

Nearer, My God: An Autobiography of Faith

William F. Buckley Jr.

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This is the story of one man's faith, told with unrivaled reflection and candor. William F. Buckley, Jr., was raised a Catholic. As the world plunged into war, and as social mores changed dramatically around him, Buckley's faith -- a most essential part of his make-up -- sustained him. In *Nearer, My God*, Buckley examines in searching detail the meaning of his faith, and how his life has been shaped and sustained by religious conviction.

In highly personal terms, and with the wit and acuity for which he is justly renowned, Buckley discusses vital issues of Catholic doctrine and practice, and in so doing outlines for the reader both the nature of Catholic faith and the essential role of religious belief in everyday life. In powerfully felt prose, he contributes provocatively and intelligently to the national interest in the nature of religion, the Church, and spiritual development. *Nearer, My God* is sure to appeal to all readers who have felt the stirrings of their own religious faith, and who want confirmation of their beliefs or who are seeking a guide to understanding their own souls.

The renowned social and political commentator, William F. Buckley Jr., turns to a highly personal subject -- his faith. And he tells us the story of his life as a Catholic Christian. "*Nearer, My God*" is the most reflective, poignant, and searching of Bill Buckley's many books. In the opening chapters he relives his childhood, a loving, funny, nostalgic glimpse into pre-World War II America and England. He speaks about his religious experiences to a world that has changed dramatically. He is unafraid of revealing the most personal side of his faith. He describes, in his distinctive style, the intimacy of a trip to Lourdes, the impact on him of the searing account by Maria Valtorta of the Crucifixion, the ordination of his nephew into the priesthood, and gives a moving account of his mother's death. And there is humor, as Buckley gives a unique, hilarious view of a visit to the Vatican with Malcolm Muggeridge, Charlton Heston, Grace Kelly, and David Niven. Personal though this book is, Buckley has gone to others to examine new perspectives, putting together his own distinguished 'Forum' and leaning on the great literature of the past to illustrate his thinking on contemporary Catholic and Christian issues.

Nearer, My God: An Autobiography of Faith Details

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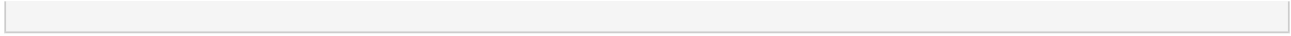
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From Reader Review Nearer, My God: An Autobiography of Faith for online ebook

Rachel Grepke says

First of all, I must preface this review by saying I am a Bible believing Christian, but not a Catholic. That being said, I read this book mainly to get a broader, independent view of the religion as a whole. Parts of the book are excellent, while others seem to drone on a little too much. I did like his approach to many of the topics and how he used multiple people and resources in his answers. It was a okay read, but did not keep me overly engaged.

Paul says

The late Mr. Buckley, famously erudite and charming (and as famously caustic and condescending: the spotlight also caught his shadow), confesses at the start: "I am not remotely qualified as a theologian or historian of Christianity [and:] my mode tends to be argumentative. ... This argumentative habit makes for poor exposition... [and this book's:] tone is not what I'd have hoped for. ... I am not trained in the devotional mode, nor disposed to it. ... I leave it at this, that if I could juggle, I'd do so for Our Lady. i suppose I am required to say that, in fact, I have here endeavored to do my act for her." And his whole act is here: the wit, the intellect, the impishness, the disdain, the namedropping, the logical rigor, the arresting conviction, the journalistic adventitiousness (Buckley would have liked that word), the odd and even stubborn failure to carry through with an obvious question, but above all the tender and loyal heart. His politics were the kind driven by fear, but here he writes of all that gave him assurance.

Buckley protests that he has little or nothing new to say (inevitable for a conservative?): "so habitual is it for me to learn and perform by contention, I have been derivatively influenced by others' contentions." Who hasn't been? His invitation to several friends - converts to Catholicism: a lifelong Catholic, he seeks the perspectives of (former) outsiders - to answer questions he wants to explore is an expression of that habit. So is his focus on a book of published letters between a priest and a layman, the former a Catholic convert and the latter soon to be converted, in effect a theological debate. He was attracted to the contentious, as he says. We knew that, before he said it. What is new here, in particular witness if not in content, is his testimony about the beneficial effects of religious practice. He offers three gems: his experience of chapel services and prayers in private school, his impressions on visiting Lourdes, and his correspondence with a nephew who became a Benedictine priest.

