



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Writers Save: How Poets and Novelists Came to Comfort the Faithful and Strengthen the Doubters

A Conversation with Alan Jacobs, Wheaton College

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KAIRYS: You speak a lot about the role of writers and poets in sustaining faith for modern American Christians. When did this phenomenon start, and how is it being presented in America today?

JACOBS: It's not absolutely clear when the phenomenon — the phenomenon of literature and the arts being the *chief* or *only* props for people's faith — started. That's something I'm trying to figure out right now. The first writer treated as a prophetic voice uniquely representing Christianity in an environment where churches were losing power was probably Dostoevsky, though there are other people roughly contemporaneous with Dostoevsky who started to think that way about poetry and writing. The phenomenon occurred a little bit later in the United States, aided by the natural and reflexive American anti-institutional nature, a kind of a suspicion of religious institutions that's similar to the suspicion that Americans tend to have about political institutions.

But for a long time, there was a kind of a countervailing conservative streak—a suspicion and fear of the world of literature and the world of the arts—among American Christians. I think this is true of many Catholics, and also of many fundamentalist Christians and early evangelicals. This is something that's been sustained in Catholic culture simply by the knowledge that there is such a thing as an index of prohibited books. And with fundamentalists, in some cases all books can be seen as forbidden

except the Bible.

KAIRYS: So you see this phenomenon occurring mainly among Catholics, evangelicals, and fundamentalist Christians in the United States?

JACOBS: Largely. I think that's where it first starts. You start seeing it as people move away from the more traditional forms of religious practice. It seems to start picking up considerable momentum in the '50s and '60s, which I think is because of the emergence of the counterculture "Jesus people" movement in the '60s. It wasn't just Vatican II, but the reforms that were in the air before Vatican II actually convened. It also resulted from the emergence of a distinct evangelical movement out of fundamentalism.

All of those things laid the groundwork for people willing to look for spiritual nourishment somewhere beyond the words of their official teachers and leaders. Literature and the arts became major beneficiaries of that as people started to say, I see God more in these sources than I do in church or in the Bible.

KAIRYS: You touched a bit on Dostoevsky, but who are some of the other primary writers and artists who were influential in shaping this phenomenon?

JACOBS: This movement in American Christianity has a strong anglophile element to it, so a lot of people who didn't treat American writers as having spiritual significance certainly acknowledged writers like C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, and Chesterton. Then writers began to come to prominence in the American context, like Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy. And, for a certain kind of mainline Protestantism, Frederick Buechner became hugely influential. There's a small world that knows him, but in that world he's a total rock star. I've seen it first hand, and it's really strange to experience the intensity of feeling.

There are also a lot of people, more than generally thought, for whom the Harry Potter books are actually a source of spiritual nourishment. I don't think this element of the Harry Potter phenomenon has been investigated as fully as it needs to be. I think that will emerge more clearly in the coming years.

KAIRYS: Can you talk a little bit about why C. S. Lewis and his Narnia books have been so influential for not only children, but also for modern adult Americans?

JACOBS: It's a really interesting thing. In some ways, I feel comparatively disqualified to assess this because I didn't read them until I was an adult. But having read them as an adult and as a Christian who knows something about theology, when reading the books I would think, I see what Lewis is doing here. It seemed obvious to me, you know? And yet to many children, it's not obvious. I think that there's a certain mysterious kind of psychological process that goes on here.

Lewis himself talks about how, as a teenager and an atheist, he read George MacDonald. MacDonald moved him deeply, but it wasn't until decades later that he was able to actually receive MacDonald's work as instruction in the Christian faith. Lewis uses an interesting phrase to describe this. He says: *MacDonald baptized my imagination*. I think this made him receptive imaginatively to certain spiritual possibilities. I think that seems to be representative of what happens to people who read the Narnia books, though there are many who read them simply as adventure stories and it never really kicks in any other way.

KAIRYS: So can we say that Lewis himself, the creator of this phenomenon in many ways for American faith holders, was an early recipient of this phenomenon?

