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Michael W. Higgins

Sacred Heart University, higginsmw@sacredheart.edu

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Rebel with a Cause

The Religious Landscapes of David Adams Richards

Michael W. Higgins

The past few years have been a golden period for those who like bashing religion and its claim to be an important dimension of human life. Discerning a public eager for such denunciations, writers, and publishers have raced where angels genuinely fear to tread, enlisting big names like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens in a relentless attack on religion's myriad forms and expressions.

God's own cohort of apologists—ranging from the ardent and predictable to the subtle and unconventional—has rallied back. Recent additions to the literature in defense of the divinity include John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge's *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World*, Robert Wright's *The Evolution of God*, Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*, Terry Eagleton's *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, and Barbara Bradley Hagerty's *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality*.

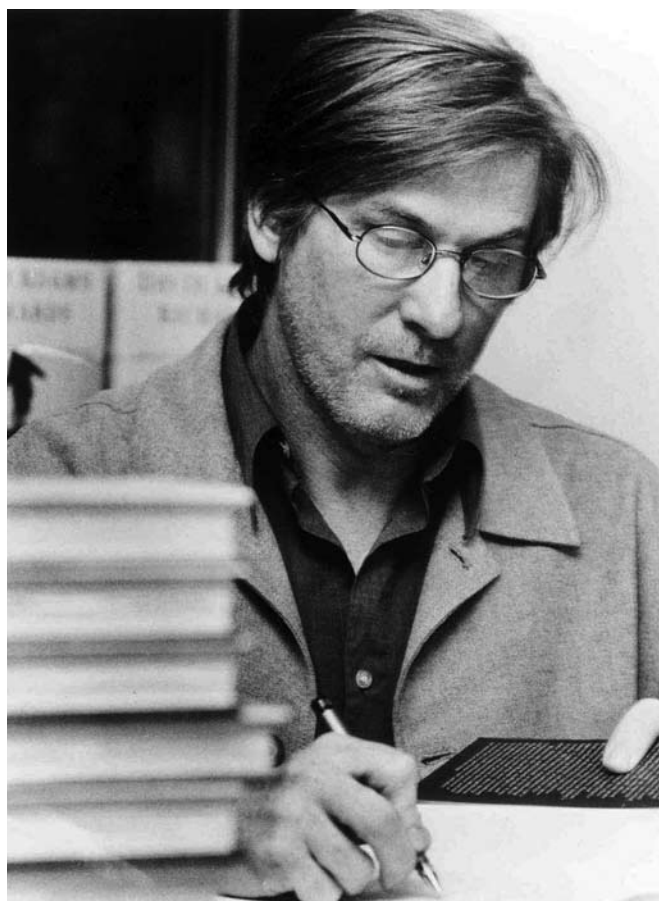
And now comes David Adams Richards's *God Is: My Search for Faith in a Secular World* (Doubleday Canada, \$29.95, 166 pp). Neither a theological refutation of atheism nor a philosophical exposé of the shoddiness of the "New Atheism," Richards's book is a deeply personal, visceral affirmation of the divinity's "isness." As he declares in his introduction, his book "simply states God is present, and always was and will be whether we say we have faith or not, whether we observe His presence or scorn His presence." *God Is* proves bold, combative, and original.

But who exactly is David Adams Richards?

Canada's most demonstrably Catholic writer, and increasingly a fixture on lists of Nobel nominees in literature, Richards

is the author of a number of award-winning novels—*Nights Below Station Street*, *Mercy Among the Children*, and *The Friends of Meager Fortune*—as well as several celebrated nonfiction works, including *Lines on the Water: A Fisherman's Life on the Miramichi*. A Canadian hybrid of Thomas Hardy, Leo Tolstoy, and William Faulkner, Richards is a prolific writer whose work conveys a haunting mix of fatalism, moral gravitas, and tragic heroism. His fictive landscape is the naturally idyllic, economically ravaged, and morally contorted world of northern New Brunswick.

Born in 1950 in Newcastle, Richards retains a deep attachment to the people and places of his youth. His fiction brims with outrage over the economic devastation visited on the rural population of New Brunswick—one of the "have not" provinces in Canada—and with contempt for the corporate



Michael W. Higgins is the author of *Stalking the Holy: The Pursuit of Saint-Making (Anansi)* and co-author of *Power and Peril: The Catholic Church at the Crossroads* (HarperCollins). He is senior executive in residence at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut, and was recently appointed the authorized biographer of Henri Nouwen.

mandarins whose mining, forestry, and fishing investments rule the region. Richards's biographer, Tony Tremblay, calls the early Richards a social realist, a regionalist who "desired to present his people to the larger world," bringing "their wit, their self-reliance, their resolve and decisiveness" to his pages.