While he makes the error of our era - mistaking belief for religion - he nevertheless presents the distinction. Religious practice yields truth and meaning that logic cannot parse. It offers assurance and consolation beyond the power of argument. It gives challenge and clarity unattainable by reason. Buckley devotes much space to theological contention as if it would radiate light instead of heat. He asserts Church teaching as if it explained religious experience. He does these things because he loved contention and relied upon it as much as upon the authority of the Church. But when he writes of prayer or pilgrimage or vocation, he recognizes - if obliquely - that through these things we glimpse truth unanswerable by theology. Even untouchable by it. It is this boundary of experience - where it is forever unreachable by words, marked but unexplained by symbols - that God-talk is meant to navigate. Again, Buckley falls into the modern mire of knowing the words but not the grammar of this rhetoric. But in so doing, he illumines it. The true grammar of God-talk begins to shine through, casting shadows of contradiction that owe their sharpness, probably, to Mr. Buckley's contentious intellect. Not only do his accounts of religious practice touch the heart, but his unqualified wrestle with theology and tradition lights a flare over shoals he - without chart - learned to

circumnavigate. I'm glad he wrote this book.

Lynn Joshua says

Unlike Buckley, I am a Protestant, and not an intellectual, but I savored this book.

I have never read someone with whom I disagreed so much that I was so drawn to and learned so much from. He speaks with profound insight, and always in a gentle manner.

Despite my major differences of belief; esp. the acceptance of the authority of the church in matters of doctrine and morals, I felt a true kinship with his searching, his questioning, and even his acceptance of the limitations of human perception. He captures the essentials of Christianity in a compelling manner. Highly recommended for those who genuinely desire understanding and unity among followers of Christ.

Jacob Frank says

The one glaringly apparent aspect of Buckley's life that he seems never to reflect upon is the socioeconomic privilege he was swathed in from cradle to grave. His was an existence of mansions and servants, elite boarding schools and Ivy League universities, of rubbing elbows with the powerful and the famous. In that light, his reflections on his faith can be a bit hard to relate to. For example, his dissatisfaction with the post-Vatican II vernacular mass comes off as the grumbling of a dilettante. He has the nerve to suggest that the translation of the liturgy from Latin into English probably does not improve the comprehension of the liturgy by the average churchgoer. Heh? On a more positive note, he constructs much of the book like his "Firing Line" show, in that he assembled a coterie of eminent Catholic converts and sent them questions about various aspects of the faith and what attracted them to it. Their responses are typically much more illuminating than his own questions and reflections; again very similar to the dynamic of his talkshow.

There are also a couple of fascinating anecdotes about his life. First, that he was recruited by the CIA to serve as a deep-cover operative in Mexico during the Korean War. And second, that he was thereby introduced to, and became a close friend of, Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt, to the extent that WFB was asked to be godfather to EHH's children, and, after the death of EHH's wife and EHH's own impending imprisonment, asked to step in as their surrogate parent. Apparently WFB's CIA experiences serve as the basis for his fiction, so maybe I'll have to check that out at some point.

In sum, was it worth reading? If you're interested in the cultural controversies of the 60's, particularly the conservative and/or Catholic reaction to the 60's counterculture, it's informative. Also, if you find stuffy, curmudgeonly people amusing, it's right up your alley.

Sharon says

I read this book hoping to see and to understand how a thoughtful person processed and accepted Catholic teachings. This did not happen. Although the author provides many examples of people who shared and contributed to his thinking, the bottom line - its true because the church says it is - did not contribute anything to my understanding. Although the part of the book covering William F. Buckley's childhood (especially concerning his mother) was touching, his overall writing style was wearing. He prefers to use 25

words when 5 would do and would do it much more clearly.

Frederick says

Goodreads has a description of this book which is better than any I could write, so I'll just give one very biased reason for reading this book:

William F. Buckley is a genuinely religious man.

Even a great religious writer such as C. S. Lewis sometimes sounds like he's trying to sell us something. William F. Buckley, on the other hand, knows that faith requires determination, resolve and contancy. He is not so much trying to persuade us of the truth of what he's saying as demonstrating what one must do in order to stick to the truth.

The question then arises, "Is Buckley evangelical?" Yes, of course he is. But he knows that readers seeking an answer to the eternal question are wary of hoodwinkery.

