

Living In Sin
a short story by Ian R MacLeod

I can still remember the last burning.
I was ten or maybe less. Too young to understand, but I knew it was something special. The priests chanting and the crowds pushing to see
the man bound to the stake above the heaped pallets, old carpets and paraffin-soaked newspapers. Everyone straining to catch some kind of understanding from his face, wondering how it must feel. And then the procession of torches up from the back of the tennis courts where the
park keeper had his hut. The special darkness of the smoke lifting above the congregation and the hamburger stalls and the football pitches and the lines of coaches parked behind the houses. Everyone trying hard to stay quiet and listen for the screams that never came. My mother snatched my hand in the press of bodies, whispered that to God the smoke was like incense, he breathed it as the purest air. Took all that was bad into
his great holy lungs and turned it into good. Pity the poor sinner, but
pity more us poor mortals who must remain in the shame of our knowledge. I've been living in sin with Annie these past twenty years. We're
almost respectable. She's a non-destructive tester at Matsi Plastics on the industrial estate and I started work there in sales, trying to get shopkeepers to stock the cheap icons we produce. Then I decided that
shift supervisors had it easier, wandering around the shopfloor, telling
people what to do. The follies of youth. But that was how I met Annie,
watching her between the vats and hydraulics with her white overalls stained
yellow from the processes they use, then catching glimpses of her calves as we all knelt for blessing in the works chapel on the "A" lunch shift. Her hair was mostly red then, strands of it falling down from under her protective plastic cap in a way that seemed pretty to me. I was
separated from my wife and living alone, in my late twenties and already drinking too much and putting on weight, losing my hair. My early marriage had failed even before it began, and Annie's story wasn't much different.
We started flirting, dating, going out for drinks. We fell in love. Of course, we both knew that there was no chance of the Church granting annulments to the marriages that tied us, or blessing our union. But
there was never any direct discrimination against us. We rented our two
bedroom terraced house across the road from the church of Saint Anthony's
almost as easily as anyone else might have done. The neighbours were friendly enough, sympathetic even. They nodded to us each morning as we all
trooped yawning in our slippers to church for Matins. They let me borrow tools every winter when our pipes burst and chatted over the hedge in spring.
In the early days, Annie's hands often used to bleed from stigmata after
we had made love. But that diminished, in honesty probably as our own

passion

lessened. Still, even after May was born, our chimney was licked by lightning every time there was a storm.

Annie having May changed a lot of things. Kneeling at the pews of Saint Anthony's at Evensong whilst she was pregnant, we had prayed

frantically

that our baby would be ordinary. But still we were as surprised as anyone

when our prayers were answered. Who had ever heard of God blessing adulterers with an undeformed child?

The people at work began to share our table and play dominoes at lunchtime

in the canteen, to kneel close to us along the lines of stacking plastic

chairs in the works chapel. Mrs Hewison next door in our terrace even knitted May a matinee suit from pink and lime green acrylic she'd had

left

over from a cardigan. Once people saw May in her pram and realised that she wasn't obviously damaged or deformed, I think they all expected the kid to be special, to start reciting the scriptures around the side of

her

dummy or piss holy water like the ones you read about in the papers.

But

it seemed that God had answered our prayers. He had given us

fornicators

an ordinary child. An ordinary life. He had reached down from the

heavens

and touched our brows with the sweat of ordinariness.

The days at Matsi Plastics dragged by. The years happened quickly. They flew, and all Annie and I could do was watch. And draw slowly apart. We loved May, but that became a thin thread as she grew older and went out with her friends and we began to share the house together alone with

our

age and our disappointments, the unbroken weight of our adulterous sin. Maybe if we could have got married, if the stigmata and the lightning hadn't returned every now and then to remind us. Maybe this, maybe

that.

Sitting with the TV on and the evening paper spread on my lap, ashamed

of

the loose and heavy flesh it covered with Annie slouched half asleep across the room and hating her for the silence and the ways she had let

go

of herself and the loose grey hair that fell from her bun, I could see

the

spire of Saint Anthony's through the little bay window, crooked and beckoning like a finger. And I could hear a young girl's laughter down

the

street that was breathless and could have been May. Then some kid too young for any sense gunning a motorcycle. Where in name of Lord Jesus

did

May go these evenings? Only the week before I'd walked into the

bathroom

and found her standing there dripping and without a towel, looking like Aphrodite. I thought of the lads that sometimes came to the door

nowadays,

rawfaced with knuckled hands I couldn't bear to watch yet couldn't look away as they moved them restlessly. Said fine Sir if May's not in I'll just call tomorrow God willing. All those polite words to make me think they were good lads when I could see their hands and I know what lads

were

like Oh yes.

