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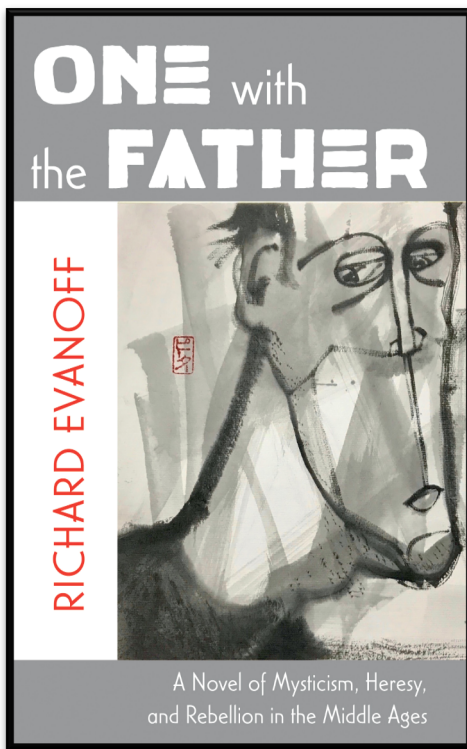
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One with the Father:
A Novel of Mysticism, Heresy, and Rebellion in the Middle Ages
by Richard Evanoff
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New Title from Richard Evanoff

One with the Father:

A Novel of Mysticism, Heresy, and Rebellion in the Middle Ages



When Justin escapes the comfortable medieval estate where his overbearing father has kept him sheltered his whole life, hot in pursuit of the servant girl he has fallen in love with, he finds himself caught up in a social order torn between extremes of wealth and poverty, feudal hierarchy and peasant revolts, ecclesiastical corruption and monastic piety, gross injustices and boundless mercy.

The mid-fourteenth century was a time not only of burgeoning towns, majestic cathedrals, and nascent universities, but also of debauchery and violence, the Black Death and Inquisition, torture and ordeals. In his encounters with noblemen and peasants, alchemists and hermits, monks and heretics, knights and revolutionaries, prostitutes and miscreants from the medieval underworld, Justin comes to realize that he is entirely on his own as he confronts his personal moral failings and struggles to find faith in a world where God no longer seems to exist.

Richard Evanoff is professor of intercultural communication at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, Japan. He holds a PhD in philosophy from Lancaster University in the UK and is the author of numerous publications in intercultural ethics and environmental ethics, including the book *Bioregionalism and Global Ethics* (2011). He is particularly interested in crosscultural dialogue on Western and Asian philosophy and religion, and is also active in literary circles in Tokyo as a poet, writer, and editor.



What inspired you to write the novel?

As a college student I became totally disillusioned with Western philosophy and religion and eventually came to Japan, where I still live, to study Zen and Asian spirituality. Along the way I kept encountering remarks by Carl Jung, Vivekananda, and others urging people to seek the truth in their own religious traditions while still being open to what is valuable in other traditions. The book was a way of me going back to the mystical tradition of the West to find connections with the spirituality of the East.

So that's why you set the novel in medieval Europe.

Right. The Middle Ages is a fascinating period. The feudal and ecclesiastical systems had solidified their power over the whole of society, yet there were also the first stirrings of new ways of thinking that would eventually lead to the Reformation and the Renaissance. Mystics at the time were attempting to rediscover an experiential faith that was not subservient to Church dogma and would empower people to overcome domination and oppression in both its religious and political forms. While not everything the mystics taught is of equal value, there is much in their approach that is still relevant for our present time when people are increasingly losing trust in religious, social, and political institutions.

What exactly is mysticism?

Mysticism stands at the intersection between contemplation and social justice. It's not about feeling good or having spiritual highs, but about personal and social transformation. We are born again into a new life, which enables us to become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. As the medieval texts *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Theologica Germanica* teach us, it is not humanism but rather letting go of our ego-centeredness to participate something larger than ourselves, which we variously understand and try to express with woefully inadequate terms such as "God," "Brahman," "Tao," "absolute nothingness," "the flow of the universe," or some such.

How exactly does medieval mysticism speak to the present?

