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# Nearer my God: an autobiography of faith

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## Nearer My God: An Autobiography of Faith

William F. Buckley, Jr.

New York: Doubleday, 1997

313 pp. \$34.95

There is every reason why I should dislike this spiritual autobiography. My conservatism is so unlike that of its author, we would need a third language to make any communication between us possible. I've spent a good deal of time reflecting on many Catholic "moments", but the structure of this one is so marked by Buckleyan staccato (an extension perhaps of the static of his speech patterns) the reader sometimes despairs. And despite the virtues of tolerance and respect inculcated into me as a child and required by the now sadly necessary mandates of rising multicultural moralists, I continue to find it difficult to appreciate Buckley's peculiar ethnic tradition—that of the American monied, self-defined, and thus self-assured, elite.

Worst of all, the book is filled with the strangest juxtapositions. The title, for example, is taken from a hymn written by a Unitarian and appropriated by firmly Trinitarian Protestants. Catholics, Buckley is proud to claim, can't sing. It appears they can't recognize hymn sources either. But, then, inconsistencies are part of Christian practice as a whole. Protestants, who, as the myth has it, can sing, bear their own musical contradictions, having pinched that arch-Catholic, Frederick Faber's hymn, "Faith of our [Roman Catholic] Fathers" as a weapon for the attack. And Buckley is no fool: He quite consciously shortens the full title of the hymn from "Nearer, My God, to Thee", thus opening his work to a deliciously double meaning, describing both the movement of God to us and our movement to God. By so doing, he emphasizes the function of grace in his and other Christian lives, a doctrine often claimed by chauvinistic Protestants. He claims back, as it were, that other Faber hymn, plagiarized as uniquely Protestant, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy".

Again: Buckley, the cradle Catholic, depends on the oddest assortment of converts to support his approach. Most are his friends. To one of them—the mountaineer, skier, inventor of the slalom—Arnold Lunn, he devotes a sixth of his text and that to Lunn's early writing as an *opponent* of Catholic faith. Setting aside the comments of Lunn's debating partner, Ronald Knox, and a not particularly well developed chapter on John Henry Newman's theory of the development of Christian doctrine, Buckley's next most quoted writer is the convert from Lutheranism, Richard J. Neuhaus. There is little unexpected in what any of them say, although their comments are worth the reading. The obligatory chapter on Vatican II leaves one with the impression that the Council was primarily concerned with lifting the obligation of Friday abstinence and removing Latin from the liturgy. Of the Council's "achievements", hinted at in the chapter's title, we learn little. There follow a collection of rambling interviews with Buckley's "advisors:

my forum of converts", first among whom is Neuhaus and including the political conservative Russell Kirk (deceased) among others. They comment in their varying ways on the crucifixion, women as priests, birth control, divorce and remarriage, church and state, the uniqueness of Christ, and other matters. Into the midst of this are embedded idiosyncratic reflections on Lourdes, on Hollywood (a sort of review of the film, *True Confessions*), and on Malcolm Muggeridge.

And yet...the book is well worth the read, if only for the first four and the final two chapters. The machine-gun staccato disappears when Buckley gives up the firing line and is willing to rest in reflection on his childhood, his early teachers, his university experience, his deep cover in the CIA, his ties with Howard and Dorothy Hunt (of Watergate fame) and his acquaintance with Charles Coulson, the ordination of his nephew, and his mother's faith. In a strange way, where Buckley is at his very best, he is at his worst. The speed of his wit makes him a quick debater but a poor assimilator. His attention is given to proving his enemy wrong, not convincing her. He leaps firmly to the attack; he is slow in considering the nature of the struggle. A ready defender of the faith, he is a poor theologian.

I was once told by a Southern Baptist friend that the Mason-Dixon line separates two religious approaches. In northern seminaries, he pointed out, priority is given to rational apologetic techniques, in the South to instruction in personal evangelism. Buckley's book begins in the North. We meet him first at a childhood home in Connecticut. At the book's close the reader discovers that this home is replaced by modern condominiums and that his parents returned to their roots and "a [restored] antebellum house in South Carolina" (283). In the epilogue, when he speaks of the death of his mother, Buckley comes, I think, to understand the implications of this shift. Certainly the book shifts. At the beginning the reader is tossed unwittingly from nostalgic comments on boyhood schooling into a sterile treatment of Newman on the notes of the church. At the close we rest by the graveside of Buckley's mother in hope of the resurrection of "the old and the beautiful", of her body and of the best of Catholic faith, recalling—as perhaps Buckley himself does, although he makes no comment on the fact—other aspects of the Venerable John Henry Newman's life and work. "No man would die for a proposition" the Newman adage runs. What counts is the person, a person, perhaps erratic, often unintegrated, always disjunctive, and inevitably contradictory, a fallen person, but a full person nevertheless, a "heart" as Newman would have said. *Cor ad cor loquitur*: Heart does speak to heart.

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