

***God Is. in The Lost Highway and
Mercy Among the Children:
Paradox, Peace, and the Existential
Power of Christian Faith***

By Greg Maillet

David Adams Richards' 2009 publication of *God Is.*, subtitled *My Search for Faith in a Secular World*, served both to confirm and chasten those critics aware, and often somewhat wary, of the religious elements in his work. Richards' absolute affirmation of faith—that "God is present, and always was and always will be whether we say we have faith or not, whether we observe His presence or scorn His presence" (*God Is.* "Introduction")—authorizes, indeed insists upon, a deeper exploration of theology in his fiction. Yet *God Is.* also questions critics' capacity to seriously consider religious meaning. "People who have disagreed with my work," Richards laments, "have often failed to bring up the quest for God as the real problem for them in a novel that professes to be modern" (77). What is Richards' conception of God? Why does Richards have faith in the divine? How is God manifest to Richards in his own life, and how can the divine presence be described in his fiction? Such questions are complex, but it is clear that central characters in both *The Lost Highway*, Richards' most recent novel, and *Mercy Among the Children*, his most celebrated work, do give fictional form to the quest of faith outlined in *God Is.*

While clearly giving priority to the teachings of Christ and His Church, and also criticizing the obvious abuses within the church, *God Is.* does not assert or deny any particular theology, not even the central Trinitarian doctrines, but more broadly asserts "faith in Something greater than ourselves" (45). This existential Christian faith is perhaps influenced by Dostoyevsky, one of a number of Russian Christian writers whom Richards has clearly read closely. Yet for Richards the presence of this "Something" can perhaps best be seen through the lives of those who most clearly attempt to deny the Divine presence. Thus the Soviet dictator Stalin, Richards argues, "is far more than anyone else the key, the lesson, for people to ponder when they doubt the existence of God" (4). This paradox must be explained. While the genocides caused by Communist or Fascist dictators have

caused many to question how a good God could possibly allow such evil, and thus to doubt the existence of God at all, amidst the physical suffering and sorrow Richards sees a spiritual, eternal battle taking place. While the “war against God” in Soviet Russia “was done in the end to make Stalin God,” at the dictator’s own death “a look of terror and rage” is reported to have “crossed his face,” and finally he “shook his fist at Something” (9), unable in the end to deny God’s transcendent presence. Richards’ main point here is not historical or political, but rather that the spiritual battle present within Stalin recurs in all of us (perhaps in response to the original temptation, in Gen. 3:5, that we can “be as gods”), and not least within the many “modern novelists and thinkers” who believe “that our intellect invented God and not the other way around” (17). Look beyond the violent nihilism of Stalin and other dictators, Richards argues, and we will see their metaphysical views echoed in the scientific utopianism of, for example, a CBC commentator who recently argued that “we ourselves had become God, or god-like, because everything was now possible” (16); or, look closer at Stalin’s self-righteous “cant and posture,” his self-serving moral relativism, and we see “our neighbours—and ourselves—at our lowest moments” (10).

As Richards has old Mrs. Chapman tell us at the start of *The Lost Highway*, all of us have “always been at war” within our hearts, especially when we war against God in the manner of her troubled nephew, Alex Chapman. Once a seminarian, he substitutes the love of God for the love of young Minnie, even when that love goes unrequited. Finally rejected, Alex is “stunned that God, whoever it was or whatever form it took, would want [Minnie] to have a child by Sammy Patch...[her eventual husband]... and not by him” (68). Alex “decided at this moment that there must be no God,” and Richards’ narrator observes: “So often it happens that what God is perceived to have done creates denial of God” (68-69). Here Alex illustrates the “general rule” explained in *God Is.*: the “trivializing” of religion is often “considered just because of some unknown personal injury that we manufacture continually within the hubris of moral relativism” (11). Substituting himself as Minnie’s controlling deity, Alex mocks her belief in Catholic doctrines such as the Virgin Birth and tries to persuade her to abort her child. Minnie responds by questioning the logic of Alex’s new atheism:

if you think I have no child inside me, where do you think this child will come from—do you think that it doesn’t grow or exist but is only human when it reveals itself fully formed from beneath my skin, when its head finally appears between my legs?...Then that is most miraculous—from thin air we

come, from vapours we are formed—what angel would not come to us in the night and create our virgin births! (68)

