

A poet converted by her own writing

Denise Levertov's intuitive grasp of incarnation drove her politics, her poetry, and eventually her religious discernment.

by [Lynn Domina](#) in the [November 2023](#) issue

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Poet Denise Levertov (Photo by Chris Felver / Getty)

One day in 1979, Denise Levertov sat down to begin a poetic sequence she thought of then as an “agnostic mass.” She said later, in a 1990 *CrossCurrents* article, that her initial intent was only to experiment with structure, always a challenge for poets

who write primarily in free verse. The mass, after all, is highly structured, regularly incorporating specific elements in a specific order, even if variations in particular words or prayers permit some flexibility. By the time Levertov reached the Agnus Dei, however, a deeper change was in effect. “The experience of writing the poem,” she said, “had been also a conversion process.” She’d set down the first words of this poem, Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus, as an agnostic, but by the time she placed the final period, she found herself if not fully a believer, then at least someone longing and praying for belief.

Nearly a century earlier, Levertov’s father, Paul Philip Levertoff, had been walking home from school in his Eastern European Jewish neighborhood when he spied a piece of paper with a bit of Hebrew prose. It was a story about a young boy, probably not much older than himself, who’d been explaining scripture to learned rabbis in the temple. Although the story excited Paul (a name he chose later), the paper upset his Hasidic parents. A few years later, after reading the Gospel of John, he converted to Christianity, eventually becoming an Anglican priest. He frequently referred to himself as a Jewish Christian.

Writing and reading, experimentation and curiosity, a Lamb of God and a young boy—Denise Levertov took an unusual path to the Roman Catholicism she eventually embraced. Her vocation as a poet was so crucial to her religious commitments that the two are nearly inseparable.

Many of Levertov’s poems, especially those protesting war and environmental destruction, remain so relevant that it’s hard to believe she was born a century ago—in Ilford, England, on October 24, 1923—or that her death in 1997 occurred as long ago as it now has been. Her Welsh mother, Beatrice Spooner-Jones, met Paul Levertoff in Constantinople, where she was working as a teacher and he was delivering lectures. After quickly becoming engaged, the couple married and settled in England.

This kind of geographic assemblage also characterized Levertov’s own life. She met Mitchell Goodman, an American, in Switzerland, and she emigrated to the United States after marrying him in 1947, becoming a US citizen in 1955. The two traveled widely, together and separately, throughout the United States, to Mexico, and in Europe. Interacting with people from so many different cultures, whose assumptions about everything from breakfast to belief would have varied dramatically, likely reinforced Levertov’s insistence that every individual matters and that no person

should be revised into an abstraction or designated to suffer by a distant government.

Her broad cultural experience would also have influenced her development as a poet, exposing her to new sounds and aromas, visions and flavors—the shish kebab and thick coffee she mentions in *Conversation in Moscow*, her ability to imagine a young man’s anxiety around women as “he takes a gondola, sliding past the palazzos, / and counts bridges” in “A Young Man Travelling.” Reliance on unique concrete details and sensory imagery is characteristic of much modern and contemporary poetry, but for Levertov it eventually serves an additional purpose. Her conversion to Christianity is founded on the incarnation, God in physical form, God experiencing creation through the senses—a theology that elevates human bodies and other aspects of creation to the realm of the sacred.

Levertov’s care and even reverence for the human body preceded her conversion and informed both her politics and her poetry, leading her to a life of activism. She marched against the war in Vietnam, even visiting Hanoi with a small group of other Americans. She opposed the proliferation of nuclear arms and promoted ecological awareness. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, much of her poetry emerged from her anti-war thinking and action.

“What Were They Like?” consists of six numbered questions followed by their extended responses. The questions mimic the parochial questions people sometimes ask about cultures perceived to be primitive, exotic, or even simply foreign, such as “Did they hold ceremonies / to reverence the opening of buds?” Tellingly, each question relies on the past tense, as if the people of Vietnam no longer exist. Question six asks, “Did they distinguish between speech and singing?” Its answer responds to the question directly, ironically incorporating the passive voice social scientists sometimes use to suggest objectivity. Yet its sorrowful tone suggests connection between speaker and subject, undermining the question’s implicit voyeurism:

There is an echo yet
of their speech which was like a song.
It was reported their singing resembled
the flight of moths in moonlight.
Who can say? It is silent now.

