

Anne Rice And My Religion

I have been slandered. But I've never been slandered by a celebrity so focused on my religious convictions. You may have read in the past week or so the dramatic exit of author Anne Rice from the Christian (read Roman) Church. Anne Rice is the author of those boring vampire books and even worse books about Christ. Let me read to you her recent screed: "Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out," she wrote. "I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being 'Christian' or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious and deservedly infamous group. For 10 years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.... In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen."

As I read this the first time, I kept wanting to raise my hand to say, "But, but, but... There are lots of Christians who agree with you, especially in the Episcopal Church. My religion accepts:

- gay and lesbian people
- women and their ministries
- birth control as a wise and holy calling
- Democrats (though some Episcopal Republicans may disagree!)
- secular humanists as honest seekers after truth
- science as a way of knowing about God's amazing creation
- abundant life as the right of every human being as a child of God.

I think Ms Rice has been going to the wrong church. I do plead us Episcopalians, along with so many other Christians, guilty as sometimes hostile, quarrelsome, disputatious, and infamous. But no one's perfect. I could say the same thing about my fellow Americans, but the answer is not to take your football and go home, not to leave this imperfect union of citizens. In both country and church, one has to develop a thick skin and realize that some folks are just plain crazy. Don't let them get to you. I'd say, "Keep up the good fight," except that that could be interpreted as hostile, quarrelsome, disputatious, and infamous.

So today I would like to share with you some of the meaning that I find in my life in Christ and in Christ's community.

Here is the first of six. I follow Jesus of Nazareth because I think He, of all religious leaders and systems, deals most powerfully with evil in our lives.

Some religions deal with evil by saying that it doesn't really exist; it is only an illusion. Thus, we have Buddhism in which the primary task is to realize that everything is merely illusion and then to free ourselves from the desires that bind us to those illusions. I find this approach unsatisfactory for two reasons: 1) I cannot imagine God going to such elaborate lengths to deceive his creatures, and, 2) I find too much reality in my experience of the world to be able really to believe that it is all a dream.

Some religions re-define evil as good. Thus there are some sects of Hinduism which say that murder and sexual excess are approved and even demanded by their particular deities. The result of such a view is so destructive to the individual and to society that I simply cannot accept that these are responsible, valid perspectives on the nature of divinity.

Some religions stand helplessly in the face of evil, not knowing how to deal with it, leaving humankind to be victim to forces that neither man nor God can or will control. As much as I love our Jewish sisters and brothers, I sometimes feel that this is their view of our place in the universe. I cannot accept that God has abandoned us to our own devices and that our major religious task is simply to accept that fact.

I think Jesus did it right. He let evil do its worst to Him – evil killed Him – and then He annulled it by coming back to life. Evil is the sum of all the forces in the universe that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. From our personal point of view, the worst that could happen to us is that we cease to be, in any kind of meaningful way. That is what we call death and that is what evil did to Jesus. There was nothing more that could be done to Him. So when the body, mind, and spirit of Jesus were one more united and began to function as a unity, to live, as we know the term, there was nothing more that death could demonstrate. The power of God was indeed greater than the power of destruction. The kingdom of Satan was plundered, laid waste, devastated. And in annihilating the worst that evil could do through death, Jesus also demolished all the lesser evils: loneliness, anger, fear, misunderstanding, cruelty, alienation, illness, pain – the list is large but finite. Sometimes it may not seem as if these things have lost their power, especially when we must endure them, but the truth is that they are dying realities, destined someday to be no more. Christ has won the victory over all evil.

The second reason I have given myself to Jesus Christ is that He is the answer to the utter loneliness of the human condition. No matter how close we are to those we love, they cannot share in the very deepest core of our being; our own death is only one among many experiences that no other human being can share with us. In Jesus, God joined Himself to our human nature; that means that God joined Himself to me. Without overpowering our individuality, without absorbing us into His own immensity and thus destroying us, God has yet made Himself as close to me as my own spirit, my own mind, my own heartbeat. When I discover that God with me, surrounding me, confronting me, He is not an alien force, unknown, arbitrary, dreadful; He is a power beyond all measure that is at the same time just like me. He understands me and my condition.

The third reason I have given myself to Jesus Christ is that in Him God helps me. The very power that created the universe, made the suns and stars, shaped the mountains and the oceans, brings a baby to birth, wants to come to my aid, assist, encourage, promote my welfare. The One who supplied energy to hold atoms and subatomic particles together wants to hold me. The One who laid out the dynamics of the universe beginning before the Big Bang has a design for me and my life. As good as I am at living, I am still terribly weak, and in my powerlessness I need that backing.

The fourth reason I have given myself to Jesus Christ is that He has given meaning and purpose to my life. Have you ever wondered what it is that God wants of every human being? What is it that is so important to learn and to do that nothing else matters in comparison? Why is it that it really doesn't fundamentally matter whether or not one is a billionaire or a pauper, talented or a nerd, handsome or ugly, American or Mongolian, male or female, healthy or dying, princess or maid, or any of the other possibilities in our lives? God unveiled Himself in Jesus Christ and showed us what He wants of us. It is love. St. John says it better than I ever could in his first letter to his friends, preserved in the New Testament: "Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. Whoever loves is a child of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. And God showed his love for us by sending his only Son into the world, so that we might have life through him" (1 John 4.7-9) Isn't that incredible? "Whoever loves is a child of God and knows God." It doesn't say anything about believing right or acting right or thinking right or anything else like that. It simply points out love as the single most important characteristic for us in our relationship with God. And in His own words Jesus commands the same thing. Listen to Him as St. John tells us of the Master's words just before He is betrayed and begins His passion: "And now I give you a new commandment: love one another."

You see, we do know what the purpose of life is, no matter who or what we are. It is the same for all: to learn love and to do love.

The fifth reason I have given myself to Jesus Christ is because He has given to me and to every other human being eternal life. It was not originally the Christian understanding that the soul is immortal, that it cannot die. That is an idea that came into Christianity through Greek philosophy. The early Church understood that in our natural state women and men cease to exist at death. There is nothing in us that of itself is strong enough to survive that alien experience of death that were never meant to know. But if we cannot live forever by nature, we can do so by gift. God has given us joyful life without end with Him as pure, unearned gift; it's what Christians call grace, but it is still gift. Because Jesus loves you and me beyond any measuring, and because of His obedient serving through His willing union with us even through death, and because God raised Him from death to life again, we shall all live in ecstasy with Him forever.

The sixth and last reason I have given myself to Jesus Christ is that, for all its quarrelsomeness, hostility, disputatiousness and infamy, He did establish a community of those who trust in Him. This community, the Church, is inhabited by God's Spirit – strengthened, guided, judged, reformed, graced, by God's Spirit. God knows, and we

know, the Church is not perfect, not even close, but it is what we have, it is what God-in-Christ intended, and though we fall often, our call is not to curl up in a ball and die, but to get up and keep slogging on. That's the real Christian pilgrimage, the real Christian courage, the real Christian martyrdom.

That is why I have given myself to Jesus Christ and to His community, the Church.

In closing, let us pray for those who shall choose a rector for this parish, this spiritual community: Almighty God, giver of every good gift: Look graciously on your Church, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a rector for this parish, that we may receive a faithful pastor, who will care for your people and equip us for our ministries, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.