

“Alone, Yet Not Alone,”

David Brooks, New York Times, January 28, 2014

There is a strong vein of hostility against orthodox religious believers in America today, especially among the young. When secular or mostly secular people are asked by researchers to give their impression of the devoutly faithful, whether Jewish, Christian or other, the words that come up commonly include “judgmental,” “hypocritical,” “old-fashioned” and “out of touch.”

It’s not surprising. There is a yawning gap between the way many believers experience faith and the way that faith is presented to the world.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described one experience of faith in his book “God in Search of Man”: “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement...get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal. ...To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

And yet Heschel understood that the faith expressed by many, even many who are inwardly conflicted, is often dull, oppressive and insipid — a religiosity in which “faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion.”

There must be something legalistic in the human makeup, because cold, rigid, unambiguous, unparadoxical belief is common, especially considering how fervently the Scriptures oppose it.

And yet there is a silent majority who experience a faith that is attractively marked by combinations of fervor and doubt, clarity and confusion, empathy and moral demand.

For example, Audrey Assad is a Catholic songwriter with a crystalline voice and a sober intensity to her stage presence. (You can see her perform her song “I Shall Not Want” [on YouTube](#).) She writes the sort of emotionally drenched music that helps people who are in crisis. A surprising number of women tell her they listened to her music while in labor.

She had an idyllic childhood in a Protestant sect prone to black-or-white dichotomies. But when she was in her 20s, life’s tragedies and complexities inevitably mounted, and she experienced a gradual erosion of certainty.

She began reading her way through the books on the Barnes & Noble Great Books shelf, trying to cover the ones she missed by not going to college. She loved George Eliot’s “Daniel Deronda” and was taken by Tolstoy. “He didn’t have an easy time encountering himself,” she says, sympathetically. “I was reading my way from darkness into paradox.”

She also began reading theology. She’d never read anything written before 1835. She went back to Augustine (whose phrases show up in her lyrics) and the early church fathers. Denominationally, she

went backward in time. She became Baptist, then Presbyterian, then Catholic: “I was ready to be an atheist. I was going to be a Catholic or an atheist. “

She came to feel the legacy of millions of people who had struggled with the same feelings for thousands of years. “I still have routine brushes with agnosticism,” she says. “I still brush against the feeling that I don’t believe any of this, but the church always brings me back. ...I don’t think Jesus wants to brush away the paradoxes and mysteries.”

Her lyrics dwell in the parts of Christianity she doesn’t understand. “I don’t want people to think I’ve had an easy time.” She still fights the tendency to go to extremes. “If I’d have been an atheist I’d have been the most obnoxious, Dawkins-loving atheist. I wouldn’t have been like Christopher Hitchens.”

Her life, like all lives, is unexpected, complex and unique. Her music provides a clearer outward display of how many inwardly experience God.

If you are a secular person curious about how believers experience their faith, you might start with Augustine’s famous passage “What do I love when I love my God,” and especially the way his experience is in the world but then mysteriously surpasses the world:

“It is not physical beauty nor temporal glory nor the brightness of light dear to earthly eyes, nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, nor the gentle odor of flowers, and ointments and perfumes, nor manna or honey, nor limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh; it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace when I love my God — a light, voice, odor, food, embrace of my innerness, where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound that time cannot seize, where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God.”