Levertov invested her energy in political movements because she was concerned about people, especially when governmental action revealed a belief that certain people were expendable, perhaps not even really people at all. Even during this earlier period, she turned to Christian symbols and the narrative of incarnation to express her themes. In "Advent 1966," she compares Vietnamese children to the infant Jesus:

Because in Vietnam the vision of a Burning Babe
is multiplied, multiplied,
the flesh on fire
not Christ's, . . .
but wholly human and repeated, repeated,
infant after infant, their names forgotten . . .

Although she might argue that in poems like this she is relying on Christianity only for a cultural reference, the intensity of the poem and the ease with which she embeds Christian allusions in her work of this period suggest that the possibility and meaning of incarnation retained a powerful hold on her, even without her active belief. Nothing in this poem indicates that the speaker is not a believer, not even the irony that challenges Christians to care about all infants rather than just the one central to their faith. It reads as sincerely as the poems written after Levertov was formally received into the Catholic Church.

Since her father was a priest, Christian narrative and language composed part of her daily life when she was a child. Still, the fact that this language remained so available to her decades later is telling. In a 1973 interview, Levertov confirms the influence of her childhood exposure to spirituality: "I was brought up, as you can imagine, in quite a religious atmosphere, although not really a conventional one; I think that the amount of religious imagery that comes up in my poems is certainly accounted for largely by my background."

While we might resist her explanation that her employment of Christian references simply reflected her childhood experience, it would be a few years yet before she began to consciously understand herself as Christian. Whether or not she accepted the conventional meanings of this imagery, it stuck with her and remained significant enough to include in her poetry. She could, after all, have relied on a

variety of more secular cultural references or even religious references from other traditions. But she received and understood the world through the sacredness of its physical form. It was as if an intuitive grasp of the incarnation drove her political and social choices even before it guided her religious discernment.

The one social cause that Levertov resisted was the women's movement. Although she was unafraid to express her opinions about controversial issues, she seemed most ornery when asked about feminism. She refused to have her work included in an anthology devoted to women's poetry, insisting that a poet's work would not be taken seriously if it were segregated in this way. She apparently could not imagine other responses, that a collection of women's writing could be celebrated or that it could exert power. Nor does she seem to have questioned the fact that she was so often the only prominent woman poet among the groups of male poets she was affiliated with, or why the poets she looked to for guidance and feedback were almost exclusively male.

In a 1990 interview, Levertov objected to liturgical language that attempted to be more inclusive, and her support for women priests was equivocal: "I have known women priests in the Episcopal Church, and I have never felt quite confident in them. In principle, yes they should be." Although the idea of women priests was acceptable, actual incarnated women presiding at the altar discomfited her: her ideas and her experience conflict. She didn't elaborate much beyond this sentence.

I wish the interviewer had asked follow-up questions: Is Levertov's lack of confidence elicited by some action or mannerism or demeanor of the priests, or does it stem from some unexamined prejudice within Levertov herself? Is her lack of confidence in women's leadership limited to the sacramental realm, or does she feel similarly uncomfortable with women in positions of power at the universities where she's taught or in the political movements she espouses? How integral is gender to incarnation? To the Incarnation? Some of us would say it's not important at all, while others would say it's absolutely central. Levertov seems not to have resolved her ambivalence, perhaps because she was simply more compelled by other aspects of human experience.

This interview occurred nearly simultaneously with Levertov's formal reception into the Catholic Church. Her conversion had not been sudden or dramatic but had occurred gradually, through intellectual, political, and spiritual struggle over several years. Her patron saint was not that most famous convert, St. Paul, but, as she

frequently said, St. Thomas Didymus, the doubter. Like many Catholics, she objected to several aspects of the institutional church, but she was attracted to its emphasis on social justice. She frequently cited both Catholic activists and contemplatives—Óscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton—as inspirational, and they were individuals who shared her own social commitments. She saw them as representing not only the best of Catholicism but also the best of peace and justice movements more broadly. If anti-war activists included so many priests, if American Catholic bishops could issue a pastoral letter on peace, then perhaps Catholicism was a denomination she should explore further.

