

Review: JAR3333

## JODI PICOULT'S NOVEL IDEAS

a book review of  
*Keeping Faith*  
by Jodi Picoult

(Avon Books, 1999)

~ AND ~

*Change of Heart*  
by Jodi Picoult

(Washington Square Press, 2008)

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"Novels about family, relationships, and love," is how bestselling author Jodi Picoult describes her books.<sup>1</sup> While it's true that Picoult's works cover these topics, in doing so they also delve into many areas of interest such as ethics, theology, and apologetics. Picoult's works are relevant beyond being simple and innocuous airport reads. Indeed, Picoult's writings present and influence ideas, but they are also influenced by current events and contemporary topics. *Nineteen Minutes* (2007), for instance, is about a school shooting and the aftermath of those events, while her latest work, *House Rules*, turns to the topic of autism, and purportedly her next book will address homosexuality.

Of particular interest to Christians are Picoult's views of religion. "I really believe that the root of so many huge problems has been religion," says Picoult, "and drawing the line in the sand between those who believe what you do and those who don't—just look around the world to see the ramifications of what Irenaeus did by deciding what constituted Christian faith, and what didn't."<sup>2</sup>

Having published seventeen novels to date, Picoult's works have also made their way to television and the movie theater. Television adaptations include *The Pact*, *Plain Truth*, and *The Tenth Circle*, while Picoult's 2004 book, *My Sister's Keeper*, made it to the big screen in 2009. For the purposes of this review, two books were selected: *Keeping Faith* (1999) and *Change of Heart* (2008). The former is of particular interest given the current state of atheism that is openly hostile to Christianity, while the latter addresses ethical issues and questions regarding the New Testament Gospels in opposition to Gnostic writings. There is a connection between both books in that a main character from *Keeping Faith*, Ian Fletcher, is also featured in *Change of Heart*.

*Keeping Faith* is about a little girl, Faith White, who begins to have visions of a "guard," later referred to as God. There are several unusual circumstances regarding Faith's visions and later stigmata, mainly the fact that neither Faith nor her family is Christian (Faith and her mother are Jewish) and that the figure who appears to Faith is female, raising questions regarding God being depicted as male or female. Of more interest to atheist character Ian Fletcher is debunking Faith's claims, stigmata, and even

alleged miraculous healings. Eager to boost the ratings of his television show, self-proclaimed “teleatheist” Fletcher takes a road trip to the quiet New Hampshire town of Canaan, where most of the events take place.

Fletcher is a particularly interesting character, especially in light of the rise of the so-called new atheism. Raised a Baptist, Fletcher turns to atheism as an adult and is eager to debunk any religious claims he encounters. His default stance is that religion, Christianity in particular, is false and harmful. Consequently, Fletcher hardly has an open mind about religious claims, instead presupposing that metaphysical materialism is true.

While Fletcher fancies himself an erudite debunker, his reasoning, like the reasoning of many contemporary atheist writers, is often flawed. For instance, Fletcher offers clever analogies meant to demonstrate the inferiority of faith, but in reality his analogies are false. He says, “Sure, lots of people believe in God. Lots of people used to believe the world was flat, too” (p. 29). Later we read, “Ian’s offhand comparison of devout Catholics to toddlers who believed that a Band-Aid itself cures the wound was hotly debated” (31). In both instances, however, Fletcher has committed the fallacy of the false analogy.

In his first statement, he is arguing that simply because lots of people believe something does not make it true. This is a true statement. Majority does not decide what is true; truth exists as it is regardless of how many or how few hold to the true position. But to compare belief in God to belief in a flat world—an idea discarded on the basis of demonstrable truth—is false. It is one thing to prove the world is round, but quite another to make the case for or against the existence of God. The shape of the earth is a clearly scientific and empirical proof, while making the case for the existence of God is a matter of metaphysical and philosophical reasoning. Similarly, the character’s remark about Catholics being like toddlers who believe a bandage (religion) will cure them is false in that many intelligent, reasonable individuals adhere to Christian beliefs not because they are deceived or misunderstanding toddlers, but because they believe there is compelling and reasonable evidence to support the existence of God and the reality of Christ. This is hardly toddler-like blind faith or misunderstanding.

Fletcher is also staunch in his belief in the so-called “God of the gaps” approach that some people take: “People believe in God because they don’t have any other explanation for things that happen” (33). But this is simply not true and, as is often the case, misrepresents the relationship between science and faith. Scientism is the belief that science can be applied to every area of knowledge, even philosophical and religious, and is the supreme approach to understanding. However, this is not true. Even if science were to set forth explanations of all the scientific questions regarding human life and the universe, it would still be unable to address rudimentary metaphysical questions such as the meaning of life.

