

MERE SELF

David Helwig

*I believe in one God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth . . .*

I HEAR THE WORDS from all around me. Above the altar, light shines through the stained-glass windows. In the central panel, the usual Christ — long hair, a beard, a conventionally handsome face — stands on a bank of clouds, his arms spread in invitation and blessing, a golden halo around his head. In the other panels, lilies and grapes, the dove and the cross. The eyes are lifted toward colour and light.

At the organ, invisible behind my back, stands my friend Bill, who brought me here. Much of the time he is blinded by the haemorrhage of retinal cells damaged by diabetes. Sometimes the bleeding stops and sight returns. He has been diabetic since he was a young man, and the disease assaults his body in a multitude of forms. Feet become infected, the infection spreads into the bone and blood poisoning rises up the leg, his body defended and assaulted by vast doses of antibiotics. Surgeons excise small bones from his feet. I have heard him preach on the nature of God's providence, where it is to be found in the face of ills that will not be cured.

The men and women of the choir who stand near me are decent, kind, respectable people. I have always loved to sing, and I love to sing here. Around me I hear their voices.

*I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord
The Giver of Life . . .*

The catch is, I don't.

Then what am I doing here, an unbeliever among believers, a detached observer at the solemnities of prayer and eucharist? Initially, I came because I was asked. Bill had been an organist at a number of churches, and I had a peripatetic career as guest soloist or additional voice in choirs from Napanee to Sharbot Lake. When he settled at St. James in Kingston, I settled with him. I'm at home in a church choir, joined my first when I was a boy soprano, and hymns were the first poetry I knew passionately and intimately.

*Christ whose glory fills the skies,
 Christ the true, the only light,
 sun of righteousness, arise,
 triumph o'er the shades of night.
 Dayspring from on high, be near;
 daystar in my heart appear.*

(Charles Wesley)

My parents and grandparents sang in church choirs, and I have in my possession a hymn book given to my grandfather when he was a member of the male quartet at the Dovercourt Spiritualist Temple, where the liturgy included prayers for eccentric prophets like Swedenborg and special mention of the workers of the world.

I am doubly out of place here. My family tradition, on both sides, is the tradition of opposition to the established churches. My ancestors were German anabaptists and English non-conformists; I call myself an agnostic; I am singing in an Anglican church choir.

It's impossible to spend hours in a choir stall, reading the liturgy, hearing a variety of sermons, without being forced to contemplate the great religious questions and to define one's belief and unbelief. Jung, I'm told, says that after the age of forty, human beings become preoccupied with questions that can only be called religious. Perhaps it is that sea-change in myself that I am observing.

I'm not sure that I was ever a Christian, even as a child. My parents attended a United Church with some regularity, and the church was an accepted part of my life, but God was never, I think, more than a word. Once when I was very young, I asked my mother about God; I don't remember the question, but I do remember the answer.

"God," she said, "is inside you."

I remember her words, remember, even, the place in our Toronto home where she was standing. I don't recall just what I felt, but the moment is vivid enough that I must have been shaken by what she said. I felt, I suspect, invaded, as if I had been told I was the host of some powerful and mysterious parasite. Or perhaps felt a sense of guilt that God was there and I had never discovered him.

My mother was no theologian, but her explanation has its roots deep in the protestant tradition. From Bunyan to Kierkegaard, writers in that tradition portrayed man as a soul struggling in solitary terror with a driving and insatiable inner need. Perhaps that is only how I, with my puritan sensibility, naturally took her words. She might equally have meant that God was inside me as the source of all beauty and pleasure.

God, if he is inside you, is not God. He is conscience or inspiration, energy or wisdom. He is Freud's superego. He is the higher powers of the human mind.

The identification of the divine with the higher human powers is the core of the attitude called humanism, which had a certain vogue earlier in the twentieth century. After Hitler and Stalin, it seems dated and shallow. Better worship nothing than worship a part of ourselves.

Why worship at all? Why not simply do one's sensible best in a pragmatic and secular life?

There is, in most human beings, an impulse to praise, to honour, to reverence, that can't be fulfilled by taking as its object anything merely human. "Reverence rather than freedom is the matrix of human nobility," George Grant observes. Life without reverence is impoverished. We are left in the barren landscape of a cautious meliorism. Or the more terrifying one of absolute valueless freedom, articulate in the intellectual as nihilism, inarticulate in most people, a fearful emptiness underlying all the chatter

Most of us live in a day-to-day world of pragmatic judgments, valium the solution to our distress, domestic affection the highest form of love. The popularity of astrology, science fiction, parapsychology is the product of our hunger for mystery, for escape from the world of what works not too badly.