Electing to be a full-time writer in spite of the financial hardship that would bring his family, Richards spent several years studying at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, but left without a degree, taking a variety of menial jobs while sharpening his persona as rebel and nonconformist. Out of this period came *Blood Ties* (1976), a work the eminent critic, poet, and editor Fred Cogswell once called the greatest novel ever written in New Brunswick. It captures a world caught in the vortex of radical change with all its disruptions, uncertainties, and social casualties.

Since then, the prolific Richards has written dozens of novels, short stories, poetry, and screenplays, amassing an ever-mounting commercial and critical success in Canada. His pinnacle achievement—in terms of complexity of vision, stylistic sophistication, and character portrayal—is the Miramichi trilogy: *Nights Below Station Street* (1988), *Evening*

power have remained a constant. Tony Tremblay notes that "Richards is obsessed with the menace of power in society, a menace which he sees as perpetually conspiring to destroy the individual's interior search for God."

The quest for God—a credible God and not the construct of an academician ill at ease with the Incarnation—sets Richards's purpose in *God Is*. Establishing at the outset his habitual animosity toward the powerful, he reminds his readers of the demonic record of villainy set down by the likes of Nero, Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin. The last enjoys a special place in Richards's inferno. "Stalin's war was fought against the very presence of God," he writes. "Goebbels might have said that Hitler was too great a man to be compared with Christ, but we think of Stalin as the man who needed to obliterate him." The divinization of Stalin—and the eradication of alternate deities—represents for Richards the public horror that visits humanity when the individual qua individual is annihilated. Stalin embodies the supreme negation of the other, the perfect representation of power as the evacuation of all personal meaning and dignity. Stalin, then, isn't just a historical figure, but a philosophy—one of ruthless control over the individual and contempt for human freedom.

Though a work of nonfiction, *God Is* is best understood in the context of the author's fiction, which shares its animus against this philosophy of contempt for human freedom. The enemies in Richards's novels, however, are not gulag apparatchiks or KGB henchmen, but rather the wounded dreamers and disappointed romantics of the North American academy. In his latest novel, *The Lost Highway* (2007), Alex Chapman—failed professor, intellectual manqué, and champion of moral libertarianism—illustrates the self-deception and snobbery that Richards sees as the damning qualities of an inauthentic and self-serving professoriate: "He was, like most men who have never really stood on their own, frightened of being disapproved of, while pretending radical theory that was really the standard theory of a coddled academia."

Such pretensions, in Richards's contemptuous view, are nothing more than "the theories of many who never worked a day with their hands." Unsparing in his dismissal of a professoriate that would foment rebellion yet abdicate personal responsibility, he derides the fake authority that would substitute for a genuine one grounded in wisdom and faith. The figure of the fraudulent radical dates to Richards's undergraduate experience. "Back in 1969, the world of the university I went to writhed in popular dissension against everything," he writes in *God Is*. This writhing, in his account, was inflamed by pseudo-Nietzscheans urging students to denounce their roots, mock their parents, and abjure the social and religious values that shaped them. Richards writes that "half the professors I met my first few years at university were stupid," adding that he never again "witnessed so much conformity among those who postured freedom."

As a college student Richards was eager to assert his independence of thought vis-à-vis his more conformity-inclined peers. "So much atheistic and social activism wasn't based

A quintessentially Catholic writer, Richards incarnates rather than reifies; he identifies sin for what it is, understanding that genuine freedom is spiritual at heart.

Snow Will Bring Such Peace (1990), and *For Those Who Hunt the Wounded Down* (1993). These are dark works in which the moral outrage of the social realist has given way to the psychological and philosophical explorations of an ardent outsider—one inveighing against the spiritual nihilism of prevailing ethical and aesthetic codes.

The success Richards enjoys has made him "something of a problem" to the university-dominated literary establishment of Canada, comments J. Russell Perkin, professor of English at St. Mary's University in Halifax. Though his championing of a "marginal" region of the country and its working-class inhabitants would seemingly recommend him to the liberal-leftist outlook of the academy, he has also authored "some fairly unflattering representations of liberalism and feminism," Perkin notes, "and he is preoccupied with the theme of individual moral integrity."