At university, Chapman discovers a world where he is thought to be “brilliant” because “there was nothing he believed in” (77), and where arbitrary “approval or disapproval had replaced justice and humanity, while posturing as the exact same laws” (78). His past religious beliefs become something to hide, not because they are something false, or true, but because they are not ‘approved.’ Alex thus both practices and experiences the intellectual anti-Catholicism that Richards saw directed at his wife Peggy (to whom *The Lost Highway* is dedicated) when even friends thought she was “being duped” because she still went to Mass (*God Is*. 24). Ironically, Alex himself becomes ‘disapproved’ after a too public protest against university administrators, and he is soon reduced to the position of a sessional instructor in ethics at a small college. Following a vaguely Aristotelian ethic of individual liberty and personal self-fulfillment, Alex “disbelieved in evil” and in the very concept of sin; although he himself “made many mistakes,” Alex saw no sinfulness “in his own nature.” *God Is*., by contrast, insists that a proud denial of sin leads towards “a projection of sin” and enslavement to sin. As in *Genesis* and Dostoyevsky, for Richards the rejection of God and “self-seeking sin left unabated seeks to become the one ultimate sin—murder” (79). Similarly seeking to become free of religion, and free of economic dependency on his Uncle Jim, Alex collaborates with Leo Bourque to murder his uncle, old Poppy Bourque, in order to steal his winning lottery ticket. After Amy Patch becomes the lone witness against them, Alex and Leo come to see murdering her “as the only way to be saved,” a demonic parody of Christian paradox that apparently ensures both horrific tragedy and the ultimate loss of Alex’s soul.

The deeper paradox of this novel, however, is that Amy, much like Sonya in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, may indeed be the only way for Alex to be saved. For the life Alex denies in Catholicism and the life he sought to destroy through abortion and then murder are reunited in Amy’s saintly person, however well it is hidden beneath her shy, frail, teen-aged skin. Amy’s profound beauty and importance in the novel are first suggested after Alex, desperate for cash, accepts a job sculpting a grotto for the local Catholic Church. He cannot envision and therefore sculpt the face of Mary, however, until he sees the face of a young girl outside a local grocery store, the face he later learns to be Amy’s (89). Amy herself speaks to Mary regularly and often lights a candle at the grotto, a candle that stays lit even when the garishly wicked Leo Bourque throws a cup of water over it (166). As the novel progresses through its *Crime and Punishment*-like

stages of danger and suspense and the two villains close in, rational readers must feel virtually certain that Amy will die and that Alex, like Dostoyevsky's arch-villain Svidrigailov, will commit suicide. Yet neither occurs. Left alone for a moment with the Gospel of John, Alex reads: "And you are unwilling to come to me that you may have Life" (5:40). It "was the first time Jesus had spoken to him in sixteen years," Alex thinks, and knows: "And what he said was—true" (341). Precisely so, he continues to hunt Amy, who prays, "Mary, save me tonight, and help me" (378), but modern readers recall the narrator's earlier comment that no answer will be heard; does this also mean that no answer will be given? As the two villains almost capture Amy, Alex recalls his former self, his old idealism, the beauty of Keats's poetry, the freedom of poverty, and the reality of religious judgment. "What if, if, if there *is* a God," Alex asks, to which Leo—the devil quoting scripture or god as just another noun proper to modern moral relativism—logically replies, "Better off for it...God forgives" (367). Alex, however, eventually speaks the truth: "If I do this I am damned" (383). Before long, he stabs Leo with the knife that had killed Poppy, but still Leo pursues Amy up towards the grotto, where she escapes by hiding behind the statue of Mary, even while some of Bourque's "blood smeared the Virgin's face and seemed to run down her cheeks" (390). The traditional, supernatural symbolism here matches Amy's miraculous escape, and Mary mourning for sinners, but the greatest miracle may be Alex's salvation. Though both Alex and Leo are soon swept away on a boat, sure to die, Alex's final actions prevented murder, saved Amy, and perhaps also preserved his own eternal soul.

