**Gillian Allnutt as a Poet of the Spirit**

Gillian Allnutt was born into an orthodox religious family; her mother and grandmother, who appear frequently in her poems, were both Christians. As a child, Allnutt was educated in convents, although it is clear that she found this oppressive, ‘girls are expected/to wear gloves/and a labour of love is lost/in plain sewing’ (*convent).*  In her first collection, *Spitting the Pips Out,* she writes frankly of a struggle towards self-identity, much of which involves a turning away from orthodox religion. In that collection, the poet ironically casts herself as Eve, but for her God soon becomes remote : ‘God is alone/in a garden without children./He walks in a dream./I hardly remember him/now[[1]](#endnote-1)’. The family’s faith becomes difficult to bear : ‘A house of God my father and my mother made/of my heart. I am afraid of it./I can no longer admire it’.

Even so, the poet finds it difficult to cease talkingof religious things. Orthodox religion may have receded into the background but there remains a pressure, that is released into writing: ‘The more she wrote poems, the more she found these holy words slipping in, unobtrusive, usually in the middle of a sentence, almost always in the lower case (even *god).’[[2]](#endnote-2)*  So there remained some spiritual residue to be accommodated in some way, outside orthodox faith and as she has grown older Allnutt has talked of moving closer to what she calls the ‘spirit’: ‘I’ve been walking towards the spiritual - it was always there - but a more explicit embracing of the spiritual for a long time .. I’m interested in the spirit, the soul, the inner person, the alive bit’[[3]](#endnote-3).

It has been said of Allnutt that she shows ‘the spirit surviving amongst the tatters of Christianity in a modern wilderness’[[4]](#endnote-4). But this perhaps needs slight qualification. It is not at all clear that Allnutt sees the world as a wilderness, or that she thinks Christianity lies entirely in tatters. She does sometimes see the world as rather stark, such as when her friend, John Levinson, committed suicide in 1979 : ‘Solitude your death a drover’s/road two dry stone walls the borders/of the earth’ (*Epiphany (Yorkshire Dales).* But the note is never persistently hopeless even here; there is always something more: *‘*I must call in the cold stars/warm them’ (*the house of the dead).* She reflects on suicide in her 1978 prize-winning poem, *Why Not,* and defiantly commits to life, *‘*Perhaps I shall go on like a cigarette/watching my ashes grow/and my small tongue of fire slow, tire./I draw on life and wait/for the abrupt stubbing out’.

The final note here is, of course, not Christian, but it is still not clear that Allnutt sees Christianity, or religion in general, as in tatters. The ‘house of God’ of which she is afraid, while cast in stone, retains beauty, this ‘house of God … is beautiful and strongly built of stone’. And God may also be found, perhaps, in natural beauty, ‘as if you, beautiful/… with your small pale flowers …/were my soul/and God/in spite of groundfrost/… could/exist’ (*Bringing the Geranium in for the Winter).* But who or what this God is still remains unclear. It is not someone especially close, or easy to relate to, ‘god will always be/hard to talk to’ (*wake).*

Allnutt is clearly trying to articulate a sense of the spiritual outside of orthodox faith. One of her favoured techniques is to draw on the imagined spirituality of Christian and Biblical figures, especially women such as Sarah, wife of Abraham, Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and the saint, Julian of Norwich. There is close attention to what these figures are imagined to have experienced, as if through this one might articulate one’s sense of the spiritual. The implication is that is that there is something to be found in the Judaeo-Christian spiritual heritage, even if it is not clear what this is. Allnutt is never dismissive of what she imagines these persons to have known, although it is clear that she cannot always take it literally: ‘Shortly, they’ll say that God sent Gabriel. That’s what/they’ll write. And what/is Gabriel but the word for morning?’ (*Mary*).

In *Preparing the Icon,* the poet pursues this vicarious spirituality by imagining Andrej Rublev instructing an apprentice icon painter how to depict the apostle, John. A sense of stern reverence for the inner life of the apostle emerges, ‘In the silence of falling snow and of the imagination’s/cold dark halls, you’ll know your own/austerity and John’s’. Similarly, in *At the Bellmaking,* where a monk’s making of a bell is imagined, there is a hint almost of yearning for ‘that mine of quiet/in the bone/he had made of listening/to God’. Allnutt’s own spiritual search has drawn her at times to the Quakers, a formally Christian but highly non-conformist community, with its avoidance of belief, ritual and scripture and its emphasis on inner, spiritual experience.

All of Allnutt’s work, of course, including her concerns for spiritual development, has to be understood in the context of her feminism. Her first collection has an almost fiercely feminist note. This soften as time proceeds and she admits in the introduction to the poems she collected for *the new british poetry* in 1988 that ‘I no longer feel I know what ‘feminist’ means’, but she has remained very forthright about what she sees as the threat of patriarchal oppression: ‘as long as one woman in the world is raped today, we haven’t got anywhere, we are still in the throes and the midst of the horrors of patriarchy .. I’m up for grabs, I’m property, I’m rapeable’[[5]](#endnote-5). This is strongly put, and it is hard to forget that there are clear and obvious tensions between being a committed feminist and having a relationship with God, tensions which much of Allnutt’s work explores. After all, God is traditionally represented as a powerful Father; Christ is also male, and many women have struggled hugely with both of these aspects of our main orthodox religion. The feminist Christian theologian Elizabeth Johnson, for instance, has chastised Christianity because in it ‘the idea that the Word might have become female flesh is not even … imaginable’.[[6]](#endnote-6) Allnutt also seems to have just these difficulties.