I tried to close my mind and watch the TV. The news was full of new miracles, the word of God spreading out from Europe and America, across the whole world. The sunset full of angels and cherubim above Cairo,

the

pillar of fire that had burned for three days and three nights in the Forbidden City. The newsreader was grinning. Oh, how foolish those foreigners must feel as they try to disguise their anguish and turn

their

creaky foreign minds towards the Faith!

I stood up and growled something about a walk, throwing the paper down deliberately loud and hard on my chair. Annie's eyes didn't flicker.

They

were closed, showing just thin glitter of white like a dog's when it's sleeping. I pulled on my old anorak and took the cigarettes that Annie wouldn't let me smoke at home from the pocket of my office jacket. I slammed the front door and it bounced back the way it always did. I

pushed

it gently shut.

Out in the street, the air was tainted with the scent of factories,

smoke

of chimneys, faded aftermath of the evening's cooking and dog turds

placed

along the pavement like pieces from some new board game. A ripe smell,

the

feeling warm and close, intimate as your underclothes. The gunning motorcycle and the breathlessly laughing older kids had gone. Just a

few

young ones who should by rights have been in bed were rattling

skateboards

on a makeshift ramp between the cars, shouting fuck this and screw that and then crossing themselves just in case and glancing back over their shoulders at the spire of Saint Anthony's souring crookedly beyond the rusted railings.

The church rose over tombstones and trees. Blackened stone that was old enough to have been here when there was nothing but sweet green haze as far as the horizon, in days of saint and knight and dragon. The story

was

that the spire had been straight until Gideon Kenna -- who was Lord of

the

Manor when there was still a Manor to be Lord of -- took to the pulpit

at

Matins one bright Christmastime and blasphemed. Said there was no God. Well, I mean. The church spire twisted at that very moment as a sign

for

all to see and has stayed twisted ever since.

But things were more easy going now. There hadn't been a burning since that one in my youth. People used to take a stricter view. They

believed

that only flames could purify a soul so tormented as to reject God. And the pendulum was swinging back that way. Articles in the tabloids.

Sermons

from the priests. Prophets shouting in their rags about the decadence

of

our ways. These things come and go as God wishes, soft or strict, the other cheek or the plagues of Egypt, and if it sometimes seems that He changes his mind, then we must remember that His ways are to us as our

own

ways are to an ant. Terrible. Inexplicable. Undeniable.

I lit a cigarette and let the smoke lie on my tongue to take away the

taste of the evening. Past the newsagents and then down the alleyway around the back of the houses, the pages of an old girlie mag were crumpled and splayed beside a bike-rutted puddle. Something the kids had got hold of, someone's daughter spread out there on the page, fading in the rain and the sun. Why does He allow us to sin in these ways? I can still remember the terrors of my own youth, those sweet floods of sweat and pleasure followed his our are, the pleasure and the pain becomes indistinguishable. But May was out in the town. Out almost every evening, pecking at her dinner, her eyes deep and absorbed, glancing up occasionally with an odd it went homework It's that some thinking that being from was and kid gave even me a Sign when I was, oh, no more than fourteen. A toy Madonna

like

the stuff we still make at Matsi Plastics that I kept on top of my wardrobe with the dustballs and a model airship I'd never got around to finishing had spread her tiny hands and glowed like starlight. She had smiled down at me, whispering words of sympathy and meaning that I couldn't quite catch. God had given me a sign. Then he looked away. Through a gate beyond the allotments and down to the High Street, a kid leaning on the bonnet of someone else's car caught me staring and gave

me

the finger. Another had spots and his arm up tight close to the breasts

of

a simpering girl who could have been May but thank God wasn't.

Everything

seemed to be quiet; the lights on at backs of the shops only made the grainy evening more empty. I turned down the footpath beyond the

library

and the public toilets into the municipal park, expecting the air to be sweeter and darker and greener. But instead there were crowds.

Kids and older people too, sitting on the grass, laughing, murmuring, pointing up towards the low hill that the Council had landscaped years

ago

for the kiddies playground. What remained of the sun was streaming

across

the playing fields through distant chimneys and skeletal goalposts. No trick of the light that it should fall on May like the blind eye of a searchlight as she balanced miraculously atop the highest bar of the largest climbing frame her skin, her open duffel coat, the white of her blouse, her very eyes all shades of gold. May talking, her voice everywhere and close to your ears as summer flies. Words of God, intricately speared on shafts of music and sunset.

