also much less surprised and dismayed by the ugly bits of human nature; her capacity to catch us out in a lie was legendary among us children. Introducing us to "difficult" writers like Anthony Burgess and Evelyn Waugh, she loved discussing them with us and the difficult moral, ethical and spiritual questions they raised.

As I've said, God's presence for me, as a child just as much as now, is completely real; I feel it in every pore of my skin, and every inch of the air around me. The world is the creation of God, I knew instinctively, and could not be that of the Devil, whose wish was to destroy the world and to tear out the very roots of heaven, in his inconsolable rage and vicious sorrow. So my father's notions were not ones I could share. But neither were my mother's more reasoned and analytical ones, for she could not, I thought, relate to my own vision.

Yes, I knew God was there—but I could not describe Him to my parents. I knew they wanted, oh, so passionately, to impart to me their own images, their own perceptions, I knew they wanted me to reflect them back to them but I couldn't. Literally couldn't. Something stopped my speech, prevented me from explaining.

It became especially difficult to talk about it when, in the early 70's, my parents, who had been greatly disturbed by the changes made by Vatican II, joined the Latin Mass Society and began going to the clandestine Tridentine Masses that had started being held in places like the Lindfield Community Hall, in Sydney. And they became even more focussed on their religion in a way which I and my siblings, as rebellious teenagers, found particularly irksome, even when there were other families there with teenagers around our age: in particular, the big Irish-American family of the Gibsons and dreamy, long-haired blue-eyed Mel, who my younger sister and I sighed over well out of earshot of our parents!

It was all so embarrassing, for us. We went to a Catholic school; yet we were known to the nuns to be the children of heretics who had rejected the Pope's rulings. We wanted so much to be part of freewheeling 70's Aussie culture, yet we were forced to go back into an ancient past, because of our stiff-necked parents. No-one else we knew at school or in the neighbourhood went to Latin Mass. Driving through the suburbs to Mass, I sometimes felt like a prisoner in a time capsule, a traveler from another planet.

By this time, I was in my mid to late teens, and writing, writing, writing. In that strange, wonderful space which is the home of creativity, I knew why I had been born. I knew that I had been given a gift and that I must use it. It was a joyful, thrilling feeling like looking at the stars at night and being overwhelmed by the sheer, wondrous miracle of our existence in this world of deep meaning..

In this space, I felt very close to God, in a way that, speechless in front of their passionate certainties, I still could not explain to my parents. I pretended to be cold to my parents' religious passion, secretly trying to hold within myself my own feelings: I did not want my parents labeling them or trying to change them.

Instead I badgered my poor parents about the irksome restrictions, as I saw it, that they had come to espouse. Why should I, because I was female, have to cover my head in Latin Mass, and not the men? Why should God extend his blessing to only a small section of the population? Why did faith always mean you had to be prepared to fight, if not to the death, then certainly to a standstill?



Fighting against the Papacy held no interest for me at all; the bizarre conspiracy theories that were aired by some LMS members made me prickle with embarrassment. And so I irked my parents with questions, with challenges, but most of all with a mask of carefully-cultivated indifference that I was uncomfortably aware would hurt them the most. It was the only way I could protect myself from the burning of the passion that burns so hotly in them.

But as the years passed, a developing sense of what it meant to have faith, as a creative writer, forced me into uncomfortable examinations. It was more than spiritual ecstasy you needed, I discovered; more than knowing naturally that God is there, that His Presence is real. It's not just a question of reflecting wonder and beauty and meaning; it's not just within the beautiful and benevolent and joyful that you will find Presence. It's also there in human suffering, pain and rage, and especially in the story of Christ's Passion. What does it mean to be the saviour of the human race? What does it really entail?

As a child, I'd been taught that original sin was about the recognition of evil that lay in every human heart, and now I understood its implications more fully. It was that capacity for choice between God and the Devil which more than anything else, had birthed human consciousness and made us what we were: exiles from the animals' Garden of Eden, eternally searching for peace, yet so full of potential that God had chosen to incarnate his Presence in one of us, who reached out to all of us, to the kingdom of God within each one of us.

Swimming naturally, unconsciously, in the ocean of mystery and wonder, yet riven deep inside by our own complex nature, was it any wonder many of us refused to see further than our own navels? Was it any wonder that some of us chose to cast the Presence from us, either blandly ignoring it altogether, or deliberately, proudly choosing the negation, the Adversary?

As I grew older, these things became more and more important to me, the lessons of painful and wonderful experience and curious observation of other lives merging with a naturally visionary temperament to strengthen, to blood what otherwise might have been a too ethereal, bloodless gift of creative expression.

Speechless as a secretive, imaginative child before my parents' religious passion, I had thought it a hindrance, an obstacle to my own vision. Today, the understanding of that passion burns deeply in me, the feeling of what religion actually is, for those who fight for it, and in its name. I still do not share my parents' religious practices and many of their harsher beliefs. And, disagreeing with them about the Papacy and its recent incumbents, I feel much closer to the mainstream of the Church than they do. And I feel completely vaccinated against religious extremism. But I still know that my parents and the vivid, turbulent religious atmosphere they brought me up in immeasurably enriched and expanded my understanding of God and of religion, both by challenging and by affirming. But it's also immensely enriched me as a creative artist. The beauty and images and rituals of our faith were just as much a part of that as the ethical questions and endless theological discussions and arguments we engaged in; and when it came time to go out into the world unassisted by parents, all that came with me, under the skin.