

Nick Cave: A Journey from an Anglican God to the Creative Christ

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Introduction

The public image of Nick Cave is far from that of reverential piety, yet his song lyrics contain frequent references to Biblical events, places, and theological themes. This article argues that Nick Cave does not plunder Christian subjects for shock value, but, rather, is a man with a genuine, albeit idiosyncratic, faith. Cave's spiritual development will be traced from the dogmatic religion of his childhood to his current rejection of institutionalised Christianity. This paper will trace Cave's distant relationship with the God of the Anglican Church, and his maturing literary rapport with the Bible due to its powerful linguistic qualities. I will demonstrate how Cave uses writing as a means of self-definition and self-preservation, as an antidote to grief, and as a means of escaping the mediocre. The positive qualities of writing will then be correlated to outcomes typically derived from religious behaviour. This article will also explicate Cave's attraction to the creative powers of Christ, which are affirmed, despite his denial of Christ's divinity. Creative collaborations and group inspiration will be posited as manifestations of Christ's call to imaginative interaction as understood by Cave. This existential understanding causes Cave to employ the trope of the madness of love as a defence against mediocrity. His violent lyrical content will be revealed to be a linguistic elevation of mundane and sordid life to the realm of the sacred, rather than a celebration of brutality. This article will also explore the reasons for Cave's rejection of the Church as a formal institution. Rather than viewing Christian institutions as a gateway to salvation, Cave disapproves of their bland and misinformed dogma. Rejecting the solidity of the Church, Cave's faith will be categorised as vacillatory, existential and uncertain. Cave's unorthodox view of God as a force that does not intervene in human life or demand moral perfection will be explored. For Cave, faith is an experiential force, not a commitment to orthodox belief. It will be demonstrated that Cave's understanding is of a reciprocal relationship with God, whereby humans write him into existence through their divinely-sanctioned creative capacity and imagination.

Nick Cave (b. 1957): Biographical Details

Nick Cave's personal history is characterised by anger, violence, publicly-conducted love affairs, and addiction to heroin, but his autobiographical recollections reveal a growing respect for faith and a personal journey of spiritual maturation. Cave's early memories involve the local Anglican choir he joined at the age of eight. Despite participation in Anglican services, amounting to several visits to church per week, Cave felt distanced from the content of the sermons. He claimed that, "the God I heard preached about there seemed remote, and alien, and uncertain".¹ Inspired by literature, Cave was more responsive to the power of language. From an early age, Cave felt that art was able to protect him from the mundane. His early songwriting was dictated by whatever book he was reading at the time.² He rediscovered God in art school where he studied a traditional curriculum, quickly abandoning the lecturers who failed to understand his appreciation of pornography, Romanesque art, and Gothic icons.³ Regardless of his feelings of alienation, the artworks Cave studied evoked childhood memories of the Biblical stories and encouraged the purchase of a King James Version pocket Bible. The content thrilled him. Cave recalls, "I soon found in the tough prose of the Old Testament a perfect language: at once mysterious and familiar, that not only reflected the state of mind I was in at the time but actively informed my artistic endeavours".⁴

From that point, Cave's *oeuvre* was imbued with Biblical violence and heterodox Christian themes. The language of the *Old Testament* reflected Cave's anger. He admitted that "the God of the *Old Testament* seemed a cruel and rancorous God and I loved the way he would wipe out entire nations at a whim".⁵ He was especially fond of the vain and distrustful God of *Job*. The language of the *Old Testament* emerged in his song lyrics and imbued his words with a new and violent energy. The aggression of his first band, The Birthday Party, was spawned through the channelling of a malicious and hostile God. Cave believed that "God was talking not just to me but through me and his breath stank. I was a conduit for a God that spoke in a language written in bile and puke".⁶ Despite his passionate reaction, this spiritual phase

¹ Nick Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word', in *The Secret Life Of The Love Song & The Flesh Made Word: Two Lectures By Nick Cave* (London: Mute Records, 2000). Initially written for BBC Radio 3 religious services, 1996.

² Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word'.

³ Max Dax and Johannes Beck, *The Life and Music of Nick Cave*, trans. I. Minock (Berlin: Die Gestalten Verlag, 1999), p. 15.

⁴ Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word'.

⁵ Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word'.

⁶ Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word'.

was short-lived. After tiring of the band, the audience, and the *Old Testament* text, Cave opened the *New Testament* and experienced creative rebirth. He was quickly captivated by Jesus, “that eerie figure that moves through the gospels. That man of sorrows”.⁷ This discovery led Cave to produce softer and more introspective music, but, more importantly, to the formalisation of his unusual religious standpoint. Cave has described Christ’s life as “a flight of the imagination”,⁸ calling to mind to his own creative capacities. He viewed Jesus as “a man of flesh and blood so in touch with the creative forces inside himself. So open to his brilliant, flame-like imagination that he became the physical embodiment of that force: God. In Christ the spiritual blueprint was set so that we ourselves could become God-like”.⁹ Through the figure of Jesus, Cave was able to link creative fantasy to the religious imagination.