May. Our kid. The baby we prayed at Saint Anthony's beneath that

crooked

spire Please let it be fine and ordinary. And here I was where I could

see

for myself and laugh at my fears that my daughter was a slut. No slut

no.

She was in the park, drawing the crowds and talking Sweet Holy Jesus

like

a prophet. And the people were murmuring and smiling and raising their hands as a flock of starlings streamed over the swings and the slides

and

the bowling green to roost and the darkness rose up from the soft damp grass and swallowed their grins and their eyes and May was in light

alone.

I broke away from the crowd and the golden buzzing in my ears, running like I hadn't run in too many years, slamming my knee like a fool

straight

into a park bench, limping the rest of the way back to the High Street. And into the nearest pub. Lucky I had enough money to get decently

drunk.

There was a fat bald guy beside me and another fat bald guy across the

bar

in the mirror. After a few beers I started talking to them both. About

how

we'd prayed for May but we should have known and it's never the things

you

worry about with kids that actually happen.

Waddyouknow, my daughter's a prophet. You've seen them, my Friend,

looking

crazed and thin, the hot light flooding out of their eyes. None of them
last long, pouring that much power into one soul is like lighting a
candle
with a blowtorch, putting rocket fuel into a moped. It burns them up.
They
shrivel down to the eyes and teeth and cheekbones. They go mad. Then
they
die and the angels weep and the clouds churn thunder and the stars fall
from the heavens like dazzling snow. There was a prophet laid out in
our
church for years when I was a kid, the bony body incorruptible and
reeking
of violets until someone found the courage to give the thing a decent
burial. It wasn't natural, it wasn't human. Who needs to go on about
the
existence of God when the evidence is all around? I suppose it draws
the
crowds for a while, gives them something to watch. But then so does a
football match. And so does a burning.
I gave a belch. The fat bald guy in the mirror belched back at me.
Finished my drink and started another, thinking of Gideon Kenna late
Lord
of this Manor when there was still a Manor to be Lord of. At least he
took
a risk, said something less than obvious from the pulpit at Saint
Anthony's on that dim and distant Christmas. Maybe it was just too much
of
ye mulled wine or the kids had been playing up and ungrateful about
their
presents the way kids always are. But it was bold, you know, he took a
stand, right?
The fat guy on the right of me was talking at cross purposes but he
nodded
anyway. The whole bar was now doused in a golden haze not unlike the
one
that had illuminated May in the park but a whole lot more comfortable.
People were getting sentimental and singing the old hymns the way you
do
after you've had a few. The way you do, at least, when your daughter's
not
a prophet. But we all have our troubles. Friend on the right was
telling
me that his wife had had would you believe it nine kids. They'd tried
praying and fasting and contraceptives and everything but nothing
worked,
the things just kept on coming. I mean, you love them all when they
come,
but sweet Jesus why so many? Why? I slapped him on the back and struck
out
into the night.
Immediately I was outside, the anger that I'd been trying to swallow
with
the beer rose up. A prophet. This was my daughter. May. A prophet.
Balancing on the climbing frame like a bird. Burning with light.
Couldn't
she have a life like anyone else? Maybe even take a few of those
girlish
risks that worried me as long as it was nothing too stupid and I didn't
get to know. Then get married and stay married and have not too many
kids.

