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He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, the Faith of Art (Book Review)

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When I was younger, I believed that there were no such things as unanswerable questions, and I'd have expected that Christian Wiman's new book, which bills itself in its subtitle as a book about faith and art, would be a sort of guidebook, answering the questions about how one makes connections between faith and art. Perhaps that belief was due to my fundamentalist evangelical upbringing, but over time I've come to the realization that even if there were no unanswerable questions, humankind could not possibly access all the answers. I've come to appreciate books that ask the right questions as much as I appreciate books that are filled with proposed answers—if not more so. *He Held Radical Light* fits this description. It's a deceptively short book, a quick read if you continue through it cover to cover but, in my opinion, better experienced when read slowly and contemplatively, as one would read a poem.

Wiman, a poet raised in West Texas, is possibly best known as the former editor of *Poetry* magazine and the author of several books of poetry, including *Every Riven Thing* and *Once In the West*. *He Held Radical Light* follows Wiman's 2014 memoir, *My Bright Abyss*, which chronicled his progression into an unconventional sort of faith through the experience of being diagnosed with a rare and incurable cancer, which by the time of the writing of *He Held Radical Light*, had gone into remission. *My Bright Abyss* begins with a poem in progress, a piece whose end eludes him:

My God, my bright abyss
into which all my longing will not go
once more I come to the edge of all I know
and believing nothing, believe in this:

This poem at the beginning of the book ends in a colon, poised on the point of an unknown. Through the book, that anticipatory punctuation mark hangs over Wiman's life as he explores what exactly it is he believes in. But by the end of the book, Wiman has transformed that suspended colon into a period: "and believing nothing, believe in this." I read Wiman's final resolution of the poem in the same sense as the man in the Gospel of Mark who declared and confessed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."

He Held Radical Light continues on the theme of living within the tension of faith and doubt in a sort of contented peace. The book's fundamental question, "What is it we want when we can't stop wanting?"

points back to the "abyss into which all our longing will not go." The question originates in a discussion of the nature of God and unwinds through the book into discussions of the role of art in faith and the necessity (or not) of faith in the life of an artist, particularly in the lives of the poets who have crossed Wiman's path, some through the offices of the Poetry Foundation, Wiman's former place of work, and some through his interactions with the page as a reader. Where *My Bright Abyss* dwelt on Wiman's journey of discovering a sort of unconventional faith through the suffering of cancer, *He Held Radical Light* moves beyond that into an exploration of the ways art and faith intertwine, as testified by his life as a poet and his life among other poets and artists. Are art and faith dependent upon each other? Independent of each other? Intersecting entities? Or are they things that dwell alongside each other, occasionally colliding in moments of inspiration?

If you're familiar with Wiman's poetry, you'll be pleased to find that he exhibits in his prose the same blend of musicality and linguistic precision that distinguishes his poetry. As with his poetry, this book is full of sentences that beg to be read aloud (an audiobook version is available, should you feel the need to satisfy that itch). Poems and stories of Wiman's interaction with the poets that crossed his path during his days at the Poetry Foundation are scattered through the book.

Musing on the humor of the phrase "famous poet" ("hard even to utter the phrase without irony"), Wiman introduces us to Mary Oliver. If ever there were a collection of famous poets, she would be included, as writer of the oft-quoted lines, "What will you do with your one wild and precious life?" In the book's most vividly memorable scene, Wiman picks up Oliver for a formal event and finds her in the hotel lobby, engrossed in a copy of *The Faerie Queene* and underdressed for the occasion ("I think she may have cut her own hair," he adds as an aside). The story unfolds from there, involving a dead pigeon which Oliver plucked from the streets of Chicago and stuffed into her jacket pocket, preserving it there for the remainder of the evening.