Christianity is currently suffering from an identity crisis. On the one hand, there is a retreat back into an antiquated, literalist version of the faith that is irreconcilable with a modern scientific, anti-authoritarian outlook. On the other hand, there has been aggressive opposition to organized religion on the part of both militant atheists and those who have left established churches to become "spiritual but not religious." Mysticism attempts to break through this polarization by suggesting that religion is not about supposedly infallible beliefs, which deserve to be vigorously debated, but about peace, joy, love, and forgiveness, which can be shared among everyone despite our philosophical differences.

How are these themes treated in the novel?

When the main character, Justin, flees the sheltered life of his father's comfortable estate to pursue the servant girl he has fallen in love with, his eyes are opened to a world of poverty, corruption, social hierarchy, and gross injustices. Attempting to deal with his own moral failings and crisis of faith, Justin meets an assorted cast of monks and anchorites, alchemists and scholars, hermits and heretics, revolutionaries and charlatans who offer him often conflicting advice about how to move forward on his spiritual journey. While the novel tells what I hope is an engaging story about Justin's encounters with peasant revolts, the medieval underworld, the Black Death, and the Inquisition, it also includes a number of dialogues which tacitly explore the tremendous spiritual and doctrinal diversity both within the Christian tradition, as well as between the Western and non-Western traditions. Rather than argue for a particular point of view, the novel simply sets out a variety of perspectives for readers to consider and make up their own minds about.

What's the anarchist connection?

I'm fairly convinced that Jesus' nonviolent alternative to the Roman Empire can be properly classified as anarchist. When the earliest Christian communities and later monastic orders committed themselves to sharing everything in common and giving to each according to their need, it wasn't a Marxist program to violently overthrow the government and institute a dictatorship of the dispossessed, but a peaceful attempt to create autonomous communities based on mutual aid. Tolstoy took the title of his book on Christian anarchism from Luke 17:21: "The kingdom of God is within you." God's realm is not a place we go to after we die, but something we experience here and now. If we are led by the spirit, the law is written in our hearts; we no longer require the control of religious or political authorities.

Who are your literary influences?

One with the Father includes some sixty pages of annotations referencing allusions made in the text to a wide range of perspectives in the Western, Asian, and indigenous spiritual traditions, as well as quotations from the Old and New Testaments. The novel offers what I think is an original response to the problem of theodicy (how an all-good, all-powerful God can permit evil), as posed by Ivan in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. Another major influence was Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, in which the protagonist's spiritual quest progresses through the stages of innocence, experience, suffering, and redemption.

Is there a role for organized religion in this process?

To avoid becoming fossilized and geriatric, religious institutions could provide safe environments where people come not to be told the answers but to ask the questions. Top-down proclamations and directives, whether conservative or liberal, are divisive and alienating. The Church might see itself instead as a pluralistic community of inquirers who freely share both their beliefs and their doubts, who learn from and support each other, who widen their perspectives and grow spiritually. Discernment is simply distinguishing what

bears good fruit from what breeds discord and schisms. We may have different theories about how the sun works, but we can all walk together in its light and warmth.

How does this work cross-culturally?

The emerging church movement is opening up conversations among people from various denominations in an effort to refocus Christianity away from institutionalization, compulsion, and the status quo towards a “generous orthodoxy” founded on love and transformation. Dialogue among people from the world religions is also transitioning away from proselytizing or looking for a perennial “common core” of beliefs everyone can agree with to an interspirituality which acknowledges diversity but allows us to learn from other religions and, perhaps, to integrate insights from those traditions into our own.

How do you work all of these ideas into a novel? It sounds more like a philosophical treatise.

Well, have a look! I’ve been told by people who have read the book that it’s both a page-turner and a super-easy introduction to a wide range of ancient ideas with contemporary relevance. Personally I think it would make a great movie!

The sun was beginning to set. A single faint star appeared in the azure sky. Justin thought: I am but one grain of sand in a vast desert, one drop of water in the endless ocean, one star out of the trillions. Who am I that God should find me significant? And yet, despite our finitude are we not also part of the infinite? Do we not participate in the eternal dance of the universe?

