

TO HAVE FAITH

Rosie Penny in conversation with Andrew Foreshew Cain.

Andrew Foreshew Cain is currently working as a chaplain at the University of Oxford. He is a priest, married to an atheist, who doesn't go to Church.

Rosie Penny is a London based writer, artist and cultural critic.

For transparency I am not Christian, in fact I am not religious period. However I am curious as to why I am uncomfortable with religion. Religion has and always will be culturally significant. In the U.K Christianity underpins many of our socio political dynamics for better or for worse - although it often seems like it's for the worse. For this reason I interviewed Andrew Foreshew Cain, the first priest to marry a same sex partner in the Church of England. Upon his marriage in 2014 he was blacklisted from the Church. I am curious about his position towards the Church a few years on from these events, an institution that he has been both devoted to and rejected from.

Andrew tells me when working for the Church you're at the mercy of the bishop and their extending permissions. Much like a student asking to take their blazer off, the actions granted are little more than expected rights. For example, the ability to get married. Except that in the Church of England this right was not granted to same sex couples until 2014. Even then, queer members of the clergy would have to vow to celibacy if they were to be as audacious as to marry.

RP: So the Church's objection to your marriage was not with homosexuality per se but with power and how to hold onto it?

AFC: I think bishops are guilty of seeing this as being a struggle about power and control rather than about individual lived human experience. They're not going to want to own up to the petty unkindnesses that they have perpetuated against people for decades. Unnecessary petty unkindnesses. Just because they can.

So things like this - where I live in Derbyshire, I did for a little while try to go to the local village Church and there was an occasion where on a Sunday morning the vicar was giving communion out. He was on his own and it was obvious he was going to struggle. I'd been administering holy communion for 40 years, so I just got up and went over to the vicar and said 'Would you like a hand?' 'Yeah that'd be great. Thank you very much.'

So I gave him a hand. A week later I had a phone call and visit telling me the bishops heard that I touched the chalice, the sacred vessel, with my filthy gay hands. My filthy gay *married* hands. And

that this was unacceptable and I would never be allowed to do this again. There was no need for this whatsoever. I offered to help, the priest accepted my help, I gave communion and then I got a visit in my house from someone telling me that even touching a chalice was unacceptable. That's the kind of cruelty and unkindness that makes no sense in my mind. They'll never apologise for that.

I stopped going to Church. I thought fuck it I'm done. It's appalling. I mean they didn't use the language of filthy gay hands but you know what I mean, that's what it felt like. I was literally helping out in a situation where I could and where I had done so for 40 years. The only thing that made a difference between me doing it, 2 years earlier in my parish and 2 years later having left my parish and no longer having a licence, was the fact that I was married. This was a way of getting at me for being married.

RP: In previous statements you've explicitly referred to the Church of England as abusive. It seems to me that the contradiction lies not in being gay and Christian but in being a gay priest who is loyal to the Church. Some would argue Stockholm Syndrome, is that appropriate?

AFC: Stockholm Syndrome is really large within the Church and when you say that to people who are within the Church they get really upset. I left ministry in 2017 and it was very difficult because it is everything, ministry, if you're doing it. It is your home. It is your place of work. It is the people you see everyday. I loved my community in West Hampstead. I can still feel, if I close my eyes, that sensation of standing up in front of Church on a Sunday morning. Looking out across a community of 150 different people and knowing them and knowing their lives and having been part of their lives for 20 years. That sense of completeness that it gives, that comes with it. That's one of the joys of ministry.

So all of that went and I really struggled. For 18 months I struggled with how I was feeling. Where I was, I was lost. I was uncertain. I was bored. I was frustrated. But in that process I began to realise the person I had become in the last decade or so in ministry, was like I was twisted, bent over and I was quite angry. There's some things I look back on that I said and did in that last 10-15 years in ministry that I would not now say or do. I think partly you get twisted by the institution without realising you're being twisted by the institution. You accept things that you would no longer accept. You expect behaviours which you now would reject. It was almost like an unbending and a rediscovery of myself and the person I thought I was, which I clearly had not been for quite a long time.

And it was only when I stepped outside of the Church and stopped going and stopped being responsible to and for it, stopped feeling somehow that I had to defend it, that I was able to start to begin to feel like myself again.

Here, in this community (the University of Oxford), I completely feel like I'm myself which is great. I love it. I didn't feel that in the Church and I think a lot of people who are in the Church, in ministry, queer people in the Church, just don't realise how twisted out of shape they become because you have to bend in order to survive.

RP: All this considered, why do you choose to stay associated with the Church of England?

AFC: You can't entirely walk away because if you entirely walk away then you leave more vulnerable people to be hurt. You have to stay in and it's a really difficult thing to do because I don't go to Church anymore. I go to Church here. I don't go to Church anywhere else and I really struggle with

my relationship with the institution. And I've gone through periods when I think oh fuck it I'm just done with this, I'm out the door. But I always get drawn back in again because I'm old and I'm tough. I'm really privileged in that I have a loving husband and lots of resources behind me and I'm secure and safe. That gives me a platform on which to stand and fight.

Even though I do think fuck it half the time you have to do it because if we don't, no one else will and someone will die. You hear stories of young people committing suicide. People die all the time and the Church is responsible for a lot of these deaths.

The Oasis Foundation did this report recently saying that the majority of homophobia comes into society from religious people. We have to stop this. One of the things that makes me angry is that my bishops refuse to see that their policies and procedures within the Church, which are used to penalise people like me, end up crushing other people. They won't see this because it means they have to take responsibility for hurting people. Bishops like to think of themselves as being kind and good, all the things that a bishop wants to be. But one of the problems of being part of an institution is that they lose themselves as a part of it.

