

# A Sacred Dimension

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McCaslin, Susan, ed. *A Matter of Spirit: Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*. Victoria: Ekstasis Editions, 1998. 302pp.

In the Introduction to *A Matter of Spirit*, Susan McCaslin, a poet and Creative Writing teacher, begins with her awareness of the connection between her own poetic creativity and her mystical Christian faith. She has extended this interest into "an exploration of the spiritual element in Canadian poetry," anthologizing the work of sixteen major contemporary Canadian poets "from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds both within and without traditional religions" (13). Quoting Thomas Moore on "spirituality as a sense of the sacred in the particulars of ordinary life," McCaslin suggests that the contemporary poet is "soul-sick for the recovery of a sacred dimension within ordinary experience" but inevitably iconoclastic towards orthodoxy or religiosity (14). In opposition to post-modern theories of skepticism and irony, she has gathered poems that express spiritual longings, transcendental epiphanies, and ontological quests. And she helpfully summarizes the emergent themes she has identified in "inspired" Canadian poetry: 1) the interconnectedness of all things, 2) feminist and revisionist approaches to religion, 3) a non-dualistic valuation of nature, and 4) the union of mystical contemplation and socio-political concerns.

In the Introduction McCaslin also deftly previews the poets she has chosen, grouping them according to tradition and approach. This is a useful overview of her subjects who are then presented alphabetically with a brief biography, a generous selection of a dozen or so poems, and (with the exception of Leonard Cohen) a concluding essay or interview in which they reflect on their poetic understanding of the sacred. A clear Table of Contents and full Acknowledgements/Bibliography complete this nicely-produced and weighty book.

The sixteen poets constitute an impressive and surprisingly eclectic collection from a wide range of spiritual orientations. And they invite groupings and cross-references even beyond McCaslin's Introduction. Two of the best and best-known poets in this volume come out of a

Jewish tradition. Although Leonard Cohen has moved into the practice of Zen Buddhism, his poems in *The Book of Mercy* and "If It Be Your Will" are modern Hebrew psalms. And Miriam Waddington combines references to the historical Hebrew prophets with a concern for contemporary social justice. Dealing more critically with their religious traditions, Barry Dempster and David Zieroth have both rejected their narrow Protestant upbringings to embrace a new spirituality of poetry. Dempster quotes Kathleen Norris: "Poetry, like prayers, is a dialogue with the sacred" (101).

Among the revisions of traditional orthodoxy gathered here, feminist reinterpretations of the patriarchal scriptures and concepts of the divine predominate. Elizabeth Brewster invokes "the unknown goddess" (27) and foregrounds the heroic stories of Dinah and Tamar from Jewish legend. Similarly, Lorna Crozier honours "the female and the body" (84) by retelling the Bible from the perspective of "God's wife" (73) and "Noah's wife" (79), and attributes "the spark of the spiritual in the everyday world" to "visions of angels" (83). Anne Szumigalski and Sharon Thesen also celebrate the holy in the daily through myths, dreams and references to angels and the goddess (for example, in Thesen's "Aurora" [252-53]).

Crozier's sacralization of nature ("What's most like the prairie / is the mind of God" [82]) connects her also to P.K. Page and Robert Bringhurst. Page's loving detail of the world around her connects "that essential / intricate design" to "a vaster / one I barely glimpse / already cosmic" (179) and, therefore, demands an ecological stewardship that irons out "the holy surfaces" (186-87). Similarly, Bringhurst abandons the "fossilized" myths of traditional religions to embrace a "pagan" reverence for nature that erases "the division between secular and sacred" (57-58).

Most of the poets in this volume, in various ways, repudiate traditional dogma for a spiritual agnosticism. Dennis Lee and Tim Lilburn are the most articulate, in their poetry and interviews, about *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the "via negativa." Lilburn, a philosopher and former Jesuit, discusses the apophatic tradition and his longing for the sacred in a union with nature (156-57). Though a secular modernist, Lee sees himself in the "negative contemplative" tradition, dwelling in his spiritual hunger, "called to worship without belief." His poetry, therefore, expresses "spiritual life in the secular world" (136-39).

The two First Nations poets in this volume, Sky Dancer Louise B. Halfe and Daniel David Moses, express their spirituality in the myths and rituals of their native cultures, although Moses notes the

inevitable "mix of Christianity and traditional Iroquoian cultural norms" in his "masculine feminism" and his "obsession with the moon" (172). Halfe's poetry honours her Cree "Grandmothers" ("Nohkomak" [113]) and celebrates the "Spirits" (106) that inhabit the Native world. Finally, two poets at opposite ends of the religious spectrum draw from their spiritual roots but foreground their "sense of the sacred" in all creation as the core of their poetry, rather than their practice of religion. Ajmer Rode, a non-observant Sikh who writes some of his poetry in Punjabi, reflects his scientific background in his awe-filled meditations on the mystery of life: "if you can find / a path into it / there is enough / space in this / particle / to stroll a lifetime" (201). Robin Skelton, in the last interview before his death, tells McCaslin that his "spell-like" later poems may be influenced by his practice of Wicca (224). But, rather than preach any religion, his poems rather reflect "Everything is in the light of everything, holy. / But do not expect a catalogue of grace" (213).

This volume is a unique and important contribution to poetic anthologies in Canada, complimenting David Kent's more precisely-defined *Christian Poetry in Canada* (1993). In some ways its rationale and rubric (as Robin Skelton points out in resisting McCaslin's attempts at defining his spirituality) are tautological: if "exploring the spiritual is trying to find a truth you want to tell somebody" (227), then all poetry is sacred. And, in fact, the category is so broad in this selection that it is totally inclusive and therefore effectively indeterminate. The theologian David Jasper has criticized the contemporary tendency to redefine the absolutes of "the entire theological enterprise" in vague terms like "sacred" and "alterity" as "religion (and literature) without commitment."

However, while few readers will be enlightened by theological insights in this volume, none can doubt the poetic commitment and power of the lyrics assembled here. The ultimate and only necessary justification of this volume is the high quality of the poetry that McCaslin has anthologized from sixteen of the finest contemporary poets in Canada.

**Barbara Pell**

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