Culture



Audrey Assad sings during a 2017 recording session in Nashville. This month she released "Pearls," a cover of Sade's song from "Love Deluxe." It was her first studio release in nearly two years. (Courtesy of Hoganson Media Relations)



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Jesus Christ, I don't know what I am.
Am I a lost little lamb, or a wolf in sheep's clothing?
Oh, my God, I don't know what this was.
Am I the child of Your love, or just chaos unfolding?
"Unfolding," Audrey Assad

On March 3, musician Audrey Assad quietly dropped a bomb that rippled through Catholic spaces when she announced that she's no longer Christian.

The beloved chart-topping singer-songwriter has over 500,000 monthly listeners on Spotify and millions of streams on YouTube. Her albums, which gently weave new takes on traditional hymns with intelligent lyrics that capture the modern Catholic experience, are the de facto soundtrack of Catholic dorm rooms, retreats and Christmas parties.

In 2010, "The House You're Building" was named Amazon.com's Best Christian Music of 2010 and iTunes Christian & Gospel Breakthrough Album of the Year. The next year she received two Dove Award nominations, for New Artist of the Year and Female Vocalist of the Year. Earlier this month she released "Pearls," a cover of Sade's song from "Love Deluxe." It was her first studio release in nearly two years.

In March, Assad stated that she hadn't been a "practicing Catholic" for three years. She held back from sharing this publicly, she went on, because she wasn't sure if her relationship to the faith were truly "over."

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Assad spoke to me via Zoom on July 7 about the intimate transition of her life and faith. This is the first time Assad has spoken about this to a Catholic publication. The following has been edited for length and clarity.

NCR: Is there a God?

Audrey Assad: I think so. I know there's something in the universe that happens in patterns, and whether you call that mathematics, or quantum physics, or God, is up to you. But I think there's something that leaves a trail of breadcrumbs to the heart of the universe, and to me, that's God. I don't really have a lot of specific shapes or

beliefs around that idea anymore, but I still feel connected to that concept very deeply.

Who failed you?

I honestly don't feel that I can say that anyone has failed me, because I am heavily influenced by the Tao and Zen Buddhism nowadays, and I think everything that's happened in my life belongs there for some reason. Not in the same way that I used to say that everything happens for a reason — like God has a perfect plan for every detail, for every hard thing. I can integrate all things that have happened in my life into my own growth, expansion and healing, and that's how I choose to approach that.

I think everyone has their own path through pain, but for me, there's been a lot of deliverance in that idea that everyone who I've encountered has played a role they're supposed to play. Or to say it another way, they played the role they did play, and I have a choice on how to look at that, and how to integrate it into my life.

Would you be willing to describe a moment that the church broke your heart, or your heart broke for the Church?

I can think of one that's so small, but it means a lot to me. I was at a dinner with a priest that I know, years ago. We were discussing Richard Rohr. Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest who lives in the Southwest and operates a retreat center and writes books about spirituality. He has a book called *The Universal Christ*, which was very influential upon me, as well as the first book of his that I read, called *Falling Upward*, about the first and second half of life, before and after spiritual awakening or crisis.

When I first heard of him, I remember mentioning him to this priest. He said something to the effect of, "You can’t read his work. You can't go to his retreat center. He's dangerous. He leads people away from the truth by using Catholic language. He’s a wolf in sheep's clothing."

At the time, I took that very seriously. I said, "OK, I'll stay away. I trust you. I won't do that." That same year I ran into a friend at a coffee shop who had recently begun deconstructing his own Christianity. He was reading *Falling Upward* by Richard Rohr.

I looked at it and I asked him how he liked it. He said he loved it, and it was really helping him. He said, "Have you read this?" I said, "Oh I can't read that." He kind of cocked his head and looked at me, and said, "What do you mean you can't read it?"

It was a moment for me of awakening when I realized what I was saying, and how it sounded, because I was saying it in front of someone else. And I thought, "I can't believe I'm afraid to encounter ideas that are different than the ones I've been taught. I'm actually afraid to. I am afraid of this because it will expand my view." And it suddenly became clear to me that that was inevitable in one way or the other. That I had been holding back from doing the inevitable, out of fear.

I think that very kind of concept of just needing to stay inside the fold, stay in the tradition, don't venture outside, don't read outside of the tradition, stay within it, is very sad to me. I can say that as a person who's on the other side of that intellectual deconstruction process, or at least, I understand why people feel that way. But I've come to such a place of fearlessness when it comes to this. I don't feel like God is afraid of any of this, either. So that is something that breaks my heart, currently, still. There are so many of us living in fear of ideas because we've attached God to our ideas so inextricably that we fear God will not be found outside of them. And I do not believe that's true.

Related: Audrey Assad serves as a musician and an advocate for refugees

I'm still a card-carrying Catholic, but I agree with all the things you're saying.