Go on holiday and walk the seafront and eat candyfloss and throw bread
to
the gulls. I looked up at the stars the way you sometimes do when you
pray
even though God is everywhere. Please understand, I said to Him, I'd
marry
Annie if I could. Even looking the way she does now. You've got it
wrong
if you think you're punishing us with May and if you're blessing us
please
don't. You have to tell God these things sometimes, even though of
course
he already knows.
But tonight the stars weren't listening. They were dancing. Not the way
the stars always do when you're drunk, but wheeling, spinning, swirling
like the lights of a fairground. One or two other people hurrying home
glanced up as well. I saw them shake their heads and cross themselves
or
just pretend it was nothing. There were celebrations in the heavens
tonight. My daughter was a prophet. Hallelujah! She would spread the
word
of God.
The sky had settled down by the time I got back outside our house,
sticking to the main roads and avoiding the alleys just in case I got
mugged by some poor sinner still searching for the Way. A few people
back
from the pub or who had slept in front of the TV for too long were
scurrying through the gates of Saint Anthony's, up the graveyard path
to
catch the last of evening Vigil and prayers. Automatically, I started
across the road myself, then paused and stepped back to the pavement. I
really had nothing left to say to God that evening that could safely be
said in my own mind, let alone in church, and filled with this much beer
I
was concerned that my stomach might betray myself. You risked being
accused of trafficking with the devil if you simply sneezed during
services. I didn't like to think what would happen if you threw up over
the pews. Staying away from church just this once seemed like the
lesser
risk. Everyone misses occasionally: after all, we are only human.
The lights were out at home. I made more noise than I intended getting
into the hall. May's duffel coat wasn't back on the hanger. She was
still
out, spreading the word. I yanked off my shoes and crept up the worn
stair
carpet on fingers and toes, not that I cared about waking Annie, but it
was a point of pride that she didn't hear me stumbling around drunk. I
tiptoed along the landing and peered into May's empty room.
Drifts of starlight through the window. Things I'd been too wrapped up
in
myself to notice. White tears the Blutac had made on the wallpaper
where
she had peeled down all her posters of ponies and pop stars. The big
crucifix that I'd been given free as a faulty moulding from Matsi
Plastics
years before that now hung above her bed. I wondered whether she'd
noticed
that the nailed right hand had six fingers, or whether she thought it
was
a Sign. And maybe it was. Nothing was certain now. Even the air had

lost

the bedroom smells of slept-on sheets, spilled jars of cheap makeup, flesh, nylons drying on the radiator and the cigarettes May sometimes

used

to smoke and thought we didn't realise. Instead, it was cold and sharp, like a church filled with flowers.

My daughter. May. My Jesus Goddamn daughter. Annie grunted from our bedroom and turned over in her sleep. Somewhere, a car horn sounded.

Now

that my eyes had adjusted, I saw that the crucifix was glowing dimly, like

like

a kiddies nightlight. Jesus turned his plastic head towards me and smiled.

I stumbled back down the stairs. Sitting in the kitchen darkness with the

cold Formica table pressing my elbows, my fingers kneading my eyes, my daughter's sweet face gazed up at me from the well of the past. May

amid

the sparkle of the kiddies swimming pool. Then holding a cold flannel

to

her forehead as she moaned and threw up next day, bilious from

swallowing

too much chlorine. And skipping beside us that wonderful misty day

along

the canal towpath. And May in church, praying with half a mind and half

an

eye like any other kid. And how proud we'd felt, thinking how we had

been

blessed with ordinariness even with all the sin in our lives. And May naked from the bath, the sweet pink womanly flesh that made you proud

and

hurt and wondrous and ashamed.

I turned the kitchen radio on. This late at night when most of the stations have gone off air you can hear the whisperings of souls. Those breathless lips, grey as moonlight. But even with the radio up high, I could only catch the odd word. Frost...candle...pain. The unforgiven

dead,

streaming across the night sky, searching for an entrance to heaven.

Maybe

Gideon Kenna was still up there too, tumbling over the sleeping

rooftops

and Saint Anthony's twisted spire like a sycamore seed, flapping his clumsy medieval wings.

The beer was starting to wear off. I was wound up so tight that I could feel the skin of my cheeks and forehead stretching like drying leather.

I

wished there was some booze in the house. But I knew there wasn't.

Annie

never got any when she went to the supermarket; said I'd only go and

drink

it.

Then I heard the front door. May's breathing as she took off her shoes, her duffel coat.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?" she asked, standing in the kitchen doorway.

"How did you know I was down here?"

"Of course I knew."

I cringed as she clicked on the light. She raked a chair across the

lino.

Sat down opposite.

"This is far too late," I said, forcing my eyes up to meet hers. "No father lets his girl stay out this late."

"You know where I've been Daddy. I'll always be safe as long as God is with me."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

She smiled. Soft pink lips that made me think of the colour of her nipples

as she stepped out from the bath although the thought made me fill with shame. What sort of father was I? Jesus some sort of pervert. She smiled

again. She was gazing straight into me across the Formica through the yellow kitchen light like I was made of dirty glass. Seeing all the things

you would kill to hide.

"You've been drinking Daddy. You shouldn't. It draws you away from God."

"Why you, May? You've got your whole..." My nose was suddenly starting to

run from the beginning of tears. I wiped it with the back of my hand. Not

caring I was a slob. "...whole life."

