

BOOK REVIEW

When Art Disrupts Religion: Aesthetic Experience and the Evangelical Mind.

By Philip Salim Francis. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 203 pages.

Whether in the form of music, dance, theatre, visual art, or literature, works of art have long been disparaged in conservative Evangelical circles for their tendency to serve as a conduit to the secular, material world without God. In Christian post-secondary student handbooks, dancing and secular music are often included in lists of prohibited activities, alongside smoking, illicit drugs, harassment, sexual immorality, and satanic practices (see Pensacola Christian College's Code of Conduct and list of College Standards for a striking example: www.pcci.edu). While such prohibitions are extreme and of dubious efficacy, Philip Salim Francis suggests that the fear behind them may be justified: art does have the ability to unsettle and rework our most deeply held beliefs.

When Art Disrupts Religion: Aesthetic Experience and the Evangelical Mind explores the disruptive power of art in the context of evangelical Christian faith and identity. Through a collection of memoirs and interviews, Francis observes art's capacity to call into question assumptions about self, other, and the world. The women and men who share their stories have many things in common. All share an evangelical Christian upbringing that many refer to as "fundamentalist." All experienced a profound change of outlook and identity after encountering an aesthetic object at one of two Christian post-secondary institutions, either the Oregon Extension (an intentional learning community in the mountains of southern Oregon, accredited through Eastern Mennonite University) or Bob Jones University School of Fine Arts and Communication. These commonalities of experience lead Francis to consider the role of art in identity transformation. Rather than presenting a general theory, Francis asks questions bounded by and grounded in the specific experiences of his subjects. His questions have not so much to do with the *why* of aesthetic disruption as they do with the *how*: in what way do aesthetic experiences upset beliefs and identities within evangelical Christianity?

The crux of Francis's argument is that, in the experiences described by the women and men in his study, the arts disrupt evangelical identity and belief by allowing individuals to overcome specific "methods of identity preservation": 1) need for absolute certainty, 2) division between insiders and outsiders, 3) all-or-nothing commitment to the faith, and 4) idealization of the past (6). He devotes one chapter to each method of identity preservation, allowing accounts from his memoirists first to illustrate the identity marker and second to describe the role of art in overcoming that marker. Throughout, Francis emphasizes the socially-informed bodily practices that support, maintain, and are inseparable from belief (15). Art—much more

so than logic—has the power to unseat belief because it impacts body and mind together, disrupting not only belief but also practice.

The memoirs and interviews offer vivid, first-person accounts of individuals who have broken away from evangelical Christianity, the very community that shaped their deepest senses of self and their understanding of society. For any reader who has themselves undergone a similar shift in faith, the stories will resonate deeply. They are at times lyrical or abrupt, always with a poignant honesty that reveals gratitude alongside grief. “If it weren’t for the arts—Rothko, Bob Dylan, Hemingway, Kerouac, to name a few—I am not sure there would have been an unsettling of my religious certainties,” says one memoirist. “Sometimes gradually and sometimes with immediate effect, aesthetic experiences burst the evangelical Christian bubble that was my world” (2). Eighty-two individuals shared their stories of art disrupting religion, and Francis builds the frame of his study using the shared themes they provide.

The need for certainty, for example, emerges from the memoirs as a key element of the evangelical identity. Many of the memoirists reflect on the physical practices they employed in their youth and adulthood to cement this certainty: apologetics debates with mentors and peers, sharing one’s testimony in church, witnessing door-to-door, or wearing tee-shirts with slogans like “Ask me! I know the Answer!” (41). However, these practices could not completely assuage what the memoirists describe as “cracks” or “gaps” in their certainty. Holly writes that she knew questions were marks of weak faith, “so I only whispered them to myself” (43). Tracy talks about her multi-year anxiety about whether or not she was really saved, because “a person who had accepted Jesus into their hearts was supposed to feel happy and certain. I did not feel this way at all” (46).

When confronted with visual art, music, literature, and artistic performance in their post-secondary institutions, the memoirists felt the cracks in their certainty grow. Away from their families but still within an evangelical community, students began practices of *uncertainty*, opening themselves to examining their faith in a manner similar to the way they examined texts, theories, and ideas in their classes. Betty writes, “With each new book and its accompanying group discussion, I found it more and more difficult to remain without skepticism in terms of my faith. If I was to approach literature honestly, allowing my own doubts and questions to coagulate into a coherent critical reading of the text, should I not also allow myself this freedom when it came to practicing my faith?” (33). In the case of the students who attended the Oregon Extension, the faculty actively encouraged this kind of questioning, modeling curiosity and a mystical approach to faith as more honest and authentic, leaning into Anne Lamott’s assertion that certainty, not doubt, is the opposite of faith (*Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, 257). Betty concludes her memoir by stating that she considers herself an “orphaned believer” who finds Christian community when and where she can, because she no longer belongs in “a church that does not risk mystery—that does not embrace honest contemplation over ease and convention” (55).

