Poetry and dogma

by Carol Zaleski in the December 25, 2013 issue

Thanks to English friends who posted the link on Facebook, I recently had a chance to hear a remarkable episode of the BBC Radio 4 program *Start the Week*. It was Remembrance Day, November 11, and the host, Scottish journalist Andrew Marr, was still recovering from a major stroke, which gave the occasion added gravity but also an undertone of solemn gaiety. On the air with him were John Drury, chaplain of Oxford's All Souls College and author of a new George Herbert biography, the novelist and memoirist Jeanette Winterson, and Sir John Tavener, the mystical composer who had also recently suffered a close brush with death. Avowedly not religious, Marr spoke feelingly of finding solace since his stroke in George Herbert's and T. S. Eliot's Christian poetry and in Bach's cantatas. This led Marr to wonder: with Britain "one of the most secular countries on the planet," with churchgoing at an all-time low, "why is it that religious poetry and religious music seem to matter more than ever?"

Various answers emerged. Winterson, who has chronicled her estrangement from the Pentecostal Christianity of her childhood as well as her love of the King James Bible and the seasons of the Christian year, spoke of the challenge of living authentically in a secular age. With religion in retreat, she said, “we’re left with this rather lonely part of ourselves, which is the soul—which has no company” and which longs for an affirmation “that life has an inside as well as an outside.” The arts are responsible for providing that affirmation, she suggested, when the churches inevitably fail.

Tavener, on the other hand, favored an eclectic traditionalism; the end of the Hindu cycle Kali Yuga draws near, he said, bringing with it a resurgence of spirituality. Having returned from a long stay at death’s door, Tavener looked back at each stage of his spiritual journey with gratitude, recalling his interlude as a Roman Catholic, his conversion to Orthodoxy, the Presbyterian pastor of his youth (who used to say, “Life is a creeping tragedy, that’s why we must be cheerful”), and his present delight in chanting the 99 names of God in Arabic—without rejecting any part of it. For Tavener, “music and believing in God had always gone together,” and all the spiritual traditions of the world have parts to play in the divine symphony.

Conversation turned to the impoverishment of our language of praise, with Tavener remarking upon “a notable lack of joy in modern art,” Marr observing that talk of beauty is generally regarded by critics as a sign of ignorance and vulgarity, and Winterson quoting Seamus Heaney’s saying: “Poetry should be strong enough to help.” All agreed on the need for the inherited forms and the cultural capital that—at least until this late stage of the Kali Yuga—had been supplied by Christianity. No one made the suggestion, often (if unfairly) attributed to Matthew Arnold, that poetry will replace religion. But a telling moment came when Drury read the poem that Herbert wrote as he lay dying: “Death, thou wast once an uncouth hideous thing / Nothing but bones, / The sad effect of sadder groans: / Thy mouth was open, but thou couldst not sing. . . . But since our Savior’s death did put some blood / Into thy face, / Thou art grown fair and full of grace.” All agreed that the wit and symbolism of the poem rested upon a foundation of robust faith; but each expressed varying degrees of hesitation about the underlying dogma.

And there’s the rub. Ultimately, the symbolism doesn’t work without the dogma. The poetry won’t stay strong without the dogma. Tavener almost said as much, but then drew back; and what makes this so poignant is that the very next day, November 12, he died. *May his memory be eternal! Vichnaja jemu pamjat’!*

That was Remembrance Day; now it is Christmas. If there is any season that overrides the critics' veto against joy and beauty, this is it. As we unpack the same old ornaments, read *The Night before Christmas* again, and entertain deep thoughts that are exactly the same as the deep thoughts of our ancestors, we have every reason to be gloriously unoriginal—to believe what George Herbert believed, even if that puts us at odds with the zeitgeist.

"A mass of legend and literature, which increases and will never end, has repeated and rung the changes on that single paradox; that the hands that had made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle," Chesterton wrote; and the best part is that Chesterton was saying nothing that hasn't been said by Christian poets of all eras from the patristic to the postmodern, by Ephrem the Syrian in the fourth century ("Today is born of a Virgin, he who holds creation in the hollow of his hand"), by poor Kit Smart in the 18th century ("God all-bounteous, all-creative, / Whom no ills from good dissuade, / Is incarnate, and a native / Of the very world He made"), by Janet Loxley Lewis in 1938 ("Now tell me, how did Mary know / That in her womb should sleep and grow / The Lord of everything?"). Poetry can't take the place of religion, but poetry can lead the wanderer back to religion—and will do so as long as poetry stays strong.