This preoccupation has undergone several mutations over the course of Richards's career—his earlier fiction is more markedly concerned with social justice and the efficacy of the social gospel, his later work with the need for personal redemption—but the mystique and the moral corrosiveness of

Letter to My Mother

Early October sky wears more gray
than your old wool sweater. Wind chills
my neck like the string of pearls left
on your dresser.

Three months since
we shoveled earth's dust into that windless
hollow where you waited for sky
to close, wind to worry our hair, rattle
branches as you turned to undoing.

Still my fingers remember
combing your hair, my lips hold winter's
chill. What is left of you, intangible
as music left sounding in the flute, dissolved
in the wind and its ways. Intangible
as shadow that waits to unthread memory,
bones—renders us chill as your face that shocked
my lips when I bent the last time
to kiss you good-bye.

I pulled back leaving
you un-kissed who had become some other thing
already, one of the elements—
Fire. Earth. Water. Wind.

—Joan I. Siegel

on truth as much as compliance to the rather strict rules of social etiquette,” he writes. But he found himself in a spiritual bind. “Though I believed in the blood of the saints as true and sacred, nothing about religion pleased me either.” And so for years he struggled with a faith he could neither fully embrace nor categorically abandon. It was a turbulent time in his life, one that led him toward dark corners of depravity. “There wasn’t a writer in the country any wilder than I was at twenty-four,” he confesses in his book. “And my wife and family paid for it.” Slowly he came to realize that “only faith could save the desperate.... And by thirty-one, I was as desperate as any.”

The account of this part of his life in *God Is* includes tales of macabre depravity and wanton violence. A man knifes a piglet on a dance floor. Another savagely beats his pit bull, then turns it loose on anyone who dares to intervene. Arson, rape, and murder touch Richards’s circle of acquaintance, creating both victims and perpetrators. Violent depravity would inform his fictive world as well—and in his novels as in his life, he was eventually able to draw from desperation a mature faith. Persuaded, like Dostoyevsky, that murder is the

supreme act of human pride, the ultimate sin of arrogance, he came to connect it with the crimes of a Stalin. But no one, great or small, is free from sin. “The best of my characters,” he writes, are “plagued by sin.”

Richards sought freedom from his own sin, and in the throes of despair, and having drunk himself half to death, he chose what he came to see as the only way out: “to write what I knew I must.” And he has, with merciless honesty, ever since. His writing is his redemption. Indeed, the novel *The Friends of Meager Fortune* (2006) reads like a modern *Passion*. Set in classic Richards territory, during the dying days of the logging industry in New Brunswick after World War II, the novel portrays characters powered by a volatile mix of homeliness and lethality, their vengeful tribalism expressed in outbursts of crude xenophobia. They are a motley crew of damaged heroes who face their destiny with defiance, bravery, and saintly tenacity. It is a story of innocence that pays the highest price, and of self-sacrifice that goes unreckoned until it is too late.

But most important, it is the *Passion*, complete with all the ingredients: Holy Thursday, Calvary, Good Friday, *kenosis*, betrayal, Gethsemane; the abuse of authority, the lust for blood, and finally the redemptive power of love. The novel’s hero (the “Meager Fortune” of the title) is a minor figure who plays his part in the larger drama of the Jameson brothers, Will and Owen, their rivals, their lovers, their logging companions—and ultimately their tragic deaths. The *dramatis personae* of the *Passion* are here: Peter, Judas, Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of Jesus, the schemers, the mob, the broken, and the desperate. But the novel is not an allegory. The Suffering Servant can be found in the simple and yet profound acts of self-giving that surprise the reader with their love and recklessness.

The Friends of Meager Fortune has the emotional punch of Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, and the novel’s closing line—“All is cut out, muted, torn away”—throbs with a despairing sense of finality. Richards has acknowledged his debt to Hardy, even as he points to a crucial distinction: “the difference between me and Hardy is that he stopped at the threshold of the church.” Richards did not. A quintessentially Catholic writer, he writes the history of salvation from within; he incarnates rather than reifies; and he identifies sin for what it is, understanding that genuine freedom is spiritual at heart. Faith in his own life, he confesses, has never kept him safe from sin or personal failure; but it has led him away “from what I once believed in, that liberty was bought with power, and toward a more astonishing recognition of the sacred in our midst.”

In the end, David Adams Richards’s search for the sacred in our midst—for faith in a secular world—brings him back to his fiction. It is fiction that will save him, he knows, not metaphysics, not theology, not argument or rhetoric. As for his characters, scorched by the fires of their own personal hells, they too will taste something of the life-restoring water which is the Life, Richards writes, that “made the lame walk, and, yes, the blind see.” ■

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