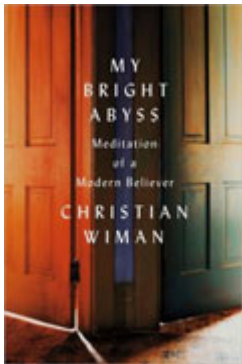


Wisdom followed from poet's illness

Paul Lakeland | Oct. 9, 2013



MY BRIGHT ABYSS: MEDITATION OF A MODERN BELIEVER

By Christian Wiman

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Every once in a very long while, there appears someone who recalibrates the field of religious reflection. In the recent past, we might think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen, all of whom in their different ways made their readers begin again. Each of them, their souls discernibly scarred some way or other, proffers a way to harness pain, physical or psychological, to the task of garnering modest adult hopefulness. Each is so much a person of our times, oriented to hope but so aware of all that challenges it, committed to love but not always finding it easy, frequently on the knife edge between faith and doubt.

And then along comes Christian Wiman to add to their number. Wiman, a distinguished poet and former editor of *Poetry* magazine, offers us a set of sublimely original spiritual reflections that grow out of his encounter over the past decade with serious illness. Born and raised in small-town Texas in an evangelical Christian tradition, Wiman left Texas and Christianity behind for a peripatetic life for many years before coming to public attention as a poet and gaining the editorship of the prestigious *Poetry* magazine. Newly married in his late 30s, the fateful diagnosis came out of the blue. He entered into several years of painful treatments during which he returned to a kind of religious belief. Now in remission from his condition, he has taken up a teaching post at the Institute of Sacred Music in the Divinity School at Yale University.

While Wiman's recent negative experience is never far from these texts, they are more about the wisdom that has followed than the illness itself. Wiman quotes T.S. Eliot's observation of "the discipline of suffering which leads to the peace of the spirit" but immediately checks himself. Noting, "The temptation is to make an idol of our own experience, to assume our pain is more singular than it is," he goes on to insist that "experience means nothing if it does not mean beyond itself." And what we mean is worthless unless it is oriented toward and discovered in the lives of others. The cost of this kind of selflessness may be any "final clarity" about one's own life or faith. But, he thinks, it would not be bad to end by burning up "like the booster engine that falls away from the throttling rocket, lighting a little dark as I go."

Beyond the autobiographical elements of the book, beyond the translucent prose that this gifted poet offers us,

its more universal value is its presentation of a modern believer. Wiman has come a long way from his evangelical roots. He attends a liberal Protestant church and demonstrates distinctly sacramental if not always Catholic sympathies -- Eliot, George Herbert, Weil, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Merton and others -- while also finding a great deal in the work of Bonhoeffer, Meister Eckhart and Marilynne Robinson.

His influences are eclectic and his place on the landscape of American Christianity is distinctly fluid. He articulates this lack of a fixed position in ways that will appeal equally to the cafeteria Catholic, the nones, the deconverted and the plain old religious searcher. There is not much here for the untroubled soul of religious denominationalism, though perhaps Wiman's convictions about the importance of Jesus' resurrection might give these more traditional types pause for thought. And if "God is gone," well, Christ "is a shard of glass in your gut." Organized, institutional religion can sometimes be the last place we can find God, while Christ is present even "in what appalls, offends, and degrades." Nor is the transcendent available only to religious people. It is present wherever you hear "a cry that seems to at once contain and release some energy that is not merely the self, that does not end at despair but ramifies, however darkly, beyond it."

This is a book to take in small bites, to savor and study. You cannot read it impatiently. It will challenge you, believer or not, to think again about the things that are most important. Above all, Wiman demonstrates how to be fully human and deeply religious in a way that is free of cant and fully open to sharing the pain of the world, perhaps in order to bring it to new life. I think Eliot was demonstrating how wrong snobbery can make you when he wrote that most people are "very little alive." Actually, it is the intelligentsia among us, secular or religious, who may be better acquainted with spiritual moribundity. But Eliot may have been on firmer ground when he added that to bring people to an awareness of spirituality "is a very great responsibility." Wiman's spirituality is sane and healthy and accessible to anyone not too sure of what they know and believe. But it is intensely spiritual and, hence, dangerous. Wiman speaks to today in ways that very few other spiritual writers have attained, causing his readers to become a little more alive, with all that might mean for a fuller insertion into the pain and the joy of the world.

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