For instance, it is clear that Allnutt sees the spiritual life as something that must be fully achieved within an existing female identity, and within a female *body.* There is little that is *etherial* about Allnutt’s spirituality, little interest for instance, in imagined disembodiment, and little sense of any life beyond this one, after ‘the abrupt stubbing out’. There is also little interest in the traditional, and arguably patriarchal ideas of sin and atonement, which in the Judaeo-Christian tradition seem always to be laid ultimately at the door of Eve. Many of Allnutt’s imagined female characters are, to this end, highly irreverent, even on their spiritual journeys. We see this vividly in the *Nantucket and the Angel* sequence, where the imagined old woman, Nantucket, engages in a dialogue with the archangel Gabriel but aims to bring him right down to earth, immersing him in the almost surreal detritus of her own particularities. Nantucket has little sense of sin as such; she is quite wicked: ‘Nantucket’s …/a riot’ (*Rocking Chair).* Nor is there anything lofty made of Gabriel; he sits about, fiddling with the cast-offs of Nantucket’s own chaos, ‘For hours she’ll sit and trace the dead bits in the Tradescantia./He’ll fetch the mat but fail to meditate on candlestick or pewter/coffee-pot. He wants his ocarina back. He’s lachrymose, laconic,/carves *Nantucket* into Lipsalve, bootblack, Vick.’ (*Pistachio).*

Equally, Nantucket cheerfully deflates some celebrated male and rather lofty, poetic conceptions of angels : ‘*Ein jeder Engel is schrecklich* or, if you press her, *Every angel? Terrible./*Rilke, at nobody’s beck and call, alone in his airy improbable/… Put it well enough./But Gabriel? *He’s ill/*She’ll tell you, *pale’* (*Scrabble)*. Elsewhere, in *Mary to the Scribes* from *Blackthorn,* Allnutt considers the significance of the Marian annunciation. Mary’s *physicality* is stressed here, even her sensuality, even as she acknowledges her high place in the spiritual order, ‘I am beyond you with my beautiful shoulders, who believed/you could name your God/with hammer and nail,/dumb me/with annunciation’. In another striking poem, there is possibly even a hint that the annunciation was a form of sexual harassment, or worse: ‘I was alone at the well/…/I was come upon./I was going to carry the water to my espoused man,/Joseph, of the house of David’. (*Annunciation*). The poet is travelling a difficult road, in which the spiritual is pursued vicariously through real and imagined historical figures, drawing strongly on Judaeo-Christian tradition, but willing to subvert it in the interests of women. Allnutt’s often remarked on increasing *diffidence* of poetic manner is very evident here, as her attempts to tackle spirituality against a resistant background of feminist concerns as well as a certain amount of religious scepticism frequently result in a hesitancy and brevity that almost struggle even for sense.

In her very latest poetry, the hesitant struggle for sense becomes very noticeable. Syntax and punctuation become strained. Poems come together as barely attached fragments. The spirit is hinted at in grammarless shards of verse: ‘or priory or prayer the wind blows through’ (Lindisfarne : the roughs), or in poems that draw on medieval or even earlier forms of language, as in a later poem for John Levinson: ‘you and I then/shriven/in my shoelessness fear of the Lord that fire and flet/unfit me for’. Again she imagines the world of Mary Magdalen, but the sense is difficult: ‘am I to live among men abandoned I may learn to love again/adrift in Jerusalem/am I upon strewn palm’ (Magdalen). At times, the poetry moves towards extreme brevity, almost towards silence, as in the three word poem titled *silence*: ‘the poet, discalceate’, where the poet is tellingly identified with one of Theresa of Avila’s discalced Carmelite nuns. This image of the *shoeless* poet/nun, of someone religiously dedicated yet uncertain, lost for all but three words, is a powerful image of the spiritual life, ambiguously holding together many of Allnutt’s complex attitudes, her struggle to formulate a spirituality that draws on Judaeo-Christian tradition, in particular the experience of women in that tradition, but, as a woman herself, finding so much of this tradition awkward and restraining. Recalling again her own time in a convent, she remembers both its oppressiveness, but there is a sense that such a road at least ran parallel to one that she could imagine travelling, if without shoes : ‘They wearied me with prayer/…/I sought him where the way was unprepared, a wild rose./The old road … will not come again,/but my riven father/who knows.’ (*Convent Girl*).

1. Gillian Allnut, *Spitting the Pips Out*, Sheba Feminist Publishers (1981) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Spitting the Pips Out*, p.56 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Interview with Gillian Allnut by Anna Woodford, for the Bloodaxe archive : https://vimeo.com/114699874 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. cover note from *How The Bicycle Shone,* Bloodaxe (2007) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Bloodaxe interview [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Elisabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (New York : Crossroads, 1992), p.151* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)