The Power of the Biblical Text

The foundational Biblical story for Cave’s spiritual perspective is the narrative of the adulterous woman sentenced to stoning under the Mosaic Law, as recorded in John’s *Gospel*. This famous passage described the public condemnation of the sinful woman, which Jesus combated by challenging the persecutors to declare which of them had not sinned. Cave focused on Christ’s physical movement as he stooped to the ground and wrote with his finger in the sand. He is convinced that this stooping is Christ communing internally with God, connecting with creativity to find an answer that will nullify the mob. Cave believed Christ demonstrated that “creative imagination had the power to combat all enemies. That we are protected by the flow of our own imagination”.¹⁰ Cave also used the narrative as a protest against the scribes and Pharisees who were obsessed with formal order and religious legalities. He stated that “Christ saw them as enemies of the imagination who actively blocked the spiritual flight of the people and kept them bogged down with theological nit-picking, intellectualism, and law”.¹¹ Cave views these rules of religion as enemies of enlightenment and the creative mind. One cannot be elevated if held back by the “chains of religious jurisprudence”.¹² In Cave’s explanation of this story and his reaction to its *dramatis personae*, three major themes of his religious faith are exhibited. Firstly, Cave demonstrates the creative manifestation of God on earth via the image of Christ scribbling in the

⁷ Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

⁸ Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

⁹ Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

¹⁰ Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

¹¹ Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

¹² Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

sand. The power of this divine creativity manifests itself in protection and personal aid, a second strong component of his religious attitude. Thirdly, he makes a clear protest against the formal institutions of religion, which result in harmful legalistic dogma. This positions religious authority figures as clear enemies of Christ's teachings. This interpretation of Christianity sees Cave as a man devoted to creativity and the language of religion, but deeply suspicious of formal religious institutions.

Cave's approach to spirituality is profoundly literary. He has stated that "I started reading the Bible and I found in the brutal prose of the *Old Testament*, in the feel of its words and its imagery, an endless source of inspiration".¹³ While he showed an early distaste for the Christian Church, his appreciation for Biblical prose was apparent from a young age. He enjoyed the way in which it was written, and constantly perused it for interesting turns of phrase. He took pleasure in the unjust behaviour of God, whom he described as "a bit of a hoot because of how much people suffered under him".¹⁴ Cave's admiration of scripture was for its literary quality, rather than its message of salvation or moral law, as literature is a major component of his life and self-conception. Cave takes pride in his writerly lineage, stating "my father was an English literature teacher. His approach towards English was almost obsessive, and his blood is going through my veins".¹⁵ His father's dramatic readings of *Lolita* and the murder scene from *Crime and Punishment* are remembered with affection.¹⁶ He has asserted that "[w]hat my father was finding in his beloved literature was God. Literature elevated him, tore him from normality, and lifted him out of the mediocre and brought him closer to the divine essence of things".¹⁷ Cave's favourite books include *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila*, *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, and *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, which he purchased in 1980. He has noted, "I was pretty clued up about the saints and the things they endured".¹⁸ Cave's reading of the Bible is

¹³ Nick Cave, 'The Secret Life of the Love Song'. In *The Secret Life Of The Love Song & The Flesh Made Word: Two Lectures By Nick Cave* (London: Mute Records, 2000). Initially written for the Vienna Poetry Festival (1998).

¹⁴ Anon., 'Interview from Revue [1994]', *Revue* (December 1994), at http://www.nick-cave.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=46&Itemid=29. Accessed 02/02/2010.

¹⁵ Ohad Pishof, 'Interview', trans.Noam Yatsiv, *Yediot Ahronot* (April 6, 2001), at http://www.nick-cave.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=72&Itemid=29. Accessed 02/02/2010.

¹⁶ Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word'.

¹⁷ Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word'.

¹⁸ Janine Barrand and James Fox, *Nick Cave Stories* (Melbourne: The Arts Centre: 2007), p. 18.

analytical and informed. He recalled “enjoying comparing the different stories, the different gospels, one to the other... I took a very academic view of the whole thing... I read it daily now, and I know it very well”.¹⁹ When introducing Mark’s *Gospel*, he noted the linguistic qualities of the temptation of Christ as “typically potent owing to its mysterious simplicity and sparseness”,²⁰ and in his celebration of Christ, Cave has drawn attention not to Christ’s divine powers, but to his “luminous words”.²¹

Creativity as a Spiritual Process

He has also posited creativity as a personal need, claiming that “writing is a necessary thing for me, just to keep myself level”.²² Writing is a means of self-definition and self-preservation and without creativity, Cave “would be less of a human being”.²³ Writing functions as an antidote to suffering and confusion. Cave has explained that chaotic moments in his life often yielded his more spiritual and emotionally subtle pieces, in which the writing process functioned as ballast.²⁴ Writing also assists in capturing and preserving memory: “most of my songs are written about other people and I sing them to keep the memory of those people alive”.²⁵ As well as aiding the passage of life, writing can memorialise the past and ascribe meaning to mutability. Cave also views creativity as a means of escaping the ordinary. He has explained that “When I write, I feel spiritually elated. I become closer to God, and raise myself above a mediocre, flat, Earthly existence”.²⁶ He credits divine inspiration with the creation of his art, seeing himself as a channel through which God may speak. He claims: “My responsibility is to sit on the piano, take a pen and paper, that’s it. The rest is up to God or inspiration. I don’t have any control on what can

¹⁹ Anon., ‘Interview from Revue [1994]’.

