

## **Called Out of Darkness**

A Spiritual Confession

Anne Rice

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I didn't know much, or anything, about Anne Rice before Tom Andrews presented this book as one of many choices for the next few months' Pasadena Covenant Church Men's Book Club discussion. Apparently it was the winner; it was chosen for the very next month. I read it during my trip to Wallops Island for the PM & SE Course #14 (Project Management and Systems Engineering). It was my bedtime reading each early, eastern time, evening, and was much of what I read on the plane flights out and back.

Rice is a prolific author of vampire novels and has quite a following, including my daughter Viannah. Obviously she can't help but write prolifically about these supernatural beings. She was raised Catholic and was very sensually devout but rejected the church at the end of adolescence, for some of the standard reasons, and stayed away until the end of middle age, returning to faith and the church in 1998. One thing she understands now is that the church and God are distinct entities. Many of us know that a person can, and often does, reject one and not the other, but in Rice's case, she rejected both at once and also returned to both more or less at once.

This book is about that story.

Christianity, like Judaism, is a religion "of the book." The Bible (in the case of Christians) is central to everything about the faith. It is all written down, it is all "inspired" by God himself, and that written Word is the final authority on all matters of faith. This explains the heavy emphasis on literacy in our society. This is the faith I was brought up in and is one of the ways I experience it now, thus my project to go through the entire Bible paraphrasing it in writing for myself and my family. This is one of the three or four key ways that I have always understood faith, experienced faith, and grasped faith. Anne Rice's childhood in the faith was nothing like mine.

She was raised in New Orleans in a good, hard working Catholic family. Her mother took her to mass every day back to her earliest memories. The churches, cathedrals, and neighborhoods were rich in images, sounds, tastes, and scents, emotions and feelings. The regular Mass and the seasonal celebrations were all sensory feasts. And it was New Orleans. Mardi Gras.... Rice understands no conflict within the so-called commercialization of Christmas. Isn't it just a great expression of what should be a huge party, after all? There is no conflict between the faith and the secular. Both are embraced by the people.

An interesting feature of all this was that Rice's perception of the Catholic Church she was raised in is that it was not against the "real" world in any respect. It was part of it, part of all of life. There were some movies that their parents prohibited, for example, but not most and movies in and of themselves were not evil. All the ways Protestants define themselves by being against something: alcohol, dancing, sex, movies, Papists, and so forth, were not present in this humid, southern, Catholic life. Yes, Protestants (from the other side) were misguided, errant sinners, beyond redemption, but this sort of internecine rivalry did not impress or affect Rice much.

Then she got to school age and was sent to parochial school. "School was like being in jail." She did not read well and could absorb very little in that way. This is much in contrast to being a member of a "people of the book." If "the book" doesn't do much for you then you will not be much of a person of "the book." Fortunately, Catholicism had much more to offer. Among distinctions from Protestants, there is much about saints and miraculous occurrences such as the Stigmata. There is worship of Mary, mother of God. There is the Rosary....

Rice's writing style is highly intelligent and engaging. She knows just when to be laborious, just when to be abrupt. She never makes a grammatical or structural error.

She goes to some length to point out that she never thought of Christianity as sexist although everything in the out-working of the faith around her was divided by gender. At one point she wanted to be a priest and was amazed that her gender made any difference toward a goal like that. She claims that her writings about vampires, and later about faith, such as in this book, downplay much influence of gender on individuals. The Fathers were all hard-working moral people, to anyone's knowledge. No clergy sex abuse scandals then or there. In any case, Rice never paid a lot of attention to the politics or current events of the church, not as a believing youth, not as a middle-aged atheist, and not now, having returned to faith. Although she is more aware of the current and historical failings of all churches (more than just Catholic) she claims in the end that we must stick with the faith, with the God, with each other, even though, as my mother would put it, "the devil is in the pulpit." Even despite the blemishes and massive failings. Rice herself calls Christianity the greatest and most dangerous thing in the world.

Indeed, I have always thought that all these complaints about hypocrisy and so forth in the church were just lame excuses from those who don't want to mess with it, and the legitimate claims that faith makes and represents.

But to return to "Called Out of Darkness."

As Rice grew up she developed the natural interest in boys. She found the church's stance on dating and boy-girl relationships in general to seem misguided and grossly inaccurate. (With this I agree. Those reading my reviews will see me blaming Queen Victoria for this sort of thing quite often, and not so much our sacred heritages.) Late in her schooling her mother died of alcoholism. Not long after that the family moved to Dallas where she finished high school, and

developed an interest in a particular boy, Stan Rice. The church was quite different in Dallas from that in which she had grown up. She felt conflicted about many things, as people will at that age.

At this point we are right in the middle of the book.

