
"Gods Without Men" and Holy Places

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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I like holy places. And, I like exploring our human limits of space and time. For me, that exploration is the religious quest; and the way we pay attention in physical places is what makes those places holy. So it is that I have read *Gods Without Men*, by a self-identified atheist, Hari Kunzru, as an insight into the spiritual search that seems common to all humanity.

In what [Doug Coupland calls a new literary genre \(NY Times, March 8, 2012\)](#), Kunzru's book is about many things: space and time, Wall Street excess, autism, cultural differences, UFO cults, the desert of the American West, even love. But it is also about one place: a (fictitious) three-fingered rock formation somewhere around the Mojave Desert. Kunzru's characters, some of whom are human and some of whom are not, arrive at this formation during different historical times. Coyotes, Native Americans, Spanish missionary priests, UFO cults, aged rock musicians, hippies, American military personnel, all end up there. But the characters whose journeys are most studied are a young married Manhattan couple, one of whom is American Jewish and the other of whom is immigrant Punjabi; they have a severely autistic son.

Of course, I will not reveal too much of the story. In fact, one might debate with me what the story actually is. Perhaps the story is how one character, Schmidt, understood his work: "The shape of his project was becoming clear: how to connect the mysteries of technology with those of the spirit" (*Gods Without Men*, Kunzru, page 11). Or maybe the story is about how one character describes some New York art in a glass case: "There's a tradition that says the world has shattered, that what once was whole and beautiful is now just scattered fragments. Much is irreparable, but a few of these fragments contain faint traces of the former state of things, and if you find them and uncover the sparks hidden inside, perhaps at last you'll piece together the fallen world. This is just a glass case of wreckage. But it has presence. It's redemptive. It is part of something larger than itself." (page 137).

Later the same character, a Wall Street quantitative analyst, says: "There are certain things you can't look at directly. You need to trick them into revealing themselves. That's what we're doing with [this financial model]. We're juxtaposing things, listening for echoes. Parapraxes. Cosmic slips of the tongue. They're the key to the locked door. They'll help us discover it. The face of God. What else would we be looking for?" (page 138).

Ultimately, I believe the story line can be reduced to a question that one earnest local girl asks the visiting musician: "Tell me something," she said. "Are you out here looking for lights?" (page 28). Yes, these characters, like all of us, are out there looking for lights. Wherever we are, right now, we are looking for lights. Some places, over time, have become sources of light for us. I call those places holy. They are holy because so many of us, of wildly various perspectives and types, have found truth and light there.

Maybe you know where I am going here. Yes, I am going to Church. The Church is holy because people have found holiness here, generation after generation. For Kunzru's characters, the holy place is an odd three-fingered rock formation (the priest inevitably interprets it as the Trinity). Again, Kunzru, the author, has publicly identified himself as atheist; but he provides quite a friendly study for how people come to identify holy places.

For Christians trying to be faithful in the twenty-first century, Church will be our place of re-discovery. We will go there when all the other tricks of the world - both ancient and modern - have gradually failed to satisfy us. Like the characters in *Gods Without Men*, none of us is perfect. In fact, we are rather mistaken, dirty, and forlorn. Nevertheless, the Holy finds us. The Holy finds us when we reach certain limits. In the Christian Church, we witness to that search, we witness to those limits, and we witness to a love that transcends time and space.

"She felt like she'd been destroyed and rebuilt again. She felt, if she had to give a name to her feeling, symbolic, as if she now stood for something greater and more significant than herself, stood for the knowledge of limits, was - no, not God's representative, nothing so grandiose or egotistical - just one of His signposts, a person in the crowd whose life story pointed toward Him, showed the way out of the vanities of this world and into reverence for the unknowable, impenetrable beyond" (page 359).