THE MYSTERY OF FAITH

Jon Fosse in conversation with Eskil Skjeldal

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PAGAN: Who is this God you worship?
CHRISTIAN: I don't know.
PAGAN: How can you worship with such earnestness something you don't know anything about?
CHRISTIAN: I worship because I do not know.

Nicolas of Cusa, *De Deo Abscondito* (On the Hidden God)

So you want to begin our conversation with a quote?

Yes, I thought that would be a good way to start. Also an epigraph shows that this is a hybrid book—while it's based on our conversations, I've rewritten all of my answers, and a lot of them will probably sound written, like little essays; others will sound more spoken. For example, I sometimes quote from memory, but here I'm giving the Nicolas of Cusa quote as a full citation, an epigraph.

Has there always been a religious element in your writing?

It's possible, maybe even since my first book, the novel *Red, Black*, which I wrote when I was twenty. I remember that in my madness I thought that the nameless protagonist, who ends up killing himself, was a kind of sacrificial lamb. A crazy thought. But it probably grew out of a kind of longing for faith, or a feeling that the novel should have some kind of greater meaning, should contain some kind of peace, despite everything.

But I can't say that I was a believer as a child, and I certainly wasn't when I wrote that novel.

My parents were and are believers, in their quiet West-Norwegian way, and I remember my mother saying evening prayers with my sister and me, and that we read from the Bible before meals. A glossy picture of an angel was glued to the headboards of our cribs, and I got so sick of it that I tried as hard as I could to tear it off, but it wouldn't come off entirely. I can still see clearly before my eyes that half-ripped angel.

I went to Sunday school like the other kids in the neighborhood, and there was also a subject in school at that time called Christian Knowledge. I also went to a couple of Christian summer camps.

Did you wish you had faith?

I don't remember wishing for any faith. There was something fake about these Christian people—I'm not talking about my parents now—something I found repellent. So when I was old enough I left the Norwegian State Church. Everything there was just too stupid. These Christian people trying to somehow force me, and other people, to believe in something that's totally preposterous, that went against all ordinary reason, and if I didn't believe it, if all I did was use a little common sense, then I would go to hell where I would be punished for all eternity and burn and be tortured and in pain, while they, the saved, would be having a good time up in their heaven. I remember I thought: How did they know they were going to heaven, how could they be so sure? And if heaven means you have to be with these Christian people then isn't hell better? At least there'd be people there who spoke honestly and acted like normal people. Or as the young Georg Johannesen put it in a poem: "It's so cold in the cathedral, Mother, / But in the pub on the corner there's a light on every table." (Recited from memory, those may not be the exact words.)

After a while I experienced more truth, more genuine human life and kindness, with my drinking buddies than in Christian contexts. They were much closer to the truth, and even, in a way, closer to Christianity. The man from Nazareth wasn't nice, he didn't spend his time with the people who were the Christians of his day—Jesus was a rebel, with no patience for pussyfooting and sugarcoating, and the people he chose as his apostles weren't God's favorite children either, they were tax collectors and sinners. He constantly emphasized how he rejected the credulous people who followed the prevailing laws, with the phrase: "You have heard that it was said... But I tell you..."

Should we be cautious when it comes to children and faith?

Yes, don't push anything on them, any belief, or try to persuade them of anything. You may have the best intentions in the world but the results will often be the opposite. I don't think it's right to bring little children to mass. They disturb other people and are upset themselves. For me, a crying child can ruin the whole mass. And little children don't need mass. They already are a mass. If there's one thing the Gospels say clearly it's that little children have the kingdom of God within them. That's said again and again.

But of course it may well be that I had so much resistance to both the State Church and the Christian types just as much because of me as because of them.

What is this rebellious side you have?

It probably has to do with some kind of desire for truth, and with my dislike for anything affected or fake, and maybe for anything habitual or customary in general, anything that's trying too hard to be something, or anyway trying to be something it's not. Anything obviously artificial, on the other hand—anything theatrical or overdramatic—I like, both in a person and in the culture.