²⁰ Nick Cave, ‘Introduction to the Gospel According to Mark’, in *Revelations: Personal Responses to the Books of the Bible*, ed. Richard Holloway (New York: CAnon.gate, 2005), p. 243.

²¹ Cave, ‘Introduction to the Gospel According to Mark’, p. 244

²² Neil McCormick, ‘Nick Cave: Part of Me is Screaming to Get Out’, *The Telegraph* (July 17, 2008), at

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2008/07/17/bmcave117.xml>.

Accessed 02/02/2010.

²³ Anon., ‘Nick Cave: Dark Star’, *The Big Issue UK* (January 15, 1995), at http://www.nick-cave.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=51&Itemid=29. Accessed 27/7/2009.

²⁴ McCormick, ‘Nick Cave: Nick Cave: Part of Me is Screaming to Get Out’.

²⁵ G.W. McLennan, ‘Interview’, *Juice Magazine* (March, 1993), at http://www.nick-cave.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=41&Itemid=29. Accessed 02/02/2010.

²⁶ Anon., ‘Nick Cave: Dark Star’.

happen. Someone else does the work, I call Him God. If I didn't sit on the piano, it would be like denying His voice".²⁷ Cave plays a passive role, confessing that "whatever happens with the songs, and how they are created is beyond my control. I don't decide what sort of song I'm writing before I get to it".²⁸

Instead, Cave feels his job is simply to provide an environment conducive to inspiration.²⁹ He remarks that an artist is required to "stay open-minded and in a state where he can receive information and inspiration".³⁰ With reference to William Blake, Cave claims: "I myself did nothing. I just pointed a damning finger and let the Holy Spirit do the rest".³¹ Cave views himself as a medium of God, achieving creative success through reception of divine stimulation. Even his live performances involve the channelling of Biblical inspiration. Describing the impact of the *Old Testament* on The Birthday Party, Cave recalls "all I had to do was walk on stage, and open my mouth, and let the curse of God roar through me. Floods, fire, and frogs leapt out of my throat".³² Perceiving himself as a willing conduit for creative power, Cave is unable to describe basic mechanics behind the development of his music. Instead, he simply states that "creation is life's biggest mystery".³³

While Cave celebrates the creative process and claims "I can write certain stuff in my sleep",³⁴ there appears to be an element of toil in his art. Cave states that lyric writing is the most difficult activity for him.³⁵ He sees lyric writing as an agonising art form from which he derives minimal enjoyment.³⁶ Cave mythologises the hardship of writing in the form of animals with parasitic qualities. Baboons, the enemies of creation, are accompanied by a pack of hyenas who make unhelpful remarks. Cave fears the moose above all others, describing his "low hopeless bellowing reverberating around the house".³⁷ While his inspiration may be supernatural, Cave's creative process is

²⁷ Anon., 'Interview', *Telemoustique* (July, 1998), http://www.nick-cave.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=66&Itemid=29. Accessed 27/7/2009.

²⁸ Pishof, 'Interview'.

²⁹ Pishof, 'Interview'.

³⁰ Anon., 'Interview', *Telemoustique*.

³¹ Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word'.

³² Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word'.

³³ Anon., 'Interview', *Telemoustique*.

³⁴ Graeme Hammond, 'Cave Digs up Another Winner', *The Herald Sun* (March 2, 2008).

³⁵ S. Smith, 'Nick Cave', in *Lyrics: Writing Better Words for Your Songs*, ed. Rikky Rooksby (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2006), p. 48.

³⁶ McCormick, 'Nick Cave: Nick Cave: Part of Me is Screaming to Get Out'.

³⁷ Barrand and Fox, *Nick Cave Stories*, pp. 82-83.

not always smooth. Despite the personal frustration of songwriting, he values the communal aspects of working with other musicians. Speaking about his band, Cave states: “What I really like is creating something - a small thing, chords and words - then taking it to the band and watching it grow. There’s an act of generosity where people come in and do something with that idea. There’s a joyous aspect, which is why people play music”.³⁸

This sharing of creativity and inspiration is comparable to one of Cave’s favourite Biblical passages, Matthew 18:20, which he paraphrases as “Where ever two or more are gathered together, I am in your midst”.³⁹ Cave believes that Christ was drawing attention to the presence of language in gatherings of people. He feels that communal sharing of language and creativity allows for the expression of God in the material world; “just as we are divine creations, so must we in turn create. Divinity must be given its freedom to flow. Through us, through language, through communication, through imagination. I believe this is our spiritual duty made clear to us through the example of Christ. Through us, God finds His voice”.⁴⁰ Cave places a strong value on artistic communication, claiming “I’m very happy to hear that my work inspires writers and painters. It’s the most beautiful compliment, the greatest reward. Art should always be an exchange”.⁴¹ He views creativity as a divinely sanctioned act, which is seen as a means of expressing God and reciprocating the gift of life.