In *God Is*, Richards makes clear that faith is "the one out" from the sin that plagues men like Alex Chapman and drives them towards murder; he adds that usually "this is not a great comfort to the modern man" and that "this is why" his work is "often considered depressing" or his "characters unlikeable" (80). Yet that can only be true for those who see no strength or beauty in Mary and no personal integrity in Amy; indeed, if one sees the latter, then perhaps the former also becomes visible. By contrast, the loss of "personal integrity" experienced by Alex, Richards believes, is "a sign-post" for "the slow decimation of the human spirit" (20) that accompanies the rejection of faith. Paradoxically, Richards' awareness of the inevitable failure of human attempts to create God's absence—and "I have known more than a few Alex Chapmans" he insists (81) also renewed his own faith in God's presence. Doubt of "the personal integrity of many," and a keen awareness of his own sinfulness, "over a long agonizing time brought me back, veering this way and that, careening ever so clumsily, to the idea

that God lives and breathes in us all, and not to realize this is to coat ourselves with a veneer that hides the truth from others as well as ourselves” (20).

Lyle Henderson, in *Mercy Among the Children*, is another of Richards’ characters who is “trying to decide whether or not murder is justified” (*God Is*. 80). But rather than rebelling against his own past, Lyle, the novel’s main narrator, must face how to respond to the life and legacy of his father, Sydney. At the age of 12, Sydney promised God that he would never hurt another person and attend church every day if only the boy he just pushed off the church roof, Connie Devlin, can live; as soon as this pledge is made, “the boy stood up, wiped his face, laughed at him, and walked away” (24). Years later, after their family has endured many attacks from those eager to exploit the weak, Lyle mocks his father: “God tricked you into this masochistic devotion. God has made you His slave because of your unnatural self-condemnation” (24). Indeed, Connie Devlin grows up to be a villain who hurts Sydney in countless ways. Is Richards himself also mocking Sydney’s faith? Or, rather, does he affirm what Sydney himself tells Lyle:

whatever pact you make with God, God *will* honour. You may not think He does, but then do you really know the pact you have actually made? Understand the pact that you have made, and you will understand how God honours it. (24)

As the novel unfolds, Richards seems to understand Sydney’s ‘pact’ as something akin to a biblical covenant. God provides Sydney with a devoted, deeply religious wife named Elly, and three extraordinary children in Lyle, Autumn, and Percy. Though poor, the family sees God in the natural beauty of Atlantic Canada; as Sydney tells Elly, “no one owned the ice, or the sunlight spiraling down into it, or any other sunlight, nor crisp autumn days, and no one had authority over her enjoyment of the world. That was given to her by something—*someone* else” (85). They also enjoy the gift of wisdom in volumes of used, inexpensive books of literature. Autumn herself becomes a writer and offers *David Copperfield* to Lyle as a way out of his struggle, recalling the well known fact that *Oliver Twist* started Richards himself on the path to becoming a writer. Richards’ portrayal of the Henderson family clearly intends to avoid what *God Is*. later critiques, the tendency to present “sainthood” as “almost always pious and absurd, with the accent on ‘absurd’,” or as “caricatured or lampooned, with the accent on ‘lampooned’” (11). Yet neither does Richards idealize the consequences of the Hendersons’ sanctity. Precisely because Richards

respects Sydney's pact, his covenant with God, it must be sharply contrasted, as the Hendersons learn from St. Augustine, with any notion that men "can con God into serving them, asking not for direction in their lives but for gain if they do right in service of him" (306). At times, Lyle notes, Sydney feels "that the love he had for my mother, and the love she bore him and the children, was always under assault" (88). Eventually, Sydney is framed for the manslaughter of Trenton Pit, a mentally handicapped boy whose death is actually caused by his uncle, Mat Pit, brother to his mother Cynthia Pit, and his two accomplices Rudy Bellanger and Connie Devlin. As a variety of slanderous accusations and even physical assaults do occur, in the quiet of his own prayer Sydney demands, "Why God do you allow this to happen?" (89).