But when everyone sits there and smiles and agrees with everyone else and never thinks a single thought about what they're agreeing about—that really rubs me the wrong way. Christian meetings can be like that, and so can so-called "cultural" gatherings—this consensus and conformity in cultural life can become totally intolerable. Not least in the theater. In a way, bad theater is precisely this kind of consensus, built on well-trodden conventions. The same is true of most novels, too, with mysteries and crime fiction as the most obvious example. To tell the truth, the same thing is also true of a lot of contemporary poetry. Not to mention politics—that's a system of consensus. All of business life works like that. But I completely

avoid it. I'm not at all someone who works or could work in business. I don't want to say that consensus isn't necessary, or that business organizations aren't necessary, of course not. But still, I myself am useless in such contexts. Some people might say that I'm shirking my obligations. There's probably some truth in that.

Did you have any spiritual experiences as a child?

I have to tell you that when I was seven years old I had a bad accident and cut open an artery. I lost a lot of blood, and to this day I remember sitting in the car as they drove me to the doctor's and looking back at my house and feeling sure that I was seeing it for the last time, and there was a kind of golden light above the house, above everything, above me too, and it was like I was inside this bright golden cloud somehow. It was so peaceful, so beautiful. A lay preacher who was living in my grandparents' house at the time sat next to me holding a sling around my wrist, pressing hard, then loosening his grip a little so that the blood could circulate. He'd had some kind of training so he knew how to do that. And I could see both him and myself from the outside, in that golden glow, a kind of almost invisible shimmering, a kind of thick blanket of opaque golden sprinkles, a kind of gentle rain, a golden cloud, or something, and I both saw it from the outside and was in it.

This experience, which was really a kind of near-death experience, shaped me deeply. Of course you might say that the whole thing was a hallucination, and surely you'd be right. But still this hallucination entered into me and stayed there and never went away. For me, it became maybe the most foundational experience of my life. No doubt because I was so young too. So for me the experience was true, even if I hallucinated it.

And it taught me something, practically the opposite of what they were trying to make me believe in, I started to think later—something opposed to the Christianity

I was encountering. I had felt this truth with my own body, my own senses, it was a truth that had nothing to do with words, and definitely nothing to do with salvation or hell or behaving in this way not that way.

Having this earlier experience in the background—it's probably fair to call it a "mystical" experience—was part of why I felt it was so important for me to leave the Norwegian State Church. As soon as I was old enough. I wrote a letter to the minister and said I didn't want to be a member of the State Church anymore.

Because there, in the Church, or in the Christianity of the meeting houses as I had experienced it—at least in those pragmatic literal Lutheran Strandebarm meeting houses—there was no mystery. The farthest I can remember the minister there ever reaching for a figurative interpretation of anything was when he said that in Jesus's day the wine might have been alcohol-free. Right.

Did you think at the time that this experience might have had something to do with God?
God or a god. It was an experience just like any other. And it was somehow, well, a so-called "supernatural" experience, but it wouldn't be true to say that I thought it had anything to do with God, or to the extent it did, it certainly didn't have anything to do with the god I'd been taught to believe in. I'm careful about using the word God, and already back then I was too.

Was this mystical experience later important for you as a writer too?
I am absolutely certain that what happened to me as a seven-year-old was what made me become a writer, and that it's why I write the way I write. In my plays there is always a kind of outside perspective, a bit like how I saw myself when I was almost bleeding to death. And actually, that outside perspective is in everything else I've written too—in all my fiction, every literary work.

Your first two novels, Red, Black *and* Closed Guitar, *are dark, filled with despair, powerlessness, close to madness. Tell me about this intense despair?*

I still think that when literature is heavy with despair, it so to speak points at its opposite: at peace, God's peace. For example, I feel that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Joyce's *Ulysses*—two of the great modernist literary monuments that everyone has to read, you might say, or at least has to know about, as part of literary culture—are works whose darkness turns into a kind of silent light. *Waiting for Godot* must be the most Christian modern drama ever written, even if Beckett probably saw himself an atheist, but he liked to say he was brought up as a Quaker.