Religious Experience and Spiritual Comfort Derived From Creativity

The divine endowment of creativity is a protective force in Cave’s personal life. He explains, “the songs themselves, my crooked brood of sad-eyed children, rally round and in their way, protect me, comfort me and keep me alive. They are the companions of the soul that lead it into exile, that save the overpowering yearning for that which is not of this world”.⁴² In 1978, Cave’s father was killed in a car crash.⁴³ Cave describes writing as a means of coping with grief, claiming:

My artistic life has centred around an attempt to articulate the nature of an almost palpable sense of loss that has laid claim to my life. A great gaping hole was blasted out of my world by the unexpected

³⁸ McCormick, ‘Nick Cave: Nick Cave: Part of Me is Screaming to Get Out’.

³⁹ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

⁴⁰ Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

⁴¹ Anon., ‘Interview’, *Telemoustique*.

⁴² Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

⁴³ Ian Johnston, *Bad Seed: The Biography of Nick Cave* (London: Abacus, 1996), p. 57.

death of my father when I was nineteen years old. The way I learned to fill this hole, this void, was to write.⁴⁴

Artistic creativity appears to bring Cave the comfort and fulfilment often gained from religious behaviour. While creativity helped with grief, so too did Cave's sadness inspire his writing. Cave recalls how the loss "created in my life a vacuum, a space in which my words began to float and collect and find their purpose".⁴⁵ He has a need to explain and understand emotions of loss and longing that have recurred throughout his life. Cave also creates a parallel between himself and Christ via the notion of a father/son relationship. He cites his father's high valuation of literature as a pathway towards God. Cave feels "my father taught me this as if to prepare me for his own passing. To write allowed me direct access to my imagination, to inspiration, and ultimately to God".⁴⁶ Through his continued creative pursuits, Cave, "like Christ[,] ... come[s] in the name of my father to keep God alive".⁴⁷

Despite the Christological focus of his life, Cave's unusual theological conclusions and distaste for formal religious establishments results in alienation from the Christian community and its institutions. Referencing Matthew 23:13, Cave lamented: "But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men".⁴⁸ His views on morality further distance him from official institutions that promote and decipher the ethical stance of the Bible. Cave has questioned how inspiration and God can be moral. Morality is categorised with Pharisees and churches as the binding law that stands against freedom of the mind and its creative powers. In what is perhaps his most comprehensive summary of personal faith, Cave revealed:

I'm a believer. I don't go to church. I don't belong to any particular religion, but I do believe in God... I've always had this faith, even if, at a certain time, I could not say it with the same conviction. Nothing happened in my life. I had no revelation. For me, believing in God doesn't change life. It is neither an obstacle nor a relief. It has no influence on my behaviour. Believing has nothing to do with morality, but with freedom and inspiration. For many people, faith should automatically dictate a behaviour, show the way to saintliness. Far from these certainties, my faith is made of doubts.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Cave, 'The Secret Life of the Love Song'.

⁴⁵ Cave, 'The Secret Life of the Love Song'.

⁴⁶ Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word'.

⁴⁷ Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word'.

⁴⁸ Cave, 'The Flesh Made Word'.

⁴⁹ Anon., 'Interview', *Telemoustique*.

Through this admission, Cave separates belief in God from belief in the validity of organised religion. He locates faith as a personal decision that need not rest upon profound revelation or unwavering belief. Faith does not lead him to morality or ritual. Instead, a belief in God is connected to Cave's "freedom and inspiration".

In keeping with his rejection of religious law, Cave holds unorthodox views of Christ and the nature of his divinity. He stated, "I don't believe in the virgin birth and I don't believe in the resurrection. But I believe as a man he was someone who had an incredible capacity to articulate his system of ideals and I find that enormously impressive".⁵⁰ Rather than celebrating the church-sanctioned supernatural birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Cave focuses on his life and teachings as paraphrased in the Gospels, commemorating Christ without distancing him from humanity. Cave has displayed qualms about having too close a connection to the Christian community, despite the strongly religious undertones of his music and personal statements. He has commented that "I don't consider myself a Christian... I have read about what they call radical Christianity which is a disbelief in God and a belief in Christ but even to be that way requires a challenge in your own lifestyle and to be a Christian you actually need to lead a certain type of life and at the moment I find myself unable to do that".⁵¹ Cave is aware of the difficulties in being a believer without a church or doctrine. He occasionally regrets this separation, explaining "I could've just said now 'I'm Catholic' and that would be it. I wouldn't have to try and explain my spiritual identity. You would know where I come from, exactly. And that is why sometimes I find myself in the accursed situation, where I'm asked to define my relationship with God, which is changing and developing all of the time".⁵² He is able to appreciate the ease of accepting a specific church where beliefs and conceptions of members are solidified and need no explanation; he acknowledges it is more practical than his own situation.⁵³ Cave appreciates "a community of people there, coming together with the same belief – that's a comforting thing. But there's another part of me that wants to run a million miles away from that".⁵⁴ Cave remains critical of the Christian church. He takes the view that sermons are metaphor

⁵⁰ Anon., 'Revue'.