This is an honest book. I would think readers of any faith would see the fundamental truth of Buckley's message here: God exists and expects something from us.

Michael says

This was an interesting book; a sort of autobiography of faith written by one of the architects of the modern American conservative movement. Buckley had a tremendous command of the English language (he wrote the introduction to the American Heritage Dictionary), but I generally find his writing a bit stilted, and have not read many of his longer works.

With that said, I enjoyed this book. Buckley's faith in God, his love of Catholicism, and his willingness to question the hard parts of our faith, as well as seek the counsel of the wise, make for an interesting read. I found the parts about the pre-Vatican II church to be most illuminating, and I have a better sense of why older folks aren't crazy about the 'new' mass ('new' as in the past 40 years!)

Catholicism continues to be my intellectual hobby, my cross to bear, and my spiritual home. Books like this, written by an intelligent, knowledgeable man, cast a great deal of light on the path I am traveling.

One final, unrelated point about William F. Buckley: he must be turning over in his frigging grave as we watches what his beloved conservative movement has turned in to.

Frank Peters says

The book was strangely enjoyable to read. This was very surprising following the first chapter, which I did not appreciate. The first chapter talked about Buckley's privileged childhood, globe-trotting with nannies and servants. This certainly did not endear him to me. From this point, I became swept away in his story telling, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

In some respects the book was a disappointment, as no answers were made to any of the questions posed. Buckley's form of an "answer" seems to be a description of an emotional feeling. Getting to grips with his lack of objective answers was certainly an education in itself. Now that I have finished the book, I am happy

I read it, but have no idea how to rate it, or if I would recommend it for anyone else to read. Odd.

Ralph says

During his life, William F. Buckley Jr was a luminary of conservative thought, but he also possessed a faith in Christianity (specifically Catholicism) that helped buoy his social and political convictions in dark times. This book is a declaration and explanation of his personal faith, his own experiences augmented by the words and lives of people he's known, as well as historical figures. Buckley is at his best in this book when detailing his own experiences in the spiritual realm, especially in his formative early years. His writing is a bit less effective when calling upon the beliefs and experiences of others, but still presented in a simple and logical manner. One of Buckley's strengths in the political world, which served to befuddle and infuriate his critics (and sometimes his friends) was the ability to present a logical argument bereft of emotional hyperbole, and he does the same thing here when writing about something as intangible and personal as faith. Emotional arguments can be easily demolished, but not so with arguments based on logic. In telling why *he* believes in something and not why *you* should, he creates a bulwark not easily assailed by tactics of denial and ridicule, which are the usual weapons used against people with strong religious beliefs. Whether or not you like Buckley, man or writer, you'll probably find something worth thinking about here.

Suzanne says

A serious thoughtful work about Christian Faith and the role and impact it had on Mr. Buckley's life and his spiritual development. It is, nonetheless, a slow read but sincere and well done.

DROPPING OUT says

When I started to read this book, I had a look at at Goodreads One reviewer, who gave the book two stars wrote: "This religious testament by a wealthy Catholic who never entertained doubts about his beliefs will doubtless offer comfort and reassurance to those who share his background and mindset. Somewhat less spiritual nourishment is offered to the great majority of us who don't."

Well, I am neither wealthy nor Roman Catholic - but I know what an honest and disingenuous person WFB jr was. He took his religion very seriously and wrote of it very personally He bared his soul in a way few of us would dare.

Possibly the critical book I have read on Catholicism, written not by a priest or theologian - but by someone who, in spite of the warts, wrote a loving portrait of his Church.

Josh says

In his "autobiography of faith", William F. Buckley Jr. gives us an overview of some of the major influences that played a role in his development as a Catholic.

Portions of this book are strictly biographical in the sense that he describes particular encounters with people (teachers, priests, fellow-believers) that shaped his way of thinking; the rest of the book is biographical mostly in the sense that he shares with us major historical, theological, philosophical, and cultural questions and ideas that he wrestled with, along with some of the thinkers that shaped his thought on the matter.

The first half of the book is very engaging, but it begins to lose steam toward the end. I found myself often in admiration of Buckley as a thinker and "great mover of deeds" (to borrow a phrase from "The Lord of the Rings") which gave me a greater appreciation of him, but I have to admit that this book is not nearly as engaging as his television programs.

I'm happy I read it and I learned a great deal from it, but I could think of a few Firing Line episodes I'd be more likely to recommend over this book (even when it comes to the topic of faith).