Without a view toward some transcendent object, thought tends to become imprisoned and circular; man's mind ponders only the products of man's mind. God is the necessary object of the highest contemplation, and the possibility of transcendence a step toward an escape from solipsism and banality. The Old Testament is full of stories of men and women forced to enlarge their understanding when confronted with the arbitrary acts of God. There is no explanation for these demands — the demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac, say — and the stories are not moralized. David is not a good man, only a man intoxicated by the idea, the presence, of God.

Human judgments leave emptiness in their wake. At the end of *The Quiet American*, Graham Greene attributes to his narrator — not a Christian, though Greene certainly was at the time he wrote the book — the wish that there was someone to whom he could say he was sorry. Each of us performs life for some imaginary audience, carries on a dialogue with some imagined interlocutor, and life is shaped by the audience we play for. For many, the audience is friends, neighbours, business associates; the other voice is the voice of public opinion, and the dialogue will seldom rise above the level of banality. The stoic performs for some austere higher self, debates his life with his own right reason.

The higher the nature of the other in whose sight life is lived, the more profound the living. The book of Psalms is one of the most accessible and powerful books of the Bible because it is the record of a man in dialogue with a high God; fittingly enough the psalms are attributed to David, who danced before the Lord, leaping so nakedly, so wildly, that his wife thought it shameful.

*Sing unto God, O ye kingdoms of the earth:
O sing praises unto the Lord, who rideth
in the high heavens which are of old.*

All this may sound like an exercise in Christian apologetics, but nothing in life teaches us that we will get something only because we need it. The need for transcendence doesn't guarantee that a transcendent reality is real or accessible. Christianity offers a particular set of doctrines about the nature and availability of the divine, and for me, these doctrines challenge belief.

*Men go to God when they are sorely placed,
pray him for succour, for his peace, for bread,
for mercy, for them sinning sick or dead.
All men do so in faith or unbelief.*

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, tr. W. H. Farquharson)

What is belief? What is it that those in the choir stalls around me possess that I lack?

We sometimes regard belief as a kind of knowing; what we believe is what we hold to be true, and for truth, most of us require evidence. Belief and unbelief meet in a debate on the nature of the evidence — on the one hand human life as we experience it, and on the other, the claims made in the gospels. Is Christianity; the question goes, a set of conclusions that concerned human beings can or must draw from this evidence?

At the other extreme, there is the insistence on faith as a leap in the dark. Pascal talks of it as a wager. If you are right, you win everything; if wrong, you lose nothing. Tertullian cried exultantly that he believed in the Christian revelation because it was absurd, impossible.

IT WAS P. K. PAGE, in answer to a question after a poetry reading, who made me aware of yet another way of understanding belief. The etymology of the word, she pointed out, links it to the same root as the word love. Belief is the attitude we offer to a vision of reality that we can love.

That's the definition of belief that I find most useful, and I am not a Christian because there are too many central doctrines that I do not love, the most important being the existence of a life after death. It's a doctrine that has always struck me as dishonourable to both man and god. Life has, on the whole, been good to me; to demand more would be insufferably greedy. But to suggest that an afterlife is some sort of consolation to those less lucky, the tortured child, the starving mother, is dishonourable to God. Yet if the doctrine doesn't address the world's injustices, it has no point. Pascal's wager is not as one-sided as he would

suggest. To believe on those terms is to abnegate human responsibility. The same objection can be made to Jung's suggestion that we ought to believe in an afterlife since it leads to sounder mental health in old age.

Most human beings cling to life, but the life they cling to is the life of the fallible, earthy, individual personality, and that is not, presumably, what the Christian afterlife offers. The self, perfected, is no longer the self.

The other crucial and related doctrines are the divinity of Christ and his resurrection. It would take an excessive scepticism to maintain that Jesus had no historical existence, but it is Northrop Frye — an ordained minister and presumably a Christian — who suggests that the Bible is concerned to conceal, not reveal, the historical Jesus, that what it provides is a narrative of a central metaphorical kind. The meaning of the Bible is found in its metaphors. The question of what actually happened isn't a relevant one.

Frye's intellectual tradition is that of Christian idealism, and his standard of truth is usually that of internal coherence. To say that Jesus was the Son of God means something within the whole redemptive pattern of the Biblical narrative. Truth, which for some of us is at least partly gained by an act of outward attentiveness, is gained, for Frye, by an act of inward attentiveness. The argument of *The Great Code* seems to me to be circular and agnostic. The resurrection becomes, not an event, but a necessary, though revolutionary, metaphor.

If one asks what, as a matter of fact, it means to call Jesus the Son of God, most answers fall into what a religious friend of mine once called Christolatry, the belief in Jesus as some kind of magician. It is not, I think, obscurantist, to prefer mystery to doctrine in such a case.