I know a lot of Catholics do, actually. I've always been scandalized by those Catholics, especially when I was younger. I know a lot of Catholics that think this way. I really respect them. I don't think everyone needs to leave the institution. Every person has their own path in this world. I think it's incredible that there are people inside institutions like Catholicism that can also find God outside of it, and be comfortable with both. I think it's profound.

Do you miss the Eucharist?

Yes, I do. The main reason I do not receive Eucharist is years ago, I began experiencing panic attacks every time I tried. That's originally what put me into trauma therapy, in 2016. At the time, I thought it was going to be temporary, because I was trying to figure out why that was happening. The second reason is

that I haven't actually tried in years. I don't know what would happen now. Probably not panic, I imagine. Another reason that I don't receive is that I know what the institution requires in terms of what makes you a Catholic in good standing, and I just don't fit those things anymore. I don't want to disrespect the institution by flouting that. I don't, out of respect, receive the Eucharist anymore.

How'd you get into liberation theology?

You know what's funny? The first time I ever encountered the idea, I was at Steubenville University for a show. I audited a class, and the professor was speaking derisively of liberation theology, and I kept thinking, "Well, that makes so much sense to me." And I read James Cone's *God of the Oppressed* and I started reading Oscar Romero, and that was probably in 2014, right around the time when Michael Brown was killed by the police.

What do you miss about the church?

I really miss that sense of familiarity and predictability that I got from religion.

What do you not miss about the church?

The angst I felt when ideas that seemed so obvious and simple to other people seemed anywhere from confusing to ludicrous to me. I don't miss that feeling. That was a very stressful thing to feel on a regular basis. It brought up a lot of shame. A lot of fear. A lot of self-doubt, self- criticism or frustration. I don't miss that.

I remember being in Nashville at a church here the day of the Women's March, the first one, which I did not attend. I knew that if I attended and that was made public, I would be excoriated for that, even though I believe people should be able to assemble around one idea without sharing all the same beliefs. I really grew frustrated that the Catholic Church, or any church, demanded ideological purity at all times in all situations, and that really bothered me.

I remember being in a church that morning, and the priest not only telling the congregation not to attend this march, but making fun of the women who were and mocking them as these kinds of "bra burning brazen women," saying that they weren't feminine. I remember how it felt. It felt terrible to hear. It felt petty, and small, and inhumane. And I felt mocked, even though I wasn't there, because I wished I could be there. I thought, if they knew what I was really like, I wouldn't be

welcome here. "I can’t be myself here" is how it felt. I don't miss that feeling of not being able to show up as my full, authentic self in a space because I'm afraid it would scandalize or offend.

What do you think about, while raising your kids?

I think a lot about how to teach them that their body is their own, and it is their gateway to all that is divine in the world. It's the only way we can experience anything. I experienced so much disembodiment as a child in the fundamentalist background of religion that my main hope for them, the main thing I would like to communicate to them through my words and with my life and example, is that it's in and through their bodies that they will encounter and experience all that is good and all that is divine and all that is holy, and that no part of them is bad, or no part of them shameful or covered in shame in any way. Even when they make mistakes and things are messy — and things *are* messy with our sexuality and choices and ways we move in the world — I want them to know that every piece of them is good and whole and beautiful, and of God.

If you had to leave the world with one song from your catalog, which would it be?

"Unfolding." It’s from my "Evergreen" record (2018). I think it's the one and only moment in my whole career as a Christian artist when I told the whole truth in a song, and nothing but the truth. Not that I didn't tell the truth in other songs, but there was always a thing at work for me where I couldn't figure out how to paint the whole picture without scandalizing people. In "Unfolding," I gave myself a very small amount of permission to say exactly how something felt, and exactly what I was thinking. Whenever someone mentions that song to me, I immediately sense a kindred spirit in them, and it's rare, but the reason I want to leave it, out of all of them, is that it is the most authentic representation of where I have sat and how I have felt.

What's the dream?

Well, I would love to find myself in a life where I'm telling the whole truth, all the time. I feel like I'm getting there. And where I'm able to create experiences and works which lend that same freedom and permission to others.

I would love to craft a life that feels like home to all people who cross my path, no matter where they are, who they are, what they believe, or what they think. That includes very religious people. I want to be hospitable to people who still believe the things that I may not believe anymore. Although, what I've learned is that hospitality is often not received as such, depending on the person. But I can't take that personally. I just know that's what I want to offer: permission and freedom for all to feel at home. In a more practical way, I would really like to run a retreat center someday. I'm sort of sketching that out in my mind for the future as an eventual dream.

> See what you've lived through, so you can grieve it,
>
> And draw it towards you, catch and release it,
>
> And now as your tears flow, let them be cleansing,
>
> Washing your heart, so you can be mending.
>
> May loving kindness calm the raging of the wound.
>
> May your healing be a clearing in the wood.
>
> May you breathe in deeper than you ever could before.
>
> "Shiloh," Audrey Assad