

**Roche, David (2008) *The Church of 80% Sincerity*. New York: Penguin Books.**

“My face is an elaborately disguised gift from God,” says David Roche. It may be, but his short, conversational, story packed book, *The Church of 80% Sincerity*, is not elaborately disguised. It is just gift.

There are so many people with disabilities or other forms of obvious difference or disfigurement that have had ambivalent and varied experiences with the religion, clergy and congregations, often with good reason. On the one hand, their participation has so often gotten muddled by the theistic questions of others: Why did this happen? What did you or your parents do? And if your faith was strong enough, perhaps you could be cured, i.e., like us? On another, people with disabilities have often persisted, found, and claimed ways in which their own faith sustains them, and sometimes find a community in which that is welcomed and embraced, or, as is often the case, they are held up as models of incredible faith and belief.

What has not happened very often is a redefining of the options and the categories, moving away from the polarities of being seen as either faithless or incredibly faithful, or, in older terms, demonic or angelic, hellish or holy. Rather, think what might happen when faith gets looked at from a total acceptance of disability and difference as simply who and what one is, a part of the diversity of human kind, and when the experience of faith in oneself and life itself comes from a deep acceptance of oneself by oneself, with the help of moments of acceptance, embrace and community that come from all kinds of unusual directions.

That is what David Roche is about in this book. He does so through the redemptive lenses of humor, irony, and paradox, no doubt the written forms of the impact of his stand up comic act and keynote presentations. The number of people with disabilities who have begun to find their own voice through humor in the last decade is an incredible gift to a world which too often freezes up, in fear, around assumptions about tragedy, suffering, and hopelessness when they encounter disability. One of the things David Roche and other comedians with disabilities do is help other “typical” adults to become children again, children who are not so much afraid of disability and doing the wrong thing, but curious about it, and willing to engage. His coming to understand his face, and life, as a mirror, is a wonderful and powerful example of the ways that our fears of the other or stranger are in fact fears about parts of ourselves.

What he also does, rather than discarding words of faith like grace, miracles, prayer, and laying on of hands, words that so often have connotated negative experiences for people with disabilities, is redefine them, reclaim them, and use them in ways that anchor his own journey, and, in turn, help all of us, disabled or not, to interpret them in new ways. As a clergyman who grew up in a Southern Baptist equivalent of David’s strict Roman Catholic childhood, his chapter on prayer is what stands out for me, encapsulated by the sentences “Prayer is not a planned thing. Prayer emerges of its own accord. You are not supposed to pray. You are supposed to get out of the way of the prayer that prays itself.”

His book is thus a reflection of the paradox of a universal form of spiritual journey in which we discover that when we accept, claim, and give voice to the things that we think are most peculiar, different, or particular to us, we begin to find and build connections with many others. Diving into the particular, the things we think set us most apart, we end up finding the universal, the connection with others who are in their own struggle to accept themselves, find their own voice, and embrace their own sense of vocation and call.

I devoured the book on two short train trips, in and out of New York for a screening and panel discussion of another powerful new resource on spirituality and disability, the documentary, *Praying with Lior*. But do not be fooled by its brevity and humor. There are stories you will remember, revelations that will stay with you, and moments you will say, "I have been there." Some may get offended by its honesty, graphicness, and what may feel like irreverence, but if that keeps people from seeing and feeling David Roche's discovery and reclaiming of joy, then it is their loss, not his. For anyone who has struggled with their own sense of stigma and shame, whatever the cause, this book will be a blessing.

Reviewer;

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