*I tell my sons the stories of the gods,
of Christ coming up out of the earth,
Balder young and beautiful from the sea.*

Those lines come from the last page of *Atlantic Crossings*, the long poem in which I tried some of these themes dramatically. Obviously as metaphor, I don't find resurrection difficult. That there is something of love and goodness that does not die is a belief that does have a redemptive power. Still, any attempt to imagine resurrection and ascension within a quotidian existence (and Christianity would have it that these were real events that happened in a real world) is likely to founder in comedy. The ascension in particular — Jesus as rocket ship — is highly difficult except as metaphor. Similarly, any detailed attempt to imagine the eternal existence of particular human personalities is likely to provoke laughter. I heard of one woman who didn't believe in heaven because there wouldn't be room for everybody.

What makes life poignant and precise is its evanescence, its swiftness, its danger, the knowledge that each individual and each moment is unrepeatable.

The service moves on. I hear the soft drumming of murmured words as decent, well-meaning people kneel to beg forgiveness.

*We acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness,
Which we from time to time have committed,
By thought word and deed,
Against thy Divine Majesty.*

Sin: it's a word that many in our time find uncomfortable; how much is this an objection purely verbal? A poet's question: how much of belief is altered by a change in its form of expression? How much of the power of the liturgy is in its style? What does T. S. Eliot's Christianity share with Garner Ted Armstrong's?

The word "evil" is one I find accurate and useful, but I bridle at sin and its derivatives. Perhaps this is a symptom of modern sentimentality, but the word does have overtones of both complacency and melodrama. Most human beings are capable of great evil — witness Auschwitz, Treblinka, and the rest — but in the lives I observe, achievement and failure exist in a reasonable balance. A glance at history suggests that definitions of sin are many, varied, even contradictory.

And yet. There is something about the confessions in the liturgy that is refreshing. Of all the forms of prayer, confession comes most easily to my lips, and not because I think myself particularly wicked. Like any conscious human, I spend much of my life having to be the judge of my own actions. All of us must struggle with our own bias, our subjectivity and blindness. One function of confession is to produce a change of focus from the tangled foreground to the wide landscape beyond it. Such a change of focus, even if it is momentary, does open doors for the mind locked in the struggle to see and know itself. This is perhaps one of the functions of art as well, but the liturgy attempts it more directly, leading, once again, toward the possibility of escape from the mere self. If I call myself an agnostic, rather than an atheist, it is because I can't be at home in a world without mystery, without the possibility of meaning.

The idea of God is the most splendid single act of the creative human imagination . . . all his multiple facets and attributes correspond to some need and satisfy some deep desire in mankind.

(Katherine Anne Porter)

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts,
Heaven and earth are full of thy glory.
Glory be to thee, O Lord Most High.*

Many years ago, I heard that wise rabbi, Emil Fackenheim, present the argument that agnosticism was an untenable position. His argument — an existentialist

one — was that we always act on the basis of some chosen assumption about reality. The moment we act, we no longer suspend judgment. We act as if God existed or as if God did not exist; we act as if life had meaning or as if it did not. The American novelist, John Updike, has said that he has no trouble repeating the words of the creed since what they finally express for him is that there is somewhere, somehow, a meaning to the world.

Fackenheim's argument has echoed in my mind for a long time. It's true, I suppose, that I often act as if life had some significance beyond what I give it by my own choices; but not always. The argument, of course, was presented by a devout Jew, whose religion has a multitude of laws of behaviour and a plethora of theological speculations, but no creed, unless one counts the simple and absolute statement of monotheism — "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God, the Lord is One." When challenged to explain himself, the God of Judaism says only "I am that I am."

The borderline between a reverent agnosticism and the belief in such a God is a thin one.

O Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us.

O Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, grant us thy peace.

The communicants kneel to take the bread and wine. Observing, I have no way of knowing what it means to those at the communion rail. Do they break through, here or at some other moment, to a world drenched in light? I am moved by the commitment of worshippers past and present, from those who kneel here, to Bach dedicating each manuscript to the greater glory of God. I am touched and refreshed by the words and meaning of the liturgy, but I remain outside it all.

Bill announces the tune of the recessional hymn on the organ, and the choir rises. I rise with them, too self-willed to share more than four-part harmony. On the final verse of the hymn of exultation, the tempo is slower. The choir, beginning to leave, sings unison while the organ creates harmonies, counterpoints.

*Wide as the world is thy command,
vast as eternity thy love;
firm as a rock thy truth shall stand,
when rolling years shall cease to move.*

Exit, singing.