

Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics
 Nos. 81-82, Spring 2021 ISSN: 2047-0622
 URL: <http://www.freeassociations.org.uk/>



Patrick Casement, *Credo? Religion and Psychoanalysis*. London: Aeon Books Ltd. 2020.

Reviewed by David Morgan

We shall not cease from exploration
 And in the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time

- T.S.Eliot, *Little Gidding*

We all struggle with the need for certainty, through out our careers, especially those of us who work and are exposed to the life and death anxieties in the people we see. These experiences, and the search for answers, can sometimes be countered with a certainty as a means of relieving the pain. Religion often offers solace in the form of certainties and reassurances. In comparison the emphasis in psychoanalysis, in the face of these fears, is the strengthening of the internal world through the introjection and repair of good objects, lost or found. The exploration of these issues around the joys and anguish of existence with another can in the end be a source of abiding inner strength, an inner strength without false certainties. In these situations even suffering and despair themselves can be of the greatest value, because it brings with it the capacity to discover what one shares with others, including the analyst. Casement has spent many years at this craft and this book is the result of this life long engagement.

As Kierkegaard has stated

“It sometimes happens that despair itself provides the very condition of urgency that brings someone to ask those serious, tragic, questions about life and meaning.”

Many people seen in the consulting room have lost their faith, in humanity, or God, or feel let down in other ways by life, and turn to a psychoanalysis that does not seem to offer ‘pie in the sky’ relief, to the tricky questions of mortality, and why bad things happen to good people, when the bad or evil, seem to flourish.

Casement illustrates how he himself went through this process of disillusionment with religion, he originally trained for the priesthood and like many of us became disillusioned by the hypocrisy that certain experiences within this clerical world confronted him with. In this case the abject failure of a senior cleric in his hour of need. Leading him to turn away from the church and seek help elsewhere. He found solace and help in psychoanalysis with its emphasis on the internal world.

This move from religion, at its most infantile level, and with its external representation of a parental God, a superego figure, who judges us from the position of an outside authority, through to the development of our own personal internal conscience with its own morality, is a profound journey, and is a path, as we can see in the world, fraught with difficulties. This loss of faith in an outside representation of God takes a lot of courage. This was true, even for Jesus, who according to the narrative, in the face of excruciating pain, had a crisis of faith during his crucifixion, allegedly crying out, “My

God, my God, why has thou forsaken me.” This loss of belief in a supernatural parental figure, who will save us, if we masochistically submit, when faced with human suffering, is a common response and is personified movingly in the narrative of Christ’s own loss of faith and his very human vulnerability at this time. These are the moments in life that confront us with the most profound experiences of human tragedy what can be left of any faith in the face of this and the suffering within the world? This is an area skillfully deconstructed by Christopher Hitchens in his wonderful expositions on religion.

Casement in his own work, through life experience, has embraced the wisdom of uncertainty, the unknown beyond the known, over the certainty of faith, that the church originally seemed to offer him. His listening to the patient, is a profound engagement with the internal world of the other, embracing the precepts of a new psychoanalytic clergy, of Winnicott and Bion - particularly Bion, with his singular emphasis on being without memory, desire or understanding. This freedom from certainty mirrors Keats ‘negative capability’ which is an openness to experience without grasping after fact to explain or define it, and is employed to withstand the attractions of binary thinking, with all its certainties and a recognition of the need for someone who is suffering, to find another who has the mental space to bear not knowing and meet them in that space.

I think this capacity to tolerate and bear this uncertain state of mind, rather than provide certainty, whether of the afterlife, or indeed the all-encompassing total transference interpretation beloved of certain sects of psychoanalysis, is central to Casement's work. In this book he demonstrates beautifully the concept of *agape*, which is a profound openness to the experience of the other. This meeting of minds, souls or psyches is what Casement illustrates in this book and where his new-found faith or credo, based on the profundity of human experience, derives its energy.

This is important, so much of faith in the orthodox religions, such as Christianity and Islam, requires a blind faith, an adherence to a monotheistic and a jealous God, that requires, as a result, a slavish following, whilst all uncertainty is projected into the non-believer. This other then has either to be saved and converted, or will suffer as an outcast for eternity. These beliefs inhabit the paranoid-schizoid realm, which is dominated by the need for this certainty, to allay fears of not knowing. There are more mature religions that do not require this rigid adherence, such as Judaism and Buddhism, which interestingly are more ancient traditions, compared to the new versions that arose around Christ and Mohamed.

Casement's form of agnosticism is redolent of Philip Larkin's attitude toward religion in all its courageousness. In his last major poem “Aubade”, Larkin dismisses the Bible as “That vast moth-eaten musical brocade/created to pretend we never die”. However if you read Larkin's poetry, religion and the church play a central theme. In his poem “Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb”, he talks about things being “deeper than the roots, and of having worshiped that whispering shell”. In ‘Church Going’ he again says, “this special shell was built to house, marriage and birth/And death. And thoughts of these/ It can be mocked as an accoutred frosty barn/ but it is also a serious house and serious earth,/a place proper to grow wise in? if only that so many dead lie round. It is the house of memory.

Larkin who said he was bored by religion, could never give his experiences of the numinous a developed framework. His vision of the sacred as with Casement is in the emptiness of the places where God might have been, the sacred spaces that provide an engagement with the numinous.

In the poem 'Water' Larkin says if he had to construct a religion he would raise in the East a glass of water/Where any angled light /Would congregate endlessly. The object of adoration here would be a sheer meaningless beauty. It might warm human loneliness even if it could offer no transcendent hope.

I think Casement offers us a vision of hope in his *Credo*, in the capacity of another to engage deeply with another, his crucible of light, is the engagement with the human soul, in all its glory and pain. His church is the analytic space where things unfold without too much theory, free of memory and desire. In this it is a form of worship a spiritual endeavour for both people involved.

David Morgan is co-editor of *Free Associations*.