

Book Review: Love, Imperfectly Known

As book reviews go, I think this one is likely to be a little unfair.

Concerning [Love, Imperfectly Known](#) by the Christian monk and mystic, Brother Emmanuel of Taizé: it's hard for me to be objective about a book that I have grown to adore so personally. This disturbs me a little bit. I would like to lay this out to you in its component parts. I should offer you pros and cons, and cross-comparisons. I should not be so dramatically affected by a book, that I cannot help you to make your own, informed decisions.

So, I am apologizing to you in advance, for my bias. If clinical impartiality is what you need in a review, then you should stop reading now. But, if you wish to know why this book has so completely captured my heart, then please, read on.

First, you should know that I would have read this book anyway. I mean, it's about my God, the Christian God, worshiped worldwide in an ever-increasing variety of styles, framed into just as many sets of creeds and doctrines. I expected to enjoy it, for that reason, and to help this practiced scholar, but first-time author, with a good read and review. I expected it to be a little rough. I did not expect a book-length, academically founded, love letter to the Divine. But, that is what I have just read.

I am sure that I have met the God in this book, but this is not the Christian God who is covered in the popular press. This is no cold, Greek deity, dispensing punishment and reward at whim. Neither is this God an aloof, distant, "Clockmaker," who forms universes and then runs away screaming. This is the God of "[The Shack](#)," who prepares the way into our hearts, before we even know that we need it. This God was a husband in, "[What Dreams May Come](#)," who descended into hell with his beloved wife, ready to die by her side. I have read and seen a living God who adores me, and needs the return of my own love.

To think of God this way, as the lover of my soul, it is much easier to step across the pillars of Christian doctrine, some of which discuss the sins that would separate us from the love of God. However, this time, the steps are made with a different narrative. As I read this title, there were many times that my heart broke so dramatically that I was left in tears. However, I was never left to wallow in self-abasement or misery. Brother Emmanuel removed the petulant excuses that I might have used to punish myself, and then illustrated that I would do this only to gain some unnecessary personal power. Instead of envisioning Dante's fiery torment of the damned, I was guided to a God who waits for me even in the darkness, and will find me, if invited. The invitation is everything, according to the author: this God will force no will upon me. I must choose how I exercise the freedom I am given.

Further increasing the appeal of this book, for me, is the fact that the author is both a theologian and a practicing counselor, with a strong academic history in the field of psychology. It has been many years since I earned my own psychology degree, but I remember enough to recognize the heady use this author makes of it. In fact, it is this kind of advanced psychology—more precisely

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psychoanalysis—that frames almost every academic argument in the book. If that is a concept which turns you off, let me try to help you: I have no love for Sigmund Freud, and while I once thought myself a Jungian, I ultimately discovered that my American lifestyle was a lot more compatible with Cognitive Behaviorism, than with any idea forged by the Psychoanalyticians. However, Brother Emmanuel surprised me again, somewhere in Section 2, by explaining Freud so lovingly and rationally, that even I found a way to forgive him. He then went on to use some of Freud's psychoanalytic ideas to frame some of his most convincing pictures of our self-imposed separation from God.

Theologically, it seems that this book does not break much new ground. Although I am no heavyweight in that subject, I can still recognize that many of its concepts about eternal cosmology are those that I have read elsewhere. However, when the author begins to blend psychology with theology, there are some fascinating ideas that come forward. I think that the one that made the largest impression on me was the way that Brother Emmanuel treated our projections of gender identity onto God.

Now, reformed theologians, particularly in the developed countries of the world, have attempted to “gender-neutralize” God for decades. It's a cause of much dissent and torment within churches. Is God a man or is God not a man, or should we just not talk about it at all, because it makes people “feel left out”? This author runs headlong into the discussion, but he does not choose to fight about it. He just asks us to “consider” that perhaps God wears neither a long white beard, nor a Hillary Clinton pants suit. His God is both of those, or neither, and then everything else. No, this isn't some watered-down “gender-neutral” straw effigy. In fact, it is exactly the opposite: every gender-based pronoun in every language on earth is encompassed by this living, passionate, loving God. You will imagine a warrior, a Casanova, a “Dad,” a “Mom”, a King, a child, and even a girlfriend. In fact, hang onto your hats, but after arguing that we deface the Divine by making God into cardboard cutouts of “Bad Father” or even “Bad Mother,” the author then goes on to underscore the scriptural points, where the Spirit of God has some distinctly—and perfectly—feminine attributes. And then, with the gentlest suggestion, he invites his reader to try to imagine God as, “a charming, welcoming, and smiling young woman.”

