Sinéad O’Connor reflection – Kellie Turtle

I want to start by saying that I have some discomfort about speaking tonight. As I tried to write these words over the last week or so I found it difficult and I put that down to two things. First, I think this reflection needs a disclaimer to note that I’m reluctant to make too many claims about the life and legacy of Sinead O’Connor/Shuhada’ Sadaqat. I said very little publicly in the days after she died, even as my social media was overflowing with commentary, as I am aware she was a complex and multi-dimensional person. She did not like to be pinned down. In interviews when a journalist would posit any kind of conclusion about her, she tended to answer with ‘no I wouldn’t say that…’. And so my disclaimer is that what I’m going to share this evening is based on the tiniest glimpses and fragments of the wonder of who she was. I want to reflect on the things she inspired in me. I may make some tentative claims about her along the way but I do that in the full knowledge that if she was here she’d probably set me straight. The second source of my discomfort I think comes from the fact that I have many unresolved and half-processed emotions in response to her death. It has pulled things out of the depths of me that are messy. And she still feels too close for me to know what to do with them. My mind is still asking how can she be gone? How can we have let her go?

I’m in a particular age bracket of women on this island who are having a very specific experience of the loss of Sinead O’Connor. We are about a decade younger than her. We were exiting childhood when she first appeared on our TV screens and blasted through our radios turned up full blast D90 cassette tapes poised and ready to hit record when her songs came on. She was a big sister we were in awe of. She was the girl who got expelled from school who didn’t regret it for a second. She blew our minds and blew our hearts wide open. I don’t think we had any clue what mark she was making on the world at that time, too young to really grasp the powers that she chose to wrestle with. But we nervously rode the wake she left in her path and stepped into possibilities we only later realised had come from her. We related to her in a truly confusing way. She was simultaneously the most alien creature we had ever encountered and entirely one of us. She rejected the rules of womanhood but embodied the feminine in the fullest possible way. She had no interest in being a pop star but stardom coalesced around her captivating talent and artistry. When I think about these contradictions, I’m not actually sure Sinead ever set out to be the rebel she was cast as but rather her authenticity meant that she embodied her roles and identities with an alarming freedom. It was that natural freedom in her that felt so threatening to the gatekeepers of social norms and hierarchies.

I’m particularly interested in how this freedom manifested in her relationship with religion. As a fierce critic of the institutional apparatus of the catholic church and its cultural power in Ireland, Sinead represents an anti-religious voice for many, particularly for many Irish women. Her world-famous act of defiance against the authority of the catholic leadership became the defining symbol of a time that we look back on now as the beginning of a secularizing movement in Ireland. For many people she became the face of that. But if you listen to her narrative you cannot miss the fact that she presents herself not as an outsider to religion but as a dedicated insider, reclaiming her faith from the gatekeepers who used it to oppress and control. When asked by a journalist about how much she had upset the catholic church she responded, ‘well it’s very important to upset them. That’s the work of the holy spirit’. She tackled those who thought she wanted to bring down the church by saying, ‘I don’t believe the answer is to not have a church. I think the answer is to get rid of the people who don’t believe in god and fill it with people who do believe in god in a more honest way’.

It was her deep religiosity and intimate connection to the divine that gave her criticism its power. She remained deeply spiritual her whole life, with a religious worldview that was rooted in both an embodied, emotional experience of the divine in her heart and soul, and an intellectual pursuit of ideas and concepts that make sense of the world. When she reverted to islam in 2018 she said, ‘if you were to study the Quran you’d realize you had been a muslim all your life and didn’t realise it’ and called this progression of her faith, the ‘natural conclusion of any intelligent theologian’s journey’. And from an emotional and spiritual perspective she said it felt like home.