Despite some of the church's teachings and practices, Levertov appreciated Catholic liturgy and spirituality and eventually realized that if part of her call was to criticize, it was a call to do so from the inside. "If one is going to take from the church as I have for years, then it is dishonest to always criticize it and remain outside," she says in the same interview. "One should criticize from within, if one is a believer, and I am. I was a communicant in Catholic churches, sometimes with the knowledge and sometimes without the knowledge of the priest that I was not, in fact, Catholic, and it was against the rules."

She also found in Christianity a basis for hope. In the midst of drawn-out war, environmental devastation, and nuclear proliferation, Levertov was able to resist the temptation of despair. She didn't comfort herself with an easy, irresponsible trust that God would simply intervene to rescue us all, but she did describe in another interview her expansive understanding of God's mercy. If it is true that with God all things are possible, she said, then we might still be saved from our own complex global blundering—as long as we're willing to cooperate with God's vision for us. Levertov understood that our human nature means that we will often miss the mark, but we also almost always have the opportunity to begin again.

In several interviews, she discusses the centrality of the incarnation to her faith. This makes sense given her investment in the material well-being of other people and of the planet; it also makes sense for a poet, whose craft relies on the concrete, the sensory detail. Levertov's poetry certainly tackles abstract ideas—what does it mean to believe? who or what is this being we call God?—but it does so through close observation of the physical world.

The poem that sparked her conversion, *Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus*, links the abstract to the concrete in its opening lines, the beginning of the Kyrie

section:

O deep unknown, guttering candle,
beloved nugget lodged
in the obscure heart's
last recess,
have mercy on us.

Here is the prayer of a believer and a doubter—God is “unknown” but perhaps not unknowable, but then again perhaps too “deep” for limited human comprehension. God is not the clichéd candle that so easily illuminates darkness but a “guttering candle,” struggling to remain lit. Throughout this poem, Levertov expresses divinity through the details of creation:

Praise the wet snow
 falling early.
Praise the shadow
 my neighbor's chimney casts on the tile roof
...
the ordinary glow
of common dust in ancient sunlight,
...

The name of the spirit is written
in woodgrain, windripple, crystal,
in crystals of snow, in petal, leaf,
moss and moon, fossil and feather.

Finally, in the memorable last section, the Agnus Dei, Levertov explores the nature of a God who could become incarnate and be described with a specific metaphor, “lamb.” She describes a lamb as delighted in its very existence but also as “defenseless.” Cute and soft as a lamb might be, it is not a pet we bring into our home because it “would soil the floor with its droppings.” How can this be? How can an omnipotent God be “reduced to a wisp of damp wool?” The poem concludes that it is up to humanity to protect this “shivering God,” this “rag of pungent /

quiverings.” Such is the mystery of incarnation.

Levertov might have begun this poem simply as an exercise in structure, as a way to impose some strictures of form on free verse. In its final form, however, the content transcends any exercise. It explores every theological idea—mercy, creation, doubt, life, death, incarnation, God—very seriously. It invites questions without grasping at certainty. It is faithful.

Without eradicating her doubt—perhaps without quelling her desire to question—the writing converted her. The form of the poem permitted her to articulate specific doubts, and once articulated they seem to have lost some of their power. Levertov frequently cites the anonymous father in Mark’s Gospel who cries, “I believe; help my unbelief,” but we might also turn to the complete story of Thomas to understand her faith. Having missed one appearance of the risen Christ, he later insists on tactile confirmation, on an opportunity to touch the body. Perhaps Thomas’s response is most faithful to the incarnation. For once he touches Jesus’ body, he proclaims, “My Lord and my God.” Through her own attention to the created world, Levertov also learned how to believe.