
Collective Brightness, an exciting offering from the relatively young Sibling Rivalry Press, brings together a broad range of contemporary poems about religion by both emerging and established poets who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, intersex, or queer. The poets appear in alphabetical order, and the resulting contrast of styles and perspectives emphasizes that the qualities the contributing writers have in common, they have in common despite differences of culture, race, and creed. Referring to the alphabetical arrangement, Simmonds writes, “these poems are neither categorized nor ordered in any way.”

Behind Simmonds’s vision of the anthology as a whole, however, there is an organizing argument: that love is “the one undeniably shared fundamental of all organized religions”—and that religion cannot oppose love without undoing itself. Some—but certainly not all—of the poems in Collective Brightness directly explore the idea that human love and sexuality are expressions of the divine. Elizabeth Bradfield’s powerful “Butch Poem 6: A Countertenor Sings Handel’s Messiah” celebrates the eroticism of a countertenor’s androgyny (“I want to reach under his starched / shirtfront, and find a different sex.”), and recasts the Biblical verses in Messiah as a “song / of the drag queen and the bulldyke” in which the promised victory is a victory over ignorance and prejudice.

Angelo Nikolopoulos’s poem “Fisting: Treading the Walls” compares brachiprostic insertion to prayer, and ultimately to Thomas the Apostle’s probing of Christ’s wounds. A less ambitious poet might have allowed that metaphor to rest on the level of parody, but Nikolopoulos knows that his poem must open onto real mystery—“analogy’s not enough,” he writes—so he develops his poem into an exploration of what it means to be truly intimate with another person, and to need tactile proof of that intimacy.

Not surprisingly, the four Carl Phillips poems in Collective Brightness stand out as some of the strongest works in the collection. In “Parable,” Phillips describes fish swimming into the hands of a saint, who will eat them; this becomes a metaphor for the relationship between the narrator and his lover. Like Nikolopoulos, Phillips rejects easy, reductive parallels, and searches instead for something that is harder to define:
... I think on
that immediate and last gesture

of the fish leaving water
for flesh, for guarantee
they will die, and I cannot

rest on what to call it.
Not generosity, or
a blindness, trust, brute

stupidity. Not the soul
distracted from its natural
prayer, which is attention...

Regardless of whether or not a poet believes in God, I think, he or she must
have this kind of restless, agitated need to dig down into what cannot easily
be named, if the poet intends to write meaningfully about religion. What
makes Collective Brightness so interesting, at least to me, is that most of the
contributing poets avoid setting up a predictable opposition between reli-
gious authority on the one hand, and social justice on the other. The poems
in Collective Brightness, taken as a group, suggest that religion belongs to all
people, and not only to the forces of social conservatism.

Jericho Brown, Michelle Cahill, J. Neil C. Garcia, Keetje Kuipers, Sophie
Mayer, and Mark Wunderlich all make memorable contributions to the
anthology. Some of the poems in Collective Brightness approach the subject
of religion so obliquely that in a different context they would not necessarily
seem to be poems about religion. In this context, the anthology’s theme
offers readers a key to interpreting the poems.

Many of the poems characterize faith as a personal spirituality (Ellen Bass writes, “Make your eating and drinking a supplication. / Make your
slicing of carrots a holy act, / each translucent layer of the onion, a deeper
prayer.”), but I was intrigued to see that just as many—or more—poets
locate faith within a specific, organized practice. It is difficult to know
whether this reflects Simmonds’s own interests as a curator; I came away
from Collective Brightness with the impression that for many contemporary
poets, writing about organized religion is a way of writing about culture or
tradition.