Not being able to afford any conceivable Catholic university, she attended Texas Woman's University where she did poorly in English, mostly due to stylistic differences with the teachers and non-standard learning styles. Her conflicts with the faith as presented grew. She found the university intellectually open and freeing. The mandates of faith are often opposed to personal and intellectual freedom, and to honest inquiry, sometimes to the point of being anti-intellectual. The secular humanists seemed more open. I know this conflict. For me the church has a sometimes stifling aura about it. The "church face" on everyone, trying to appear to be what they are truly not, can be overwhelming. The cooler water out in the secular world seems much less oppressive, until one is bitten by some behavior, manipulation, or downright crime, which would be prohibited in the church world. Well, which ought to be prohibited in the church world. People are people there too.

Rice became a secular humanist, and remains one to this day. But the conflicts mounted and, as she tried to work them out with help from a priest, he one day realized she had a Catholic background and claimed that there was no other possible life for her aside from the Catholic model, that of being a submissive mother of many, mostly doing and mostly not thinking, and performing all of the normal Catholic obeisances. Well meaning and correct as this was within his context, Rice left the faith over this advice, which in the broader context of reality, was absurd. And, not realizing that there was a difference between church, faith, and God, she also abandoned God and became an atheist.

She admits in that episode that she never put her "dilemma before God." He might have done better than the priest, having a broader perspective.

So, Anne married Stan Rice and moved to San Francisco where he had a successful career as an English professor. They had a beautiful daughter, who died before she was six. After that Anne became the author of vampire books and other treatises on the supernatural for which we know her today.

Anne Rice is an unusual thinker, a unique experiencer of life. We all are, actually, but Anne is articulate and quite confident in her view of everything and how it works and how it fits together. and her uniqueness is one of the many attractive features of her thinking style. Her return to faith is a long story told in images and icons, a statue of Saint Francis of Assisi with Christ that appears in several places in particular.

Her return to faith was followed immediately by a diabetic comma, and later by the death of her husband. She lives today in California but owns much of the area and many of the buildings of her childhood in New Orleans.

Her return to faith was precipitated by an in-depth study of history. How did the Jews survive for all those centuries through all they survived through? It was clearly impossible. How did a religion started by a crucified Jew ever get established at all? This too was and is clearly impossible, except through God's hand and for his purposes. Much of what God does or does not do is mysterious, but he is clearly there behind it all making certain very broad things happen.

In the end she talks about the church and sin and what it means to be good. Her faith is one of strong sincerity. Nothing done in true sincerity can be wrong, not writing vampire novels, for example. All of this is explained in detail, what it all means, how it represents her searching for faith, how it is all legitimate. Anne Rice is not a returned prodigal as the promotional materials say, she has just figured some things out. She says, "The sincerity of my writings removes them completely from what I hold to be a sin." And she knows what sin is. Sin is when she pushed that boy down into the basement just to see what would happen. Sin was when she and her sister stole flowers out of someone's greenhouse. There was penitence. There was mercy. There was good fortune, if we are allowed, in a context of faith, to call it that. Fortune might be secular. That would be OK with Anne Rice.

This is an area in which I would have a lot of discussion, however. She has tried hard for it not to look this way and I don't think it, in actuality, is for her, but something about saying in essence that everything is OK if you're just sincere, or sincere enough, isn't very satisfactory. But, me being conflicted about this would be, I think, just an area of discussion, not by any stretch a breaking point of relationship, if a relationship to break existed.

What does she think about modern sexual mores? Food for thought at the very least:

"Centuries ago the stars were sacred. A man could be burnt at the stake for declaring that the earth revolved around the sun. Churchmen feared that if astronomers gained authority over the Heavens, Scripture would be undermined.

"But no such thing took place. Scripture is too great, too powerful, too fathomless for such a thing to take place.

"Now the Christian world holds the stars to be secular. Most of the Christian world holds biology and geology to be secular as well. And Scripture is as potent and irresistible as ever. Scripture still guides our lives.

"And the stars are still the lamps of Heaven.

“Is it not possible for us to do with gender, sexuality, and reproduction what was long ago done with the stars? To realize that these are also secular areas, and that new sources of information about them may be as valid as the information given us long ago by men who gazed through the first telescopes at the night sky?”

“Is it not possible that gender, sexuality, and reproduction are areas for which the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount may be entirely adequate as they are for every other sort of behavior we face?”

And yes, Rice is devout and observant, but that doesn't mean what it means for a lot of people. It is not drudgery, it is not like being in jail, and it is not doing something hypocritical or stupid. It is relaxing into God and just living in the mystery.

I do that, after a fashion, in my own conflicted way.

Rice has now written historical fiction (in the first person, even) about Jesus as a youth. This is not as controversial as it might seem. She claims that there is a thirst for this in modern culture. I dare say. After having spent six years in depth in the Bible, reviewing many things I already knew, I have an interest myself in some expansion into new modes of thought about the subject matter. Is God not big enough to handle this? What, anyway, *is* going on here?

As she says at the outset:

“If this path to God is an illusion, then the story is worthless. If the path is real, then we have something here that may matter to you as well as to me.”

Quite.