I thought of Sinead recently when I was reading a book just published by American journalist Sarah Stankorb called Disobedient Women. It tells the stories of many of the women from evangelical and fundamentialist Christian churches in the US who have, over the past 10-15 years started a movement of survivors of child abuse within these highly patriarchal and deeply misogynist religious communities. The Southern Baptist Convention, America’s 2nd largest Christian denomination after the catholic church, its largest protestant denomination, was home to many of these women whose lives were shaped in every possible way by the power wielded by the male leaders. The book charts how they began to tell their stories online as blogs first took off in the early 2000s, eventually connecting and forming survivor communities that gave them enough strength in numbers to present concrete challenges to their churches. Legal cases, demands for independent inquires, pressure on the leaders to create better safeguarding policies. In the book’s more intimate moments where Stankorb sensitively recounts the personal pain at the heart of her subjects’ stories, one thing that struck me was how many of the women felt most hurt and anger over the fact that the abuse they experienced robbed them of their faith. The faith that they loved and that had been the centre of their spiritual lives and sense of identity was so distorted and mis-appropriated by their abusers and the institutions that protected them, that some found they couldn’t return to it again, in any form. For many however, it was their fierce and ongoing relationship with God that drove them to stand up and fight for accountability. And as everything else they thought was certain began to fall away in the aftermath of the abuse and cover ups, their faith was the one thing that kept them afloat, albeit in a very different form to the rigid legalistic belief system they once knew. Christa Brown, one of the very first women to tell her story and challenge the Southern Baptist Convention publicly, uses this incredibly expansive language to describe what her faith is like now: ‘It’s like I’m on this rag-taggy little raft in the middle of an endless ocean, and that is my ocean of faith’. Stankorb adds, ‘The vastness of her faith used to scare her, but somehow the storms have made her grow comfortable with the bigness and the mystery’.

Women like Christa and Sinead are often painted as enemies of the church but what we are really witnessing are people who are determined to rescue it. People who are labouring with God to wrestle their faith from the hands of those who have proven they cannot be trusted. Their work can feel chaotic and messy at times but if it’s underpinned by integrity and a faithfulness to the blueprint of love and liberation that is our best guess at what matters most to God, then I think what we are observing is an authentic expression of faith created outside of the established boundaries.

These examples move me to pay attention to what is happening outside of those boundaries here, in this place and at this time. In sociology we have a theoretical framework for analysing this phenomenon. It’s called lived religion and it comes from the disciplines of religious anthropology and history. It conceives of religion as something people create in our day to day lives. It rejects the idea that religion is defined by official religious institutions, elites and gatekeepers and instead pays attention to the discursive processes by which ordinary believers create and recreate meaning in our practices, our traditions and our communities. Scholar Hervieu-Leger, calls religion a ‘chain of memory’, and sees it as something that evolves through collective memory in an iterative process that responds to the reality of our social and cultural context. It is embodied and relational. You could say it is God with us.

So if survivors of the worst abuses of official religion are creating a new iteration of faith in their own lives and communities, what does it look like? What values and dynamics characterize the lived religion of women like Sinead and Christa? Well I think there’s plenty there to be explored. There’s the focus on not losing yourself to some man-made claim of authority over you. When Sinead spoke in the media about her journey with Islam, she noted that just as with Christianity, there were things she embraced and identified with and things that she didn’t. Her discernment came from always centring the importance of personal integrity and maintaining moral authority over your own body and destiny. Two things that were definitely not present in the religion that had shaped her youth. There’s the commitment to anti-oppressive practice, the belief that faith should always make you more of who you are, never less. This is particularly impactful for women and LGBTQ people from whom religion has traditionally required a willingness to squeeze yourself down small enough to be accepted. God help anyone that tried to make Sinead O’Connor be less of who she was. She inspired a generation of young people in this place to live big and loud and best of all, she declared confidently that this is what God wants for all of us, she believed that this is how she was called to use her voice.

But the most important feature, I think, of this prophetic emergence of faith from the margins is the complete and utter rejection of any kind of shame. What I have always found most remarkable about Sinead O'Connor is the fact that when this 21-year-old was thrust into the spotlight, microphones ready to transmit what she had to say to the world, she had already, at such a young age worked out that the things she had experienced in her life were not her fault. She understood the outworkings of oppressive religion in her own family and in Ireland as a nation. She could trace the trauma scars in her soul back through those of her mother and her mother before her. She was able to process the enormous impact of these structures of oppression in her life without disappearing under the sheer weight of them. And the key to that was right there in a line of the song that first brought her to the world's attention: I don't know no shame.

I can't emphasise enough just how important this is because the presence or absence of shame in a person's sense of self is a matter of life or death. It's shame that keeps us small and quiet. It's shame that kept Christa Brown from holding the pastor who raped her accountable until 40 years later. And Ireland is a country that has been held to ransom by shame for generations, especially us women. It is so deeply entrenched in the cultural and religious expectations of what being a woman means in this place that we have internalised it, feeling its contours in every part of our bodies and minds. So that when Sinead danced around, light on her feet and light in her eyes singing that she did not know shame… it was everything that this country needed to hear. That she, completely a woman, completely a child of God, completely a survivor of this broken place knew no shame was revolutionary. Look at her with the head shaved and the absolute cheek of her. Has she no shame? No, she does not.