⁵¹ Anon., 'Revue'.

⁵² Pishof, 'Interview'.

⁵³ Anon., 'Nick Caves in to Religion', *Contact Music* (May 20, 2003), at <http://www.contactmusic.com/new/xmlfeed.nsf/mndwebpages/nick%20caves%20in%20to%20religion>. Accessed 02/02/2010.

⁵⁴ Anon., 'Nick Caves in to Religion'.

and often finds them irritating, “pathetic and untrue, based on terrible misinterpretations of the Bible”.⁵⁵

Cave complains that, “sermons often include a lot of excessive pathetic element. Sometimes sermons contain direct lies caused by the fact that priests don’t understand the Bible”.⁵⁶ He claims to be very interested in the story of Christ and Biblical texts, but deeply annoyed by the institution of the Church.⁵⁷ He has described liberal Christianity as spineless and bland, and deeply irritating to him. Cave protested against the softening of Christ and his message in an attempt to make Christianity pleasant and popular. He has even blamed a lack of imagination for Christ’s persecution. He protests:

Christ spoke to me through His isolation, through the burden of His death, through His rage at the mundane, through His sorrow. Christ, it seemed to me was the victim of humanity’s lack of imagination, was hammered to the cross with the nails of creative vapidty.⁵⁸

Recounting the events of the Gospels, Cave lamented “the outpourings of His brilliant, jewel-like imagination are in turn misunderstood, rebuffed, ignored, mocked and vilified and would eventually be the death of Him”.⁵⁹ Religious institutions are seen as antagonistic forces that are unable to comprehend the importance of Christ’s dramatic emotions or imaginative output. Regardless of this criticism, Cave takes pleasure in the ritualistic nature of church services, participation in which is a means of overcoming mundanity and delusion, via spiritual meditation. From the order and ritual, Cave has procured a feeling of elevation and greater awareness. Despite this, he admits: “I haven’t had any great epiphanies. I just feel it’s my duty to educate myself about the concept of God”.⁶⁰

Rather than engaging with church communities as a means of developing and solidifying his faith, Cave chose a more direct relationship with Christ, unmediated by formal institutions. He has explained that, “for me, Jesus

⁵⁵ Alice Hammond, ‘Prince of Darkness Scores a Masterpiece’, *New York Rock* (April, 1997), http://www.nyrock.com/cave_cd.htm. Accessed 02/02/2010.

⁵⁶ James McNair, ‘Interview’, *Mojo Magazine* (March, 1997), http://www.nick-cave.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=60&Itemid=29. Accessed 27/7/09.

⁵⁷ Dave Thompson, ‘Nick Cave, Alphabetically’, *Alternative Press* (April, 1997), at http://www.nick-cave.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=62&Itemid=29. Accessed 02/02/2010.

⁵⁸ Cave, ‘Introduction to the Gospel According to Mark’, p. 245.

⁵⁹ Cave, ‘Introduction to the Gospel According to Mark’, p. 243.

⁶⁰ Hammond, ‘Cave Digs up Another Winner’.

Christ is one of the most enigmatic and exciting characters around”.⁶¹ Cave has, however, admitted that, “I can’t really get my teeth around the resurrection and the virgin birth. I mean, I just can’t believe that. I look at him objectively these days”.⁶² He has also admitted that he does not believe in heaven or hell.⁶³ Cave bases his faith on an overall notion of higher power, rather than belief in particular ideas. In a statement more reminiscent of Deism than popular Christianity, Cave explains:

I have a general feeling that there’s some kind of divinity in the world, something I really can’t put my finger on, but something that prevents me from saying that you just die and it’s all over and prevents me from saying that uncategorically there’s no such thing as any higher level of spirituality.⁶⁴

Cave’s personal copy of the Bible demonstrates close study of the text, with heavy underlining and marginalia. In John’s *Gospel*, he asks “WHY is FAITH essential to eternal life? Why the need to believe?”⁶⁵ Cave’s attitude towards Christianity is characterised by confliction and vacillation. In 1994, he stated, “I don’t find myself becoming religious at all”.⁶⁶ He speaks with self-deprecation of his “dubious Christian leanings”,⁶⁷ and describes himself as a deeply interested but poor quality participant in religion. With an honesty that is often absent in mainstream religious people, Cave admits: “I don’t think a person truly believes unless they doubt as well. My faith kind of swells up and subsides”.⁶⁸ The nature and intensity of Cave’s beliefs are not set, but fluctuate with the conditions of his life. He has explained that his creative output and subject matter relies upon a certain form of belief. The spiritual nature of his lyrics is a search for God.⁶⁹ Cave’s search, however, is not located in

⁶¹ Anon., ‘Nick Cave Interview’, *Rolling Stone* 689 (August 25, 1994), at http://www.nick-cave.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=44&Itemid=2. Accessed 02/02/2010.

⁶² Mark Mordue, ‘Nick Cave’s Love In’, *Juice Magazine* (May, 1994), at http://www.nick-cave.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=43&Itemid=29. Accessed 02/02/2010.