When Lyle "talked to God," by contrast, he "did not ask why things happened: but rather "accused him of what was happening," an "essential difference" (89) between not only this father and son but also between the average person—including Richards and his readers—and the authentic saint who completely covenants with God. Yet in defense of his family, Lyle must ask the great ethical question of the novel: when is turning against others necessary? Or, to put it another way, should one respond to violence with love, or with violence? As terrible things continue to happen to the Hendersons, it becomes increasingly difficult to accept Sydney's faith that "no one can do an injury to you without doing an injury to themselves" (38). Yet much later, after numerous fistfights and even a minor robbery of the local church—of which Lyle poignantly asks, "What happened to my soul because I stole the chalice?" (253)—Lyle recalls his father's claim and admits, "If only I had believed him just a little I might still be free" (283).

Lyle's experience here again recalls Richards' own life and the central conclusions of *God Is*. Tempted to follow the example of murderers who had threatened his family growing up, Richards learned that the one irrevocable gift of faith in God is to reject violence and "allow us peace... from the active complicit role of wrongful injury" (13). Faith can "save people," Richards explains, "not from being murdered, but faith would save me from murdering someone else" (81). Unlike many moderns who claim that "one cannot be seeking liberty and God at the same time," Richards believes that "liberty cannot be had without the other, God," and that "the whole premise of life is to seek God, in order to realize freedom" (77). In sum, "to become liberated through faith is not to say that there is no sin, but to be able to lessen its tendencies over ourselves" (88). Gradually, Lyle

comes to realize that this liberty was gained by his parents, even if it made them powerless against their enemies around them.

In *God Is.*, Richards further makes clear that while faith “does not stop crime, or sin, or wrongdoing, or evil,” faith “does always and forever combat” these things (94). He is certainly not naïve concerning problems within institutional Christianity, particularly the scandal of sexual abuse that has plagued modern culture and has even infected some Christian leaders. Both Sydney Henderson and Connie Devlin were sexually victimized as preadolescents by Father Poirier (the novel’s parish priest), though perhaps we can believe Poirier’s claim that this was “his one lapse in all this time,” for eventually he does tell Lyle that his father was entirely innocent in the death of Trenton Pit. Conversely, *Mercy Among the Children* also includes a brief, inexplicable portrait of “Vicka,” the actual “child visionary from Medjugorje” who claimed visions of the Virgin Mary and shows her positively effecting change within the soul of so hardened and corrupt a woman as Cynthia Pit (401-02). Yet precisely because faith does not eradicate sin from this world and because this novel is a serious theodicy, Richards concludes the novel with three major tragedies that many readers find increasingly depressing. First, Elly dies at the age of only 39, worn out by poverty, stress, and perhaps most of all from the nearly three year absence of Sydney, who had gone north to find work. Though her funeral is well attended, Lyle finds it “strange how few people actually knew her compared to those who knew *of* her”; in some ways, “it was as if she had never existed,” as if her life “had caused not a ripple on the surface of our land” (344). Yet Lyle closes the third section of the novel, subtitled “Love,” with a simple, concrete statement of facts about Elly, most related to the infinite love she had for her family. In their lives, her influence had been monumental, inexpressible, and above all else, Lyle concludes, “I want people to know—I loved her” (344). Ultimately, although her death and life seem meaningless to outsiders, Elly taught her family love, a holy, infinite love whose influence can be seen to continue, in many ways, both in this life and beyond, into the eternal reality of their souls’ life with God.