Far from making me uncomfortable, as I expected, I found this (Section 4, and into the Epilogue) to be the most liberating section of the book. I did not realize, until I read this book, how restrictive it was for me to neuter God in my own mind. I mean *what if* God is present in me, and I represent Him (Her?) as a woman? Far from blasphemy or sacrilege, it is an amplification of my relationship with the Divine. I am invited to think of God as a sister, a girlfriend, or a companion. I can celebrate the overtly male nature of the Lord as a Warrior, Christ as a Lover, God the Father and High King, and I can fully return His love, knowing that God also appreciates, and even shares, my feminine nature. In the presence of God, I no longer am confined to the shadows. I am now an equal participant.

However, I have to leave this thought as a “*what if*,” just as Brother Emmanuel does, for there is no sense putting God in a cage. He / She? will supply our needs, if we ask, but in His / Her? own time. I am convinced, though, that in his monastic vocation, Brother Emmanuel has discovered a perfect relationship with the Divine, and as a result, he has completely fallen in

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love with God. *Love, Imperfectly Known*, is a personal letter to the first love of this author's heart. Reading it, I am overcome, and inspired to fall in love, too.

At this point, I'm happy to say that I have found at least two areas of minor disagreement with the book. "Happy," because this means the book did provoke some of my thoughts, even while it was enchanting me with its message.

First, as a science-minded person, I found that the author's blanket acceptance of all modern science was not as well thought-out as I would have liked. It is a minor blip in Section 1, and does not disturb the flow of the book. I suppose that author's scope is such that he simply doesn't wish to debate the subject. Fine by me, it's not a science journal. However, there is some disagreement—or at least perceived disagreement—between science and scripture, that did not quite resolve as I had hoped. It would be nice to see theories treated as theories, and not as absolutes; for scientists rewrite their own explanations of the universe constantly.

Second, in Section 4, I squirmed a bit when he brought in Apocryphal books just to underscore some of the nature of God. It is important to note that these were supporting points, and not the main ones, and I truly enjoyed them as illustrations. But as a Protestant, I wasn't prepared to accept them at face value. However, even with these areas of disagreement, I had to look a long way into this book in order to find facts that didn't sit well with me.

More important than these points, though, is a note on readability. For us English speakers, Brother Emmanuel helps by dividing his message into very small bites. This is to his credit, for the concepts are beautiful and the language is lush. I am certain that in French, it paints a literary version of a Renoir. In English, though, it makes for some very dense wording. Trust me, it doesn't even compare to the translated works by Jung or Bonhoeffer, but you will definitely be reminded of some English translations of Victor Hugo. I note that French is a language with more descriptive tools than English, and so English phrasing of the same text must pack in a lot of verbiage, just to keep up with it. Therefore, you can fully expect to spend some extra time rereading some sections of *Love, Imperfectly Known*. I read one of them 4 times. Don't let that discourage you—both my husband and I did it the same thing you will likely do. I am here to tell you that it was worth every reread, and now I am even going through the book again. Center yourself, buckle down, and keep reading, because your focus will pay off at the end of the book.

I can only sum this up by saying that *Love, Imperfectly Known* has changed my life, and for the better. In the middle of reading it, I received a clear vision of the light of Eternity. Even before that, when I had just started to read it, I was inspired to write a song. Near the end, I wrote a second song, then enjoyed an epiphany about God's Divine nature. Rereading it again, I've written yet another song. So, for those of you who need me to wax academic, hmmm . . . three songs, one vision, and an epiphany? That's a 500% increase in blessings from any other book I've read this year. There: you have your statistic, and so maybe now, I have written a scholarly review.

For those of you who don't need any numbers, then I will leave you with this: you do not need to believe in God in order to read this book. If you do, I hope that you will take the journey with me, and find me somewhere along the road, renewing my own relationship with God. If you

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don't believe, then this is the book I would present to you, to describe the living, eternal Presence that I worship. Brother Emmanuel's letter *to* my God has become, for me, a letter *from* my God. He . . . She? . . . The Divine is revealed alive there, in the beauty of perfect love.