As to questions in *Keeping Faith* regarding the gender of God, some Christian characters are forthright in stating that God is beyond gender. Being noncorporeal, this is certainly true of God. Throughout the Bible, nevertheless, God has chosen to reveal Himself as Father and the Son, Jesus, was born as a male into a patriarchal culture. The main point of critics of the view of God as male in the book, such as the MotherGod Society, has to do with oppression of women and women’s rights. A cursory examination of Christianity and Christian history, however, reveals that Christians have always been at the forefront of championing equal rights for women, as well as elevating woman far beyond competing cultures and religions.<sup>3</sup>

*Change of Heart* shifts to ethical questions and matters regarding the advent of Christianity in light of competing ideas, particularly Gnosticism. On the ethical spectrum, the primary question in the book relates to organ donation. In this case, a murderer on death row, Shay Bourne, offers to donate his heart to the daughter of the people he killed. Of particular interest beyond ethical questions in *Change of Heart* are matters regarding Gnosticism and the Gospel of Thomas. One character, Ian Fletcher again, claims there were “52 gospels found in 1945 in Egypt” (314). Fletcher goes on to state of the Gnostics, “They had their own *gospels*...The New Testament—in particular, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—were the ones that orthodoxy chose to uphold...the Orthodox Christian Church felt threatened by the Gnostics. They called their gospels heresy, and the Nag Hammadi texts were hidden for two thousand years” (315).

Unfortunately, the statements made by the Fletcher character are far from accurate. Like *The Da Vinci Code* and its outlandish claims regarding Christianity, *Change of Heart* is full of misinformation

regarding the Gnostic Gospels, with the likely source being Elaine Pagels, cited by Picoult as her main research resource on the subject. There were not fifty-two “gospels” competing for inclusion in the New Testament canon. Moreover, the Gospel of Thomas is hardly a gospel in the sense that it is not comparable to the style and structure of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Thomas is more a collection of sayings than anything, some orthodox and some quite unorthodox. In reality, Gnosticism is a corruption of Christianity, which, most scholars agree, existed prior to it. Regarding Christians “hiding” such material, the very reality of Irenaeus’ work *Against Heresies* should be enough to demonstrate that Christians were not systematically suppressing Gnostic ideas, since Irenaeus wrote about such ideas openly.<sup>4</sup>

In Picoult’s defense, the points cited in this review do highlight areas where there is tension with traditional Christianity. However, Picoult’s books generally offer a number of competing points of view from the perspectives of different characters. As creative license dictates, an author may in fact represent ideas the author does not necessarily agree with in order to create tension or craft more realistic characters. Picoult herself appears open to various religious and spiritual ideas, but is generally noncommittal, coming across as open to belief but something of an agnostic on the matter. “I still don’t have all the answers about God,” she explains. “I don’t think any of us will, until it’s too late for us to be able to share them.”<sup>5</sup>

This perspective, however, results in a deficient epistemology (theory of knowledge). The agnostic position on metaphysical knowledge is, at best, a temporary place for the sincere seeker. There is simply too much at stake to remain so noncommittal when it comes to ideas and their potentially monumental ramifications. Granted, Christians should not claim to “have all the answers about God,” but we do have many answers, particularly answers to the big questions of life. This is not because Christians are privy to any esoteric knowledge, such as the Gnostics claimed to have, but because God exists and has chosen to reveal Himself not only through human conscience and creation, but through His Word and His Son.

As a bestselling author, Picoult’s words reach millions of readers. While it is at times refreshing to see such candid discussion and religious ideas set forth in Picoult’s writings, it is unfortunate that some of her works perpetuate false ideas about Christianity and the Gnostic writings. How do we respond to writings like those by Picoult and other bestselling authors? We respond, first of all, with “gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15), while at the same time setting forth truth to combat errors. It is necessary to move beyond merely stating that some idea is wrong or questionable and also offer evidence and reasons to support our perspective, otherwise literary caricatures of Christians as simpletons who take blind leaps of faith may indeed become more accurate than they should.

—Robert Velarde

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## NOTES

- 1 Jodi Picoult Web site, <http://www.jodipicoult.com/>.
- 2 Picoult believes Irenaeus “was trying to codify the early Christian church by deciding what was ‘real’ gospel and what was heresy.” See <http://www.jodipicoult.com/JodiPicoult.html#questions>.
- 3 See, for instance, Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), chapter 4, and Douglas Groothuis, *On Jesus* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), chapter 7.
- 4 For a response to the Gospel of Thomas, see chapter 3 of Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).
- 5 <http://www.jodipicoult.com/keeping-faith-chat.html>.