And I certainly don't know of any work that shows the meaningless emptiness of everyday life fixated on sex and the body better than *Ulysses* does. But it does so through incomparable formal mastery.

It is a revelatory book, an epiphany. And it was precisely Joyce, the fervent anti-Catholic, who carried that term over into literature. I've also read that Joyce changed his attitude toward Catholicism at the end of his life.

Something similar can be said about Kafka too. But in his work, for example in *The Trial*—probably the greatest of the books I've mentioned; I don't actually like the *Ulysses* type of mammoth artworks as demanding as the bible, I prefer short novels to long ones—what he presents is the inability of people to recognize God's closeness, and so God becomes the invisible and incomprehensible law, taken allegorically of course, and life becomes merely brutal, incomprehensible existence. But Kafka's work is luminous, too, in its dark way.

Would this be "the shining darkness," to use the phrase that Leif Zern chose as the title of his book about your work?

That's another way to try to speak of it—a metaphorical way, of course. The phrase is a quote from my play *A Summer's Day*. And it's actually a quote from Meister Eckhart. Or maybe it's not a quotation, since I only came across it in Eckhart many years after I wrote it. I might have come across it sooner, but back then the Grotto* was being renovated, and my Eckhart books, along with most of my worldly belongings, were in storage, in a warehouse belonging to the Museum of Contemporary Art, of all places.

Another way to think about it is that there is a darkness that stands guard over the light.

Would you call this shining darkness "negative mysticism"?

Yes, there might be a connection there. And this is a kind of transition from a metaphorical, literary way of putting it to a more tangible one, which says that by writing about one thing, an absence, you as it were write the opposite thing too—you point negatively at the other thing, a unified, undifferentiated presence.

I don't think an epiphany can unfold directly. It will always show itself hidden, or negatively, or in any case through something else; it takes detours. Maybe it's fair to say that it shows itself in an allegorical way.

I have always disliked metaphors, both in plays and in fiction, because a work of literature is itself a metaphor. And metaphors within metaphors make the basic metaphor impure, in a way. But for a work of literature to be a metaphor, it has be allegorical all the way through—good literature is allegorical, that is, it means something other than itself, and this other thing comes together in a kind of whole, a

* Trans. Note: The honorary residence on the grounds of the royal palace in Oslo, awarded for life to a specific artist by the King of Norway. Fosse was awarded it in 2011.

metaphor, which can't be expressed in any other way. By saying one thing, you're also saying something else: not necessarily the opposite, as in our common understanding of irony, but something else.

In exceptional cases, maybe the mystical experience can be stated directly. I think that the end of *Morning and Evening*, when Peter takes Johannes with him away from the world, might be an example of that. Maybe.

If I may shamelessly bring up a world classic in this connection—another one of those works you need to know if you want to claim to have literary culture—the final stanzas of Dante's Divine Comedy absolutely reveal the mystical. As much as it lets itself be revealed, as Dante says. That's just an example that comes to mind, from a work that is as much a play or a novel as it is a poem.

And a remark of Wittgenstein's comes to mind as well: What cannot be said must be shown. Wittgenstein is probably best known for having said that if something cannot be said, we must keep silent about it, but he also said that what cannot be said must be shown. That's exactly what art does, isn't it? Visual art in a literal sense, but also art in language, and music too in its way. Because you can sort of hear a picture, can't you? It speaks to you, somehow, it has something to say to you. In the same way, you can see a story, and you can both see and hear a poem. So there is a kind of synesthesia in art. Or as Horace said: *Ut pictura poesis*—the picture is like poetry.

Good literature, then, reveals something that cannot be said, or shown, in any other way than exactly how it's written, there and then. It says, or shows, the unsayable. What characterizes such literature is that it can't be summarized, because then what makes it good, its literary quality, disappears.

This applies to novels as much as to any other kind of writing. But unlike a play, which has certain specific external features (a traditional play does anyway), a novel can be almost anything.

Not every kind of novel has anything to do with mysticism, or with literary quality. The