The strength of the book lies in the poignancy of these first-person accounts, which often read as a “testimony” to their counter-conversion. Unfortunately, Francis spends an exhausting amount of time disclaiming the memoirs by emphasizing the limitations of qualitative research. While those limitations are real and important to acknowledge, the sheer number of qualifying paragraphs generate a sense of unease in the reader: if the writer of the book discounts the data, why should I value it? The disclaimers also cast doubt over his claim to be “grounded in the stories” (8), especially given the amount of time he devotes to aesthetic theory. The stories end up feeling more like punctuation marks or proof texts than sources of knowledge themselves. While the theoretical framing frequently offers useful conceptual insights, it also tends to become dense very quickly, making the reader eager for the next piece of memoir.

Francis locates his work within the discourse of aesthetic philosophers like William James, John Dewey, Alexander Nehemas, and Elaine Scarry, while also drawing heavily on the work of psychologists, historians, and scholars of religion. These “dialogue partners” (106) provide language and form for Francis’s observations, allowing him to structure his ideas without drifting into generalization. In the chapter on certainty, Scarry’s concept of the “wordless certainty” of beauty is useful in understanding how art can destabilize previously held, absolute beliefs by creating new, contradictory convictions that require the revision of the old (66). In the same chapter, Francis points to William James’s suggestion that aesthetic experience opens a sense of unknowing, a heightened awareness of “the more” that lies beyond our experience, thus breaking down certainties. Excerpts from the memoirs support that idea, one respondent noting, for example, that literature “burrowed” into their certainty by demonstrating “just how much I didn’t know” (64).

While *When Art Disrupts Religion* is, overall, more a philosophical reflection on the topics of art, religion, and identity than a sociological study with practical outcomes, its interdisciplinary approach allows considerable room for sociological imagination. Of particular interest to scholars interested in the intersection of Christianity and sociology will be the memoirs that explore social practices of identity, which readily evoke Goffman’s “backstage/frontstage” presentations of self and impression management in the context of evangelical identity preservation (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959). Another clear connection lies in the sense of lostness, confusion, and disintegration of self that occurs after a core identity has been rejected. The memoirists describe depths of grief and terror that lead them to contemplate suicide as they find themselves cut off from their faith communities. Their descriptions reflect the anomy that Berger theorizes exists outside the sacred canopy of religion, the normlessness and lack of meaning when one’s identity and place in an ordered universe is lost. Interestingly, many of Francis’s subjects indicate that art not only caused the destruction of their sacred canopy but also provided a substitute, albeit a less all-encompassing

one. “I turned to the arts when I felt . . . the gnawing sadness of God’s absence,” says Cora T. “It soothed my soul” (129).

Interestingly, though Francis argues that art has allowed the memoirists to overcome the identity markers of evangelical Christianity, the memoirs themselves suggest that “overcoming” does not mean leaving those markers behind. For example, in the chapter on overcoming the demand for an all-or-nothing commitment to the faith, though art is shown to allow the emergence of new selves that no longer held to evangelical systems of belief and practice, the identity marker remains: “It was all or nothing—and I eventually chose nothing. I jumped from the burning building” (99). Francis mentions in his introduction that some of the memoirists have come to a middle ground of faith, still holding some beliefs while rejecting others, maintaining community despite differences in perspective, much like what Wendy VanderWal-Gritter describes as “generous spaciousness” in her book of the same name (2014). That type of emergent identity is not discussed in this book, and that omission is a weakness given the current movement toward redemptive, generous postures within evangelical Christianity (see Deborah Jian Lee’s *Rescuing Jesus: How People of Colour, Women, and Queer Christians are Reclaiming Evangelicalism*, 2015). Similarly, Fowler’s ideas in *Stages of Faith* (1981) could provide more perspective and thus hope for these individuals in their future engagements with faith, positioning art as just one of many “disrupters” that lead to fuller experiences of faith rather than a necessary rejection of it.

The absence of those “third way” stories results in a heavy pessimism at the book’s end. The final chapter finds his memoirists in an endless state of grief for the God they no longer believe in, never fully healing because they remain bound by a fixation on the past, an old evangelical identity marker which continues to hold them even after their encounter with art (135). “I miss God,” one memoirist writes (120). “I live, and I think I will always live, in a perpetual state of bereavement,” says another (120). Even while acknowledging that past beliefs were deceptive and limited, they long for “simpler” times: “Knowing doesn’t stop me wanting my God back . . . If I could have kept my naïveté, I never would have lost him” (123). While Francis offers some light at the end of the tunnel in terms of art looking forward rather than back, pulling the artist into progression rather than regression, I remain unsatisfied. But is this critique merely evidence of my own desire to believe that I can keep my faith, in whatever altered form?

As Francis does in the afterward of his book, I find myself offering a disclaimer for everything you have just read. As someone who has gone through a process of faith disruption through art and ideas at a Christian post-secondary institution, I acknowledge that my reading of *When Art Disrupts Religion* and the memoirs it contains are colored by my own evangelical upbringing, aesthetic experiences, transformations of self, and orphaned faith. Nevertheless, I believe that the questions it asks will be of interest to scholars in the fields of social psychology, the sociology of religion, autobiography and narrative, and to a wider audience interested in

transformation of self in the context of Christian faith. It should be required reading for upper-level undergraduates in these fields, many of whom may themselves be grappling with the very disruptions that Francis describes.

Marie Raynard
Dalhousie University, NS, Canada