It is Elly’s sacrifice, the unselfish offering of her entire life, that allows the fourth and final section of the novel to be entitled “Redemption,” even though it opens with the harsh tragedy of Sydney’s death. By this point, however, Lyle understands the central biblical analogue of his father’s trials, both those caused by his initial covenant or “pact” with God, and the final one now at hand. “Both were Old Testament trials,” Lyle explains, a “trial with his own human heart” of the kind that modern people “have forgotten in their world of internal clocks and self-assertion” (349). Yet nei-

ther could these trials be clarified by Old Testament books such as Proverbs, in which “all wrongs are rectified, justice measured equally, and to the good the triumph of the good” (349). Rather, Sydney’s final trials could only be understood through “a stronger, more brilliant, more penetrating, and more painful book,” the Book of Job, which Sydney “knew by heart.” Seeing through the wisdom of this book, Lyle must deeply respect how Sydney survived in a world that

is not a certain place, where anything man has can be taken from him, leaving him to sit in stunned acceptance of the horrible Word of God. Only the young think there is freedom from that book—wise men and kings know it is the greatest and truest book in the world—and my father was nothing if not both of those. (350)

Sydney’s final, Jobean trial begins, and is linked to his initial pact with God, when Connie Devlin arrives at his work camp. Devlin soon returns to petty theft, from whose retribution Sydney mercifully defends him even though he knows, as he tells Connie, that you “have hurt me all my life,” and, as he seems to tell God, “I should not have made my pact... it is a hard pact” (351). Just how hard, how incredibly difficult it is to truly love one’s enemies even for a moment let alone an entire life time is then artfully suggested rather than directly depicted by Richards. For as Sydney leaves for Elly’s funeral, Devlin begs to come with him, promising to confess his past crimes against him but really planning—readers must suspect—to rob Sydney of the money he has saved for Elly and simplemindedly stuffed into his backpack. Leaving on “the day of Elly’s death,” Sydney is not seen again in the novel, yet the mystery of his death being caught up into the life of God, with Elly, is finally revealed to Lyle; appropriately, at least within the inexplicable but inevitable ironies of divine justice and mercy, it is revealed by Connie Devlin.

The novel’s most important scene, one heavily influenced by the spiritual wisdom and perhaps even presence of both Elly and Sydney, occurs months after Sydney’s disappearance. Connie Devlin has returned, suddenly well-heeled but soon under house arrest, and, “people said” that he had confessed both to his earlier crimes and the murder of Sydney. Lyle goes to Connie’s house, afraid that he “would get away again” (364), with knife ready to justly execute Devlin for his crimes, promising that “I will kill him” (382). Debating abstractly, Lyle recalls citing George Orwell on the Spanish Civil war to reject the pacifism of his father, and noting the various abuses of Roman Catholic clerics to disprove the authenticity of

his own religious culture; yet to the latter claim Elly had a poignant answer:

So what if that *is* true? That does not make *me* less true—it does not make your father less good, or his bravery less real. Nor does it make a mockery of Saint Therese of [sic] the child Jesus. (382)

Lyle then asks one of the subtlest but most important theological questions of the novel: “But did it make me less true to be holding my knife?” (382). Whether intentional or not, Lyle again alludes here to St. Augustine and his famous teaching that evil is an absence of being, an absence of ultimate good, whereas the goodness and truth of men and women like Sydney and Elly remains eternally real. Whether rational or not, Lyle had long known that Elly’s religious faith gave her “a peace beyond any I had experienced” (313). Now, in this critical moment, spurred by self-righteous rage, Lyle enters Connie’s house and “realized in a delayed way” that Devlin had already begun “the process of hanging himself” (383). As Connie looks down at him “in almost a reflective manner, feet dangling a foot from the floor,” Lyle is miraculously moved by grace, or his parents’ presence, or by “Someone” whose will to mercy is much greater than his own, which allows him to speak and act simply: “I cut him down” (383).