Susan says

William F. Buckley, Jr., the founder of modern American conservatism who just died recently, was a man of enormous intellect, wit, erudition and culture. This autobiography, organized around his grounding and formation in the Catholic faith and tradition, gives the reader a great deal of fascinating information about Buckley's upbringing, family, friends and associates, as well as some insight into his religious beliefs. Most interesting, witty, and compelling reading.

Lobstergirl says

After an opening chapter detailing with numbing blitheness his fabulously privileged upbringing - an enormous house in Connecticut, somewhere between 10-12 siblings, servants, tutors, piano teachers, butlers, chauffeurs, gardeners, probably tuxedoed Jeeveses engaged in lint-plucking, samovar-polishing, ski-waxing, and bridle-primping, wintering in South Carolina, boarding school in England, boarding school in America, vacations in Europe, all awash in reverence for the Lord and Mary the Mother of God, Buckley settles down to hardcore matters of faith.(1)

For this he has assembled, by mail, a bevy of Catholic converts, both clergy and lay, to whom he poses questions of Church doctrine. He tried to find women for his council, but Clare Boothe Luce was old and ailing, he didn't want to burden her, and this exhausted his female options. So we get no female perspectives on a range of doctrines, including those that would seem to have special interest for the ladies - birth control, divorce, remarriage, the ordination of gals. The men give answers on these, plus miracles - are they real or parabolic? Was Jesus Christ a real historical personage? Is the Resurrection critical to your faith, and to Christianity? What one feature of the Church drew you to it? Was there one feature that kept you from joining it sooner than you did?

There is an intriguing chapter on the 1932 exchanges between Arnold Lunn and the scholarly Catholic convert Ronald Knox. Lunn was a Christian, for the most part, but was having difficulties with the doctrines of Catholicism: how do believers and the Church come to terms with the idea of imperfect leaders - popes, bishops, priests? How does one reconcile divine omniscience and free will? How to explain slavery and the Inquisition - could a Church that promulgated these horrors be the one that Christ intended? Is Hell believable? How could the Church tolerate indulgences? Ought the whole Scriptures be taken literally?(2)

This is all very interesting, except the reproduced 17-page "vision" of one Maria Valtorta, who saw the Crucifixion in its prolonged entirety in the 1940s and doesn't miss out on a single instance of nail-hammering, flesh-tearing, body sagging, Christ-yelping.

Along the way Buckley tosses in a few shockers: how his sister Trish slapped the radical lesbian feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson at a forum at Catholic University for Atkinson's "ribald attack on the Mother of Jesus"; his support for a sort of trial marriage, given the Church's condemnation of divorce, the idea being that newlyweds have not reached a "psychic consummation" of a marriage until 3-5 years in, and at that point are able to "engage each other with an informed solemnity that validates perpetual vows."

Buckley favors a very lax interpretation of the Establishment Clause and bewails the absence of religion in both public and private schools.(3) One chapter is titled "Where Does One Learn About the Christian God?" and while my answer would be at church and at home, or in nonpublic religious schools with captive audiences willing to hear it, for Buckley this is not enough. I am with him on one small point here, the elision of Martin Luther King Jr.'s religion, which was not peripheral but central to every part of his message, from classroom teachings. It is folly to try to understand this Reverend without accounting for his Christian faith.

(1) Later Buckley tells us that he and his wife winter in Gstaad. So when he is organizing a TV special set in the Sistine Chapel with Malcolm Muggeridge, and is in search of Catholic celebrities to provide commentary, "...I approached David Niven, a neighbor in Switzerland (where I spend February and March), and Princess Grace of Monaco, who regularly vacationed with her family nearby and who, with Niven, spent occasional evenings at our house, painting in oils."

(2) These exchanges were published in book form as *Difficulties: A Correspondence About the Catholic Religion Between Mgr. Ronald Knox and Sir Arnold Lunn*.

(3) An appendix contains detailed summaries of how religion is included and excluded from the practices of twelve exclusive New England boarding schools, and the blurb on Choate Rosemary Hall contains my favorite sentence in the book: "There are no outward indications that the chapel is a church, other than that its superstructure is a steeple," which seems tantamount to saying that there is no outward indication that this baby is a boy, other than that penis there...

Roblee says

Quite well written and deeply felt. An analysis of one person's life long faith in God and in Catholicism. It is not an easy read, but it is well worth the thought and effort.