JACOBS: Yes. I think Lewis is a pretty early example of someone who traces his acquisition of faith to an imaginative response that precedes any kind intellectual or theological response. He represents a particular kind of pattern where individuals move toward orthodox or traditional forms of Christianity. You don't see that often before Lewis. Before that, we do see literature awakening people to a type of spiritual engagement with nature for instance, but it doesn't move from that into some sort of doctrinal adherence. With Lewis, literature led him straight to a very traditional historic form of Christianity. And I think this is a phenomenon you see

taking place among a lot of the people who are reading O'Connor, Percy, Lewis, Tolkien and maybe even Harry Potter. Literature as a road to traditional forms of Christianity, as opposed to a kind of a pantheism, is a distinctively 20th and early 21st century phenomenon.

KAIRYS: When did you first take note of this occurrence? Was there a specific event made you aware of it?

JACOBS: I think on some level I had been aware of it for a long time, but I really started thinking about it maybe six or seven years ago, when I was at the Calvin College, Faith and Writing Conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The conference is just enormous. Thousands of people come, there are hundreds of speakers, and the whole city of Grand Rapids is taken over by Christians.

I've actually known Frederick Buechner for 25 years, and so my wife and I got to spend some time with him there. The organizers of the conference had him set aside in this inner sanctum where nobody could get to him. People would come in, craving audience with him, and some were let in. During the two hours when people were coming in and out, I heard maybe five different people say: I'm a Christian because of your books; I'm a believer because of your books; I wouldn't be a believer today if it weren't for your books. I started thinking, that's kind of a weird thing to say. Ultimately, and especially if you look at the history of Christianity and the Abrahamic religions, it's just not a common phenomenon at all.

But that's really what got me moving on it and thinking about how to account for this phenomenon. At first I didn't know how or what I wanted to write about, but Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age* (2007) gave me some tools for thinking it through.

KAIRYS: What are the implications of this phenomenon for the future of Christianity?

JACOBS: I think it's not anything but good for the future. If success for any religion is drawing adherents and worshipers, then this phenomenon is successful insofar as it brings people into the faith. So *ipso facto*, it's a good thing.

There are some questions, though. For instance, if you are someone who has been brought to some kind of religious belief strictly as a result of literary experience, it's not necessarily going to be an easy transition to becoming a member of a worshipping community. It's a whole different ballgame. In a worshipping community, you're not sitting there in your room reading brilliantly crafted stories or beautiful poems. Instead, you have to deal with your very ordinary neighbor and maybe some of your own ordinariness as well. I don't know that people are going to find that an easy transition to make over the long term.

So, the phenomenon gets people through the door, but I don't know how long it will keep them in the house of faith. It has a lot to do with whether local churches are prepared to deal with people who have encountered the faith in that way. I don't think many local churches—Catholic or Protestant mainline, evangelical, fundamentalist or Pentecostal—are ready. I think the phenomenon will become more and more common on some level, so churches need to think in more constructive, creative, and theologically rigorous ways about what the implications of this change are for them.

KAIRYS: Do you think that the phenomenon might be compromised by the pervasive influence of media that enables people to “like” their favorite authors on Facebook or chat with them online?

JACOBS: Yes, that's a great question. I think it pertains to what I meant when I was talking about the transition from an encounter, which you can have on your terms, to life in a worshipping community, which you don't get to have on your terms. Through the media, we do get to encounter authors and artists—or at least feel like we do—largely on our terms. In fact, that's not really true. It's a prepackaged experience in many cases, but we get to watch the movie when we want, as many times as we want. We get to read the book as many times as we want, whether we're doing it on a Kindle or elsewhere. It's the same with the movies, whether we're watching on our computers or in the movie theater. We feel that we have control over that kind of experience, and people like that feeling.

One of the really important distinctions that Charles Taylor makes is between what he called the porous self of pre-modern people and pre-modern societies, and the buffered self of modern society, where people have a lot of protection against outside forces or feel like they do. People don't like feeling out of control, and they like being able to select their own experiences, or at least feel that they are. I think that's going to make traditional forms of religion a hard sell for people for whom clicking the "like" button is the most natural way to affirm something.

KAIRYS: Thank you very much for talking with me today.

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