Though Connie does not appear again in the novel (his fate lies outside the main plot), he does give Lyle a brief account of Sydney’s final moments. However bent by Connie’s need to hide his own guilt, some of the account does ring true, particularly because Connie cannot help but admire Sydney’s religious ethic. For contrary to the rumors which said Connie pushed Sydney down a cliff, here we learn that Devlin himself “ran right over a cliff” during a blinding snowstorm and that “of course” Sydney “came down after” him, Connie explains, for “he had to,” “as if we were on the church roof years ago” (385). From there the account grows more dubious, with Connie trying to explain how he obtained Sydney’s socks, boots, and 25,000 dollars, and how he simply couldn’t return later to the side of the cliff for fear he would be accused of a crime. Yet there does not seem to be any ulterior motive in Connie’s account of his final moments with Sydney, who “wasn’t in pain any longer” but was “crying and calling out to someone” and then “talking to Elly” (386). The meaning of his final words to her are not entirely clear, at least not for readers of the novel, but they are appropriately intimate, personal, and perhaps also affirmative, peaceful, maybe even joyful:

‘I know, Elly—yes—I know—it was always right here—right here—you and me and the children’ (387)

To dismiss these words as the incoherent ravings of a dying, freezing man would be as insensitive as Connie leaving Sydney’s “stupid poems” behind; rather, a spiritual interpretation is more plausible. Right there, in eternity, with God, is where Sydney, Elly, and their children always were, even right here, in this harsh world. Right there, with ‘Someone,’ Sydney’s pact has been honoured and, right here, in a most critical moment, his peaceful path chosen by a son who accepts the liberty of faith rather than the power of revenge. Though he will continue to be buffeted and tested by the stormy trials of this world, Lyle’s own will to violence has been irrevocably altered and he understands the true value of his parents’ life; as he earlier told Autumn and Percy, but perhaps did not fully understand himself, “in this world,” Lyle insists, “Mom and Dad meant greatness” (354).

Despite such moments of clarity and insight, the novel’s third major tragedy is the most difficult for Lyle to accept. In an act of random, apparently meaningless evil, Mat Pit flees another robbery and murder before ‘accidentally’ running over and killing the young boy Percy. Where is the mercy for this child, and the siblings who love him? It is fair to say that Lyle is never shown as fully recovered from this loss. For both Autumn and Lyle, the loss of such a young, happy, extremely good-natured sibling is sure to be a wound they carry the rest of their lives. Yet paradoxically, the very irrationality of Percy’s death, and the manner in which he both died and lived, produces the most vital fruit in the lives of others. The principle involved here was stated precisely by the young boy himself, possessed of the childlike faith that Christ taught as necessary to entering the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3), when he told Father Porier and wicked old Leo McVicer that “if there are no saint bones, then there is no church—you cannot have one without the other” (309). Further, claimed Percy, “there are!” saints’ bones already in this church, quite possibly a reference to Elly, or Sydney, or, unwittingly, to himself, for a strong case can be made that Percy is the holiest saint in the Henderson family and the person closest to God in the novel.

As with all saints, death does not separate Percy from the heart, mind, and soul of those who love him, and so he helps inspire Autumn to go on, to marry, to become a novelist, and to give birth to a son, named Sydney. She even publishes her father’s poems, retrieved from the bag he carried at his death. Lyle has a less outwardly successful life as a wandering alcoholic, and for a while he also tries to hunt down Mat Pit, to avenge Percy’s death. Yet then he meets Mat’s sister Cynthia and her daughter Teresa May,

who had often been ill, and for whom Percy often “lighted a candle” in prayer for her recovery. At this moment, Lyle realizes that he was not seeking Mat, now dying of bone cancer, but really “had been trying to find *him*,” Percy, whose faith must surely have kept him alive and united to his Father and Mother (412). To offer a ‘modern medical miracle’ analogue of this spiritual truth, Richards even ascends to an almost Dickensian level of sentiment by having Cynthia then reveal that Teresa May “has your Percy’s heart,” transplanted, and “could not still be living without it” (413). Moving and significant though it may be, Percy living on in this way is a minor act of corporeal mercy. The major grace of the moment, the true divine mercy, comes when Lyle finally tells Terrieux (a policeman who years earlier had pulled Mat Pit from a frozen river and thus allowed the evil young man to go on living) that mercy had brought redemption:

I want you to know you did the right thing. That if you had to walk along that brook and save that man a thousand times, or tens of thousands, you would do it. It was a universal duty given to you. I want you to know that, overall, it has been a life of joy. Of joy unending. Of Autumn and Percy and Elly McGowan. Who am I to ask for any of it over? (413)

“Joy unending” here means something much more than contented happiness and is rather much closer to the German word *sensucht*, the eternal joy that first converted and continually surprised even so learned a writer as C.S. Lewis (*Surprised*). For Richards, this joy can also mean terror, for Catholicism “is a transcendent religion, and its grace is a terrible and transcendent one,” with eternal consequences either for Leo Bourque and Alex Chapman, or Mat Pit and Lyle Henderson, or as an ever-present reality in the lives of saints such as Amy Patch and Sydney Henderson. “If people fail at this transcendence,” Richards asks, “should they or others not seek to try?” “In fact,” he concludes, “the very fact that others still seek to try, and that some succeed, shows not only the necessity of continuing to try, but the truth of the ultimate quest” (*God Is*. 42).

The ultimate aim or significance of Richards’ religious writing is surely not systematic theology and still less as an apologetic polemic trying “to make anyone believe” (*God Is*. 166). Rather, the evolution of Richards’ religious consciousness is simply an extension of the honesty and integrity that has always marked a literary career committed to speaking the truth, as he sees it, regardless of the consequences. *God Is*. does include some stirring testimonies, but as in the novels these are marked by a lack of intellectual pretension and almost child-like faith. Richards recounts meeting a former family nanny in a mall, for example, and feeling certain that he was

called upon—indeed, never in his life had he “felt stronger the presence of God”—to simply tell her, “God loves you” (59). And then there is the story of Peggy’s young cousin, Wayne, who had Downs Syndrome, and who just before he died “named relatives of his he could never have known,” telling his mother: “They are all here and want me to tell you that they have come to take me to heaven” (67). Such examples, again, are not polemical, any more than the main characters of Richards’ recent religious novels are caricatures of theological ideas. Both are simply present in his writing as part of an honest need to witness to God’s presence and power. As Richards concludes *God Is*,

Faith has guided me away not from sin or wrong—never that—or from failing with my children, or my wife and I failing with each other—never that either—but away from what I had once believed in, that liberty was bought with power, and toward a more astonishing recognition of the sacred in our midst.

I know from experience that Something we pray to is well worth it. Something has always kept His promise, no matter how strange it comes about.

Made the lame walk and, yes, the blind see. (166)

Richards’ is a God of miracle, mystery, and both transcendental and existential faith. This faith has drawn derision, as when Alex Good concluded his review of *God Is*. by calling Richards “a crank,” and also inaccurate praise, as when T.F. Rigelhof dubbed Richards “our Blake.” Closer to the truth is that David Adams Richards has become our Dostoyevsky. Further, if Richards makes good on the initial affirmation of *God Is*. that he believes in God “far more now than when I was 20, far more than when I was 35, and I hope not as much as when I am 70” (4) it may well be that Richards is meant to become, as Good warns and I will pray, our Solzhenitsyn. As that great writer forcefully argued at Harvard University in 1978—challenging and rebuking the practical atheism of an arrogant Western culture then gloating over the impending collapse of communist atheism—God is, whether we acknowledge God or not (“A World Split”). As Lyle Henderson might add, who are we to ask for anything other than the life of joy unending which He so mercifully offers?

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