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A Conversation with Kelly Barth

author of

My Almost Certainly Real Imaginary Jesus: A Memoir

Was your relationship to faith changed by the process of writing about it? And what is it now, after the completion of your book?

Not by my book per se, but throughout the writing and revising my faith changed. Those changes mirror those in the church communities I was associated with as well. The people in those communities and I have slowly given up what might be called “magical thinking,” to borrow Joan Didion’s term. I no longer believe in a supernatural universe where a human-like being throws switches and pulls levers to punish or reward, or, for that matter, intervenes in human affairs. As I read and listened to the people now called new paradigm Christian thinkers like Marcus Borg and, in particular, John Shelby Spong, I began to let go of the need to take the Bible literally. I became able to see the Bible as a sacred text of a particular people who knew far less than we now do about the cosmos and how it operates. I don’t mean to imply that they were stupid. I simply mean to say that, as our understanding of reality changes, so must our understanding and use of these texts.

I must say though that this wasn’t an easy transition. Evangelical, fundamentalist Christianity offers certainty. It makes many promises about the ever-changing nature of reality. I don’t like change—even good change—at first. I don’t even like moving the furniture around. As a member of another culture than the original writers of the Bible, I have finally been able to see reality as a dynamic though nonetheless powerful and wondrous thing. It’s less hierarchical, less human, more experimental and diverse. It doesn’t favor the human over other life forms. It doesn’t rest on its laurels with the arrival of the human. . . . I still identify as Christian because I believe wholeheartedly in the historical message of Jesus, in the extraordinary love and power his life brought about and continues to make available, especially in the lives of those who find themselves on the other side of a locked church door.

I have faith that things are and will continue to be long after I am gone. I have faith that all I do not know is more wonderful, terrifying, and generative than I can imagine. Where my faith once felt narrow, self-focused, anthropocentric, it has expanded ever outward. It cannot be contained in one text, doctrine or ecological epoch. Where I once felt as if I didn’t belong on the Earth in a heterosexual universe, I know that, made of the very stuff of stars, I completely belong, am completely home.

What advice might you give now to members of the queer community seeking the sanctuary and community of church?

If members of the queer community have felt a desire to go back to church or visit for the first time, I’d tell them that certain church communities await them with open arms. I would also warn them though of what I call ball-cap churches full of Christians trying to pass themselves off as casual, hip, and groovy with their jeans and T-shirts and drums and flyers that talk about how they aren’t like other churches, how they ask other questions about God. I know I sound like the Ghost of Christmas Past here, but still, I say beware, beware, beware. I say lift up the T-shirt and you might just find the same corset of bigotry as you would in a church that is open about its understanding that “homosexuality” is a sin. I would tell them to be as open with their sexuality as possible when investigating churches. Ask if the pastor and members of the congregation affirm sexual diversity as completely expected and completely normal. Don’t beat about the bush; don’t worry about sounding suspicious. By all means, be specific. The onus is on the church to welcome you honestly and openly. Many of these ball-cap churches hope to love you into the circle so they can set

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about “loving the gay out of you.” Those who have experienced religious abuse in the past, don’t worry about joining a Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) for fear that you’re staying in the ghetto. The ghetto can be a great, affirming, stable place to be. And, I might add, it can be a great place to meet someone of like mind. Beware of Vineyard churches in particular, who seem to have made it their mission to rid the world of queer people by luring them in with the carrot of open-mindedness, and then hammering them over the head about how “broken” they are, how in need of “healing.” In light of what we know about how living things evolve, Vineyard’s beliefs and purpose are not only hooley, but dangerous hooley. Run don’t walk away from them. Run away screaming if you like.

Do you ever find yourself still talking to the Imaginary Jesus of your youth?

Yes, occasionally when I’m in a really big fix—up against an impossible deadline, sitting in a waiting room certain that I have an inoperable tumor—I talk to him and he comes right back. He’s not separate from me anymore, but comes from inside the little warm part of me that remembers to breathe, remembers how many galaxies there are, the part of me that nurtures. He comes to me through the kind words and friendship of others, too. Sometimes though, he comes to me through crazy people who are a little too loud or are drooling or disrupting my peace of mind just to remind me of how wide his own net really was, how wide my own should be as well.

Things have changed significantly for LGBTQ Christians since the time you lived the events in your book. Do you think anything can be done to heal the rift between the community and the church? Do you see your book as a force of change?

I don’t necessarily see my book as a force for change between queer people and the church, but I hope people can find some sort of solace in reading it. I hope they can feel as if whatever choice they make, it’s the right one for them, even if it means leaving the traditional church as I have. I hope my book will remind people just how radical, how anti-establishment and broadly irritating Jesus really was to those who feared radical change, radical love. And I hope people can reclaim him as an advocate for their own lives. I hope my book helps them know that he would be with them on the wrong side of the door and that I will be.

If you could deliver one small message to the Kelly Barth of five, looking for a tiny Jesus in the electrical outlet, what might it be?

You’re a good girl. You’re going to be a fine woman. Don’t listen to anyone who tells you otherwise. They’re full of beans.

This memoir is your debut, and the fourth edition published by Arktoi Books. One of the goals of this imprint is to publish lesbian authors in order to involve them further “in the conversation.” What does this mean to you?

I guess what this means to me is that people have the opportunity to hear a whole diverse range of voices with a cornucopia of stories to tell. None of the stories is the same, but each has been shaped by a culture that has, at various points in history, tried to silence or marginalize them. How many times have we closed our mouths in response to a raised eyebrow, a raised finger. Sorry. No more. Arktoi fosters the multiplicity of voices I longed for as a child and never really found. The press honors difference in all its forms. If that difference offends, then it also enlightens. It might dispel some fantasies and ruffle feathers to which I say, Hurrah! It’s about time.

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