⁶³ Michael Dwyer, ‘Murder he Said’, *Rolling Stone Australia* (November, 1995), at http://www.nick-cave.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=54&Itemid=29. Accessed 02/02/2010.

⁶⁴ Dwyer, ‘Murder he Said’.

⁶⁵ Barrand and Fox, *Nick Cave Stories*. p. 37.

⁶⁶ Mordue, ‘Nick Cave’s Love In’.

⁶⁷ Stewart Lee, ‘Nick Cave’, *Sunday Times* (September 7, 2003), http://www.stewartlee.co.uk/press/writtenformoney/2003-sept-nick_cave-sundaytimes.htm. Accessed 02/02/2010.

⁶⁸ Lee, ‘Nick Cave’, *Sunday Times*.

⁶⁹ Anon., ‘Interview’, *Telemoustique*.

adherence to the Christian community, but, rather, in personal agency and the reciprocal relationship of creativity.

Kessler's Assessment of Cave's 'Sceptical and Vacillating' Faith

Anna Kessler believes that Cave's relationship to God via the creative imagination "necessarily oscillates between attitudes of doubt and certainty".⁷⁰ She placed this vacillation in the phenomenological rather than the epistemological character of faith, with doubt emerging from personal awareness of God rather than the metaphysical truth of Christian doctrine.⁷¹ Kessler claimed that Cave rejected the model of an interventionist God in favour of "depicting the divine-human encounter as intrinsically connected to the human perspective" formed upon a model of interaction.⁷² She argued that Cave's religious stance relies upon the rejection of an interventionist version of the metaphysical God.⁷³ Kessler bases this assumption on Cave's repudiation of the interventionist model, which fails to recognise "the engagement of human subjectivity with the divine".⁷⁴ Kessler points to Cave's engagement with the *New Testament* as an example of a two-way relationship via the life of Jesus.⁷⁵ She suggests that Cave's phenomenological engagement with Christianity be seen as an "inward turn", as he values the experiential nature of faith above metaphysical proof of God's existence.⁷⁶ Indeed, Cave's views of salvation and divine aid insist that God cannot change the world or assist humanity in its problems. He states:

I don't think that the duty of God is to make people's lives better, to change the march of events. God is the highest substance. It is impossible for us to understand that substance. People can have reason, heart, wishes, give the gift of intercourse to each other but they don't have something which is more important. Every person lives within the limits of his own passions, his problems. Sometimes we can help each other but there are events people's spirits can't overcome.⁷⁷

While Cave testifies the power and comfort of experiencing God through personal creativity, he does not see God as responsive to prayer or capable of

⁷⁰ Anna Kessler, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination: Nick Cave on the Divine-Human Encounter', in *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music*, ed. Michael J. Gilmour (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 80.

⁷¹ Kessler, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination', p. 83.

⁷² Kessler, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination', p. 80.

⁷³ Kessler, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination', p. 81.

⁷⁴ Kessler, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination', p. 82.

⁷⁵ Kessler, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination', p. 82.

⁷⁶ Kessler, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination', p. 84.

⁷⁷ McNair, 'Interview'.

intervention. Human interaction with God exists only in the imaginative sphere. In Kessler's view, the physical world of natural law is not our realm for communication with God. Instead, Cave suggests the inner world of creativity and subjective experience as the sphere of divine interaction with humanity.⁷⁸

Kessler sees Cave's version of faith as "*necessarily* [her emphasis] underwritten by a certain misgiving about the object of belief".⁷⁹ In Cave's model of faith, scepticism, questioning, and mistrust are real elements of the interaction between human and God. Thus, to value humanity in a reciprocal relationship with God is to inject an amount of uncertainty spawned from the natural suspicion of mankind. Kessler maintains that said doubt is not a pejorative version of faith in the opinion of Cave, nor is it perceived as weaker than its unyielding counterparts. Rather, Cave construed doubt as a face of the human relationship with God, and part of the faith experience.⁸⁰ Kessler compared Cave's attitude to the Kantian notion that the wavering of faith does not imply non-belief. The subjective doubt present in Cave's lyrics is still a faith experience, even if his conclusions appear negative.⁸¹ He celebrates the uncanny and illogical aspects of Christianity, stating "one of the things that I guess excites me about belief in God is the notion that it is unbelievable, irrational and sometimes absurd".⁸² Cave explains that Christianity "is about imagination and mystery. And that for me is what art is about as well. So the whole thing is very much tied together".⁸³ The mystery of God is linked strongly to his creative impulses.⁸⁴ The reciprocation between God and human and the primacy of mystery and doubt in Cave's spiritual conclusion negates the need for formal religious structures. He explains that:

cognition of God includes a lot of beautiful and mysterious things but the thing called sermon is often nothing more than profanation of Christian faith. That is why I think that my way to God is like a journey of a lonely wanderer whose spiritual perception of the world is based on Doubt.⁸⁵

Scepticism and vacillation should not bring shame. Instead the obscurity and liminality of the creative process (and thus of God) should be celebrated and embraced without the intervention of a religious institution.

⁷⁸ Kessler, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination', pp. 86-87.

⁷⁹ Kessler, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination', p. 83.