It strikes me that this is an issue which goes far wider than the Church or religion. We are talking about power and corruption. We are talking about the guise of authority. Sometimes it takes contradiction and dissonance to shatter the illusion of power. The mirage that it serves in our best interest. Baudrillard's essay 'The Agony of Power' comes to mind. In the U.K we're onto our third Tory prime minister of the year. Rishi Sunak now holds authority.

AFC: Nick Baines has recently written a thing on corruption in power and how it mistreats people. He's aimed it at the Tory party and it's a very good thing. So this was a speech given at the House of Lords. If you read it, it's an attack on the Tories, and corruption, money, power and influence but actually quite a lot of it could be applied to the bishops.

We discussed the feedback loop between politics and religion. Baines' speech was a damning diagnosis - 'Behaviour and language are not neutral. Never. And the insidious truth is that corruption ignored, downplayed or spun opens the door to corruption elsewhere in both individual and corporate life.' What came first, the chicken or the egg? Whether religion corrupted politics or politics corrupted religion, the order is somewhat irrelevant. Each sphere reinforces the other.

RP: Do you think politics influences the Church more than Christianity influences politics nowadays?

AFC: I think a lot of Church members are influenced by the Daily Mail. The average Church of England person is probably a white person in their 60s. They tend to read the Daily mail. So I think there was some research that showed that the majority of people who read the Daily Mail also voted for Brexit. Whereas the majority of clergy, like me, are on the left. And there's a tension there between the two.

The people in the pews are right wing. There's a dissonance between the individual in front of you and actually the wider impact on the community. I mean that is true of all of us isn't it. Not just specifically religious people.

RP: This reminds me of the fact that hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people have risen in the past 5 years following on from Brexit. Have you seen a similar rise in hostility to LGBTQ+ people in the Church of England?

AFC: I was talking about this the other day with someone I know. One of the issues, I think, is that gender, so women clergy, was a battle that the Church of England fought 30 years ago and Conservative forces lost that battle. So we have women clergy and women bishops. When that battle was lost they shifted foot onto another battle (sexuality). So it's fundamentally about power in the Church.

Who controls the Church? Who makes the decisions about where money goes? Who directs the Church's moral authority? Sexuality sort of became the touchstone after gender. It's a much more convenient one because world wide Anglicanism is generally in more conservative cultures. We exported our homophobia and our legislation against homosexuality in the empire into the criminal codes of most of the former colonies. It remains in the criminal codes of most of the former colonies and the Churches remain, for the most part, profoundly homophobic.

So you're on an automatic backing to strengthen the Conservatives in this country in their attitude to people. So it's not necessarily about bodily autonomy (in regards to sexuality and celibacy) but it is about power and control. That's why it's such a vicious fight, because they don't want to lose control and they have quite a lot of it at the moment.

Sexuality is being used as a pawn in a game much larger than marriage equality. It's power play. On the subject of sexuality I had asked how the Church would deal with non-monogamy. This was not in relation to marriage equality so much as it was a comment on the increasing popularity of polyamorous relationships in my generation. Whilst he stated he was against non-monogamy personally, he was reluctant to speak more broadly of polyamory and the Church. He was concerned if he gave voice to this issue it would muddy the waters about public perception of his stance on same sex marriage.

RP: There's still a lot of insinuations and stereotypes about queer people and the inability to be monogamous.

AFC: I'm a gay man from the 90s, ok. I was in London in the 90s, before I met Steven. We weren't allowed to have relationships. This is what people forget. Yes, there's a huge amount of promiscuity within the gay community and it's entirely understandable because when I was growing up we were told we could not have a relationship. So we had sex. Occasionally you'd end up in longer term relationships but the expectation put upon us by wider society and therefore internalised by the gay community was that we just had sex. Now there are stand out people that met and formed relationships which lasted decades. You will quite often meet older gay people who have been with their partner for 30 or 40 years. This is not as uncommon as people think. But they've done so against a huge set of expectations on them. It's only really your generation, or since 2004 that there have been official structures to support long term committed relationships for gay and lesbian people.

And I think that's one of the things about marriage that is so important. Me and Steven were together for 14 years before we got married. It has felt different everyday since we got married. Being married feels different. Because whether the Church or wider society wants it or not, when you get married you enter into a historical institution which brings with it weight and a sense of stability that you

import. My parents had a great marriage, they were really happy. You associate with that. You bring that into your relationship with the person you're now married to. So the accusation of promiscuity - absolutely gay people have been, were, sometimes still are quite promiscuous. It's not inherent. It's a result of generations of expectations and impositions from the wider society and a culture which then developed and grew that lived up, or lived down or lived within those expectations.

I have never been one to dream of marriage but this made something click. Whether I like it or not we all live within the expectations of our culture. God bless filthy gay hands because they are poking holes in the hierarchies we find ourselves trapped in. The dirt stuck under our nails has come from scratching away at tradition in order to build ways of being outside of the system. Before our conversation ended I became overcome with the urge to ask a rogue question.

RP: What music do you listen to?

AFC: I don't listen to music. I have not listened to music my entire life. I listen to Radio 4 and the World Service.

This was not the answer I had expected, to an extent none of them were. Perhaps part of having faith is committing to something, or someone, despite the unknowns and the contradictions. Post interview I reflect that I am made more uncomfortable by structures of power generally than I am specifically by Christianity or religion. Faith is not the problem, authority is.