"This...my whole life?" She looked around at the kitchen, half smiling, half in tears herself. "...this. We've got all eternity Daddy." I realised

suddenly that the radio was silent. Her presence must have frightened away

the ghosts.

"God is waiting for us all," she said. "He cares, he even gives us signs

so that we can be certain. But still people have to be told." She looked

straight at me, her eyes wet and bright and hot. "Still people have to be

told."

"So evenings you go down the park. That's the beginning." My voice started

to tremble. "The people point and gather round. That's the beginning. You

know what will happen don't you?"

"One day God will break this vessel, just as he will break yours. Does it

really matter how or when?"

I nodded and heard my neck creak and said nothing. But yes it did matter.

I was made from flesh and sin and folly and May was my daughter...my beautiful, beautiful daughter. I loved her because of these things, not

in spite of them. Even the foolish hurts and fears. The shameful things

that make us weak and make us strong. And now something had possessed her

that was power and knowledge beyond belief and all possible understanding. It

smiled at me like plastic Jesus and slithered wet ropes of steel behind her eyes.

"Let's pray, Daddy," she said, taking my hands. Her cool fingers, sharp and dry. "We'll wait through the night. Go across to Saint Anthony's together for Matins when the dawn comes. Let's be the first there. I

love

it when the light comes in on the darkness and the stained glass starts
to glow."
And we waited. And the clock ticked in the lounge. And the house
creaked gently. And light at the window brightened. And the milk carts rattled
in the morning. And the kitchen was grease-stained walls, the faint smell
of gas that I could never trace, the Brown and Polson clock that never
told the time, scratches on the Formica table, everything that shrank into
ordinariness when you looked at it like a punctured balloon.
But May retained the power of the night.
"Come on, Daddy," she said. "Let's go."
"...your mother."
"Let Mummy sleep. There's time for everything."
We crossed the road. The air was fresh and clean now and the last of
the stars were fading. I was in slippers and neither of us had bothered to
change or put on coats. Sour sweat wafted up from my crumpled collar,
but May's white blouse still glowed like something from a soap advert or a
cheap religious painting. Her steps were light on the gravel path as we
walked up through the graveyard. It was too early for shadows but I
felt the dark weight of Saint Anthony's leaning out of the rosy sky. The
spire seemed to tilt and sway.
Under the Norman arch I looked back beyond the railings towards the
tight rows of houses. A few people were already starting to emerge, heading
this way down the street. More front doors opened as I watched. Dogs began
to bark, the sparrows began to chip, lights came on behind yellowed
curtains.
It was hardly six. The streets were waking up too early; normally you
only got the crazies and the painfully devout in church for Matins at this
time. But they were coming in a rambling stream through the swing gate,
expressions of childish expectation on faces still stiff with sleep.
They knew that something was going to happen.
The church door was open as always. Gleam of gold and jewels at the far
altar: precious riches that no one would ever dare to steal. I felt my
way through the misty dimness, breathing the scent of hymn books and old
stone, the faint acrid tang of violets.
"You always sit at the back, Daddy," May said.
"Not today." I shook my head.
At the transept where the tall stained glass was beginning to weep
colour,
the ancient pulpit was a castle of dark wood. I unhooked the rope that
barred the steps and climbed the spiral.
"...are you doing?" I heard May's stern voice behind me, but she didn't
follow.
Looking down at her from twice my height from the top of the pulpit, I
felt a reckless sense of freedom.
"You can't just..." She looked up at me with the slide of steel behind

her eyes. Her voice grew lower, deeper, half inside my head. Commanding.

"You cannot speak. Not here in My house." I forced myself to look into those eyes. I saw everything and nothing.

The open wound of eternity. "You gave me free will," I said. "To do what?" "To worship Me. To do My will." Her lips moved awkwardly, like a poorly-dubbed foreign film, but the sound was overpowering. The bones in my skull rattled like loose floorboards. I swallowed once, then again. "And if I choose to exercise my own will. What will you do? Bring down the church, twist the spire like a kid in a tantrum? Destroy me? Haven't you done that already, given me a life where the days run and stick to one another like...like so much wet newspaper.

Just who do you think you are, you bastard!" May's face grew blank and almost ugly with puzzlement. The terrible power faded from her eyes. She looked crumpled and dowdy, her blouse in need of a change, her hair in need of a wash. Just a kid, just a kid. "May," I said, "I love you," knowing that He was still there, that He never went away, that He was still in me even as I defied Him. But perhaps there was still enough of the real me there to fight it. "Look, Daddy," she raised her hands in a frustrated shrug. "Just what do you think you're going to do? This is so..." she glanced around at the fat, drunken pillars, the creamy white of the marble monuments on the walls. "...so embarrassing." Embarrassing. Yes, that was good; embarrassing. An ordinary human emotion.