Many of the stories Wiman shares of fellow poets carry a shadow of death or mortality within them, but not in the sense of hopelessness or foreboding—rather, with a sense of wisdom and reinforcing the idea that

“resurrection is a fiction and a distraction to anyone who refuses to face the reality of death” (66). At the time of the Mary Oliver story, her partner had already begun to suffer the illness that would eventually claim her life. A story about the poet Denise Levertov coincides with her diagnosis with lymphoma, which would eventually cause her death. The book ends with a story of a visit to the home of Donald Hall, who had lost his wife, poet Jane Kenyon, only recently to leukemia. Earlier in the book, Hall serves as the voice of reality in the face of Wiman’s desire to write “a poem that would live forever,”:

When...my friend and then poet laureate Donald Hall turned his Camel-blasted eighty-year-old Yeti decrepitude to me and said as casually as he bit into his burger, “I was thirty-eight when I realized not a word I wrote was going to last,” I felt a galactic chill, as if my soul had chewed tinfoil. I was thirty-eight. It was the very inverse of a calling, an ex post facto feeling of innocence, death’s echo. (6-7)

He Held Radical Light is a masterclass in poetry appreciation woven into a memoir. Not only does it give the reader insight as to how a poet reads poetry, it also offers a glimpse into the everyday lives of several poets, acquaintances and close friends of the author and their respective struggles with issues of faith and art, life and death. Poets (and artists, writers, and other people with a creative calling) are driven by “moments of soul,” Wiman points out, an idea which

repeats through the book, the idea that in the process of creating a poem or other work of art, the artist seeks out the places where eternity meets time. The Celtic religion had a similar idea of this in the idea of “thin places,” moments of time where the distance between heaven and earth become shorter, and the space between the eternal and the temporal nearly connect.

Wiman gives us a picture of one of these “moments of soul” in his retelling of how his poem “My Stop is Grand” came to be written, fueled by an night of physical suffering coupled with a disagreement with another poet friend over whether art could be a “personally redemptive activity.” Having finished the poem in the predawn hours following a sleepless night, Wiman asks himself of the poem, “Will it last forever? Certainly not, but forever—for that one night, for this one writer—was in it” (70). And perhaps, until the new heaven and the new earth arrive, death is vanquished, and all things are put into order, that is enough.

What is it we want when we can’t stop wanting? Is it art? Is it faith? Is it both, together? Is it to create a piece that will last eternally, or at least generations beyond our death? Is art enough to elude our own mortality? Or is it better, instead, to be acquainted with our own mortality, our own failures, the constant unquenchable desire that serves, in its best sense, as the engine within that drives us to God?

Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology. Volume 3 of Cultural Liturgies. James K.A. Smith. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017. 233 pages. ISBN 978-0-8010-3579-1. Reviewed by Laurence C. Sibley, Jr., lecturer, leadership and pastoral care, Reformed Episcopal Seminary.

While I was reading *Awaiting the King*, questions like “should I salute or take the knee?” were swirling in the headlines; questions of public justice, public morality, and, yes, public theology. The National Football League had decided that all players on the field must stand (or remain in the locker room) during the national anthem. And the President had added some tweets about the flag, democracy, and freedom. After reading *Awaiting the King*, I can imagine what Jamie Smith might say. It would go like this:

Democracy and freedom are not just good ideas for the “meantime” of our earthly sojourn; they are the ultimate goods for which we die (and kill). This is reinforced by the liturgies of the stadium and arena that stage spectacular displays of national mythology and military power akin to what Augustine described as the “fabulous” civil the-

ologies of the Roman Empire; those public rituals that constitute nothing less than public worship. (*Awaiting*, 23)

Smith went back and re-read Augustine’s *City of God* as he was working on *Awaiting*. In book 6.5, Augustine writes “that there are three kinds of theology, that is, of the account which is given of the gods; and of these, the one is called mythical, the other physical, and the third civil.” The mythical, obviously religious and perhaps hard to believe, are supposedly distinct from what Smith describes as “the respectable and necessary civil religion of the *polis*.” But, they “bleed into each other” (*Awaiting*, 28). And both shape the loves of people, their takes on the world, their visions of the good, and their ultimate ends/*teloi*. In a nutshell, when you salute the flag, you have