⁸⁰ Kessler, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination', p. 83.

⁸¹ Kessler, 'Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination', p. 84.

⁸² Anon., 'Nick Caves in to Religion'.

⁸³ Anon., 'Nick Caves in to Religion'.

⁸⁴ Smith, 'Nick Cave', p. 49.

⁸⁵ McNair, 'Interview'.

The active human component in the relationship with God places individuals in a position of power. Cave notes that God needs us just as we need him.⁸⁶ He warns that “if the world was to suddenly fall silent God would deconstruct and die”.⁸⁷ Humans have the power to deny and destroy God, not through unchristian thought and action, but through creative silence. Cave is appreciative towards the mysteriousness of creativity, the power it brings and the emotional comfort it grants. But he does not interact with God from the position of a servant. Instead, he celebrates the imaginative elevation granted to humans through the example of Christ. He remarks:

The essential humanness of Mark’s Christ provides us with a blueprint for our own lives so that we have something we can aspire to rather than revere, that can lift us free of the mundanity of our existences rather than affirming the notion that we are lowly and unworthy.⁸⁸

Cave describes Christ as a liberator who “understood that we as humans were forever held to the ground by the pull of gravity... He gave our imaginations the freedom to fly”.⁸⁹ Cave’s view of Christianity values creativity over obedience. He states that “God is not found in Christ but through him”.⁹⁰ He cites the *Gospel of Thomas*’ claim that the Kingdom of God is outside and within. Cave asks why the Church is necessary for a connection with God when he already resides within us.⁹¹ He applauded this passage for its emphasis,

upon our individual souls. Rather than praising a personal and supernatural God as an all-mighty, all-knowing, all-seeing force existing somewhere in the great beyond, the emphasis is placed clearly on man; that without him as a channel God has nowhere to go.⁹²

From Cave’s viewpoint, adherence to prayer and the subservience of group worship is pointless. God’s favour cannot be won and the natural world cannot be intervened in. Such behaviour is primitive, unconsidered, and fruitless.

⁸⁶ Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

⁸⁷ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

⁸⁸ Cave, ‘Introduction to the Gospel According to Mark’, p. 111.

⁸⁹ Cave, ‘Introduction to the Gospel According to Mark’, p. 111.

⁹⁰ Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

⁹¹ Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

⁹² Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

The Madness of Love and the Encounter With God

Instead, Cave embraces the absurdity and insanity of faith, using madness as a creative tool. He employs irrationality and lunacy to create separation from the mundane. Cave explains:

The love song must be born into the realm of the irrational, absurd, the distracted, the melancholic, the obsessive, the insane for the love song is the noise of love itself and love is, of course, a form of madness. Whether it be the love of God, or romantic, erotic love - these are manifestations of our need to be torn away from the rational, to take leave of our senses, so to speak... ultimately the love songs exist to fill, with language, the silence between ourselves and God, to decrease the distance between the temporal and the divine.⁹³

There is a strong parallel between the doubt and madness of love and the human relationship with God. Both employ irrationality as a severance from the mundane. While the notion of a love song may seem profane, Cave views love as a manifestation of the human desire to be free of rationality and embrace divinity. He describes the love song as “the very heart of my particular artistic quest”.⁹⁴ The love song is perceived as perhaps the truest and most distinctive human gift for recognising God and a gift that God himself needs. “God gave us this gift in order that we speak and sing Him alive because God lives within communication”.⁹⁵ In keeping with Cave’s notions of spiritual reciprocity, the love song is a divine gift, sanctioned by God as a means of maintaining his existence in the world. While Cave’s love songs have been frightening, cruel, graphic, and crude, the specific morality of his lyrics are irrelevant to his religious ideas. It is the creation of a love song and its experiential qualities that are important, not its ethical or religious content. It is likely that Cave’s distaste for censored mediocrity in renditions of the gospel transfers to the dull and uninspired babble of most manufactured love songs.

Cave has cited a few modern examples of artists who understand the irrational melancholia of the love song. He mentions Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Van Morrison, Tom Waits, Neil Young, (his sometime lover) PJ Harvey, and The Dirty Three. He has also celebrated the veiled madness of Kylie Minogue’s ‘Better the Devil You Know’. Despite these contemporary influences, his greatest inspiration is from the Biblical psalms, “which deal directly with relationship between man and God, teeming with all the clamorous desperation, longing, exultation, erotic violence and brutality that I could hope for”.⁹⁶ Again he shows the profound influence of the literary

⁹³ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

⁹⁴ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

⁹⁵ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

⁹⁶ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

qualities of Biblical texts on his work. Cave also takes note of the Portuguese word *saudade*, which he describes as “an inexplicable sense of longing, an unnamed and enigmatic yearning of the soul”.⁹⁷ He also describes his intent via Federico Garcia Lorca’s term *duende*. This concept refers to the darkness, death, blood, and struggle within creation, which Cave connects to “the eerie and inexplicable sadness that lives in the heart of certain works of art”.⁹⁸ Lorca connected *duende* to authenticity, describing it as “true, living style, of blood, of the most ancient culture, of spontaneous creation... in sum, the spirit of the earth”.⁹⁹ Cave identified the psalms as the location of this yearning and dark power. He describes them as “soaked in *saudade*, drenched in *duende* and bathed in bloody-minded violence. In many ways these songs became the blueprint for much of my more sadistic love songs”.¹⁰⁰ Cave believes that the true love song dwells in “the haunted premises of longing”, where it cries out as “howl in the void for love and for comfort”.¹⁰¹ He connects the true love song to sadness, desperation, darkness, and struggle.