“Might I ask you one more question?” Justin said to the abbot.

“Yes, but we must return to the abbey soon. It’s getting dark and chilly. Plus, you have chores to attend to and I must prepare for the evening vespers.”

Justin turned so that he was facing the abbot directly.

“You have said that the power of God is everywhere,” Justin began. “But I am so weak and helpless and have no confidence whatsoever. I feel like I am nothing more than a senseless rock.”

“You have a very low opinion of yourself, Justin.”

“Yet how might I find the divine energy within myself? Would it not be much easier for me to simply devote myself to God and pray for his assistance, since I have no power of my own?”

The abbot pulled his frock more tightly around him, then replied, “There are two very different approaches to religion, Justin. One is the doty way of devotion, in which we put our faith in a make-believe God created in our own image whom we then mistake for reality, a God whose existence we must always doubt because he is only a figment of our imagination. Piety is the way of those who are spiritually impoverished, who, because they are unable to find the power of God within themselves, think of God as a being that exists outside of and above them, whom they then bow down before and worship, praising the Lord because they can find nothing within themselves worth praising.”

“And what is the other approach?”

“The way of actualization in which we are empowered by the God within. We ourselves are icons made in God’s image. God engraves himself in us. Any images of God we engrave in our own minds are nothing but counterfeits. We already have the light of God within us and can perceive it directly. This illumination cannot be doubted and requires no faith, for it is self-evident. It is not something we understand intellectually but something we experience. Instead of trying to gain knowledge about God, we should seek to become acquainted with him.”

“Religion is not needed?”

“Indeed, Christianity is not a religion, but a way of life. The trappings of religion are totally unnecessary. As the iconoclasts have so graciously reminded us, we should never confuse the symbols we concoct to express our experience of the divine with the divine itself. If we sink into the cesspool of religiosity, it will only make us stink!”

Without looking back, the abbot pointed his thumb over his shoulder to the monastery behind them and said, “The sole purpose of the lofty architecture of our edifices and cathedrals, the beauty of our paintings, sculptures, glasswork, and icons, the haunting music of our liturgy, the poetry of our litanies and prayers, the resplendence of our vestments and engravings, our vessels and utensils, our altars and baptismal fonts, our rituals and ceremonies, is not to draw attention to themselves as aesthetic ornaments, but to edify us. We ourselves are works of art created by the divine.”

Praise for *One with the Father: A Novel of Mysticism, Heresy, and Rebellion in the Middle Ages*

“If you enjoy meaningful and detailed novels with intriguing plots that make you think rather than simply entertain, you are going to love this one! Situated in medieval England, the novel describes one man’s struggle to navigate his way through competing religious and cultural beliefs in a complex and rapidly changing society, eventually reaching a belief system he can live with and die for. A unique novel that is fascinating to read.”

—Tony Boys, retired university professor

“Argue not concerning God, said Walt Whitman, but with a scholar’s heft and a poet’s touch, Richard Evanoff argues ingeniously in this disputatious, philosophical novel. The overlapping of the Buddha and St. Francis backstories in the hero Justin’s life brings East-West concerns into relief, and the reader is alert to the dialectical possibilities it raises for the sympathetic mind.”

—Alan Botsford, author of *Dreamer*

“A boy foreseen at birth as a future religious leader, raised in strict seclusion in a medieval English fiefdom by an authoritarian father, breaks away—seeking ‘to know God.’ Richard Evanoff draws on myriad Western and Eastern philosophical/spiritual sources to debate the meaning of personal salvation, social justice, and political autonomy, revealing incidentally how some beliefs once dismissed as absolute heresies have metamorphosed into mainstream orthodoxies in our present era.”

—Ken Rodgers, managing editor, *Kyoto Journal*

“I highly recommend this book by Richard Evanoff. Its various twists and turns and the various religious/philosophical perspectives makes it a fascinating read.”

—David Howenstein, author of *Jumbo Jumble*

“Richard Evanoff’s writing is telling of more than a story; it is telling of life itself, of how it is for us. That is its glory. It is writing that is alive, that helps us survive.”

—Scott Watson, author of *Quake Notes*