It was a victory. I smiled. Victory. I knew it couldn't last for long. "Sit down," I said, waving a hand, getting the feel of being up here in the pulpit. "I just have something to say." She was about to argue, but the door at the back of the church boomed open and the people began to pour in. I saw Mrs Hewison from next door in one of her horrid cardigans, faces from work. And Annie was there too, shuffling in baggy socks like the old lady she had nearly become. They all looked up, but no one seemed that surprised to see me, the sinner, the adulterer, gazing down at them from the pulpit. The priest hurried in from the chancery, half in and half out of his cassock. May saw him and ran over, whispered something to him. I never knew what it was, but it was enough. He sat down with all the others. The pews were full. May on the front row, looking up at me. I saw my own face in hers, and Annie's when she was younger and her hair was pretty and red. I saw joy and weakness, uncertainty and sin. The sun had risen now and light was pouring through the windows, gleaming on the balding heads and the spiderwebs of grey hair, the innocent and wicked, the upturned faces. The air was filled with the human smell of them all, like the

taste

of cigarettes and the night that was still in my mouth. I could hear the whisper of their lungs, their hearts pulsing.

Overhead, along the high roof, one of the wooden angels that buttressed the hammerbeams shivered its dusty wings uneasily, like a bird keeping balance on a dipping branch. The fluttering spread amongst the others,

a

dry sound like paper twisting in a fire, like leaves blown across concrete. The congregation hardly bothered to look up, but to me it was

a

Sign. I could almost feel the whole church tremble; the wood and the stones and the twisted dunce's cap of the steeple held together moment

to

moment by force and unreason.

were

I glanced down at the lectern in front of me. The pages of the Bible laid open and marked, ready for the first reading of the day. Exodus 3:14.

The part where Moses asks God how to describe him to the Children of Israel. And God says, Tell them I AM THAT I AM.

opened

I closed the heavy pages. Dust drifted in the gathering sunlight. I my mouth, then checked myself. Normally -- if there is a normally for a time such as this -- I would have been a stammering, shivering wreck by now. But although the whole world and the heavens were against me and already I could smell the paraffin and feel the first hot tickle of the flames, I was strong. I imagined the ghost of Gideon Kenna. A sad,

earnest

face blotched with the sufferings of years, pushed one step too far

along

a road he didn't want to follow. His arms were supporting me, his

fingers

pushing me on. Age to age. One man to another with nothing but time and air between us. Wanting only to live in peace, to die and know the certainty of darkness. And I felt a hot surge in my blood. I felt my strength and knew that it was anger. Simple. Hot. Righteous. Anger. I balled my fist and shook it at the roof and the at sky, at the trembling, fluttering angels. My voice echoed through the silence in a great and gathering howl. I wiped the spit from my lips with the back

of

my hand. Slob that I am.

I leaned forward over the lectern. I began to speak.

Afterword

'Living In Sin' was published in Amazing Stories in January 1991.

has

I've always had a bit of a love-hate relationship with religion, which

which

probably reached its culmination in my first novel, The Great Wheel,

is due out from Harcourt Brace in the USA this summer, where I ended up managing what I'd like to think is a reasonably sympathetic portrait of

a

Roman Catholic priest. Religious convictions, of course, are basically illogical; they are wild leaps in the direction of aspirations and

ideas

that have little if anything to do with the practicalities of everyday life. Religion makes promises of serenity and fulfilment that it never keeps. Religion leads people towards self-centred certainty, bigotry

and

violence. But it also encourages quite staggering feats of altruism. Religion is, in fact, a little like that other great human mystery - sexual love. It often makes people look ridiculous, but it can also transcend every other aspect of life. In the future, no matter how it happens and we writers choose to envisage it, I don't think either love or religion will ever go away; or not, at least, until humans are got rid of altogether. God, on the other hand - the kind of God that most of us were brought up to believe in the world's main monotheistic religions - has in my view much less to recommend Him. He's the anti-hero of 'Living In Sin', meddling in a world that would get on better without Him. If nothing else, the story is an argument against all those people who say that, if God exists, he she or it would surely reveal his, her or itself to us. Do we really want to know? Where the Hell (and I choose the world advisedly) would such knowledge get us?

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