Although Cave describes writing love songs as eating the “same ball of vomit year after year”,¹⁰² he celebrates the spiritual elevation they may provide. Cave describes the love song as “the cry of one chained to the earth, to the ordinary and to the mundane, craving flight; a flight into inspiration and imagination and divinity. The love song is the sound of our endeavours to become God-like, to rise up and above the earthbound and the mediocre”.¹⁰³ Within the madness and desperation of the true love song lays the creative link to God and escape from the mundane. Cave’s view of elevation is, however, less than cheerful. He calls the love song “the sound of sorrow itself”.¹⁰⁴ Cave warns against love songs that deal with romance and no pain. He describes them as untrustworthy hate songs that “deny us our humanness and our God-given right to be sad”.¹⁰⁵ Cave views melancholy and pain as divine bequests that help the true love song to unite man and God. He also warns that “the writer who refuses to explore the darker regions of the heart will never be able

⁹⁷ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

⁹⁸ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

⁹⁹ Federico Garcia Lorca, *In Search of Duende*, trans. C. Maurer (London: New Directions, 1988), p. 49.

¹⁰⁰ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

¹⁰¹ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

¹⁰² Jim Sullivan, ‘This Time Back Nick Cave’s Dwelling Mainly on Love’, *Globe* (1998), at http://www.nick-cave.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=68&Itemid=29. Accessed 02/12/09.

¹⁰³ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

¹⁰⁴ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

¹⁰⁵ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

to write convincingly about the wonder, the magic and the joy of love”.¹⁰⁶ He illustrates this point with a reminder of Christ crucified between two criminals. Cave is unimpressed by hate songs, and laments that “the air-waves are littered with them”.¹⁰⁷ In his opinion, contemporary rock contains “excitement, often; anger, sometimes: but true sadness, rarely”.¹⁰⁸ He suggests, “there is just no money in sadness, no dollars in *duende*”.¹⁰⁹ Cave describes the music industry as a machine that “does little more than hurl dollops of warm, custard-coloured baby-vomit down the air waves” and a place where “true sorrow is not welcome”.¹¹⁰ Cave’s view of the love song does not tally with morality, profit, or popularity. For him, the love song is madness, darkness, and release. It is “the light of God, deep down, blasting through our wounds”.¹¹¹

Rather than describing Christ as a miraculous saviour, Cave focused upon his creative powers. He believes that Christ “came with the gift of language, of love, of imagination”,¹¹² celebrating inspiration above metaphysical suppositions. His unorthodox views on soteriology and disparagement of church leadership alienated Cave from mainstream Christianity. He also diverged from official theology via his notion of a reciprocal relationship with divinity, where he asserted that he wrote God into existence through his use of language. Human agency is a major element of Cave’s heterodox belief. Rather than turning to organised religion as a source of meaning and comfort, Cave finds rejuvenation and solace in the act of creativity. He looks to the communion of language as an experience of Christ.

Conclusion

Cave’s spiritual beliefs take a stand against tradition, organisation, and jurisprudence. He describes his early church participation as a distant and uninspiring affair, finding resonance in his private study of the Biblical texts. Cave’s engagement with the Bible is primarily focused upon its inspirational literary quality. Imagination and creativity are posited as the true pathway to God, rather than obedience to moral law. Despite his atypical theological conclusions and aversion to organised faith, Cave still derived self-definition, relief from sadness, and elevation from the mundane through his spiritual approach to the written word. Cave argues that Christ is a figure of liberation,

¹⁰⁶ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

¹⁰⁷ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

¹⁰⁸ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

¹⁰⁹ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

¹¹⁰ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

¹¹¹ Cave, ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’.

¹¹² Cave, ‘The Flesh Made Word’.

directly opposed to the legalistic dogma of the Christian Church. He focuses on Christ's imaginative qualities rather than his supernatural divinity. Cave doubts the virgin birth and the resurrection. Instead, he views Christ as a spiritual libertine who exists within the collaborative unity of creative projects. Cave also views God in unusual terms, describing him as a force of inspiration that does not intervene in human affairs or demand morality. Cave inserts a notion of reciprocity whereby humanity holds power over God and could destroy his existence through a bout of creative silence. Due to his experiential relationship with God via creative inspiration, faith is an experience of mutability rather than certainty. Cave's amoral view of God has permitted an overt usage of violence and romantic love as spiritual elevation from mediocrity. He does not view the insanity of spiritual belief as a negative manifestation. Rather, he engages with madness as the birthplace of the true love song and as the egotistical lunacy of violence and its striking linguistic quality. Cave's music is a celebration of God-given language regardless of ethically questionable content. For Cave, divinity can be found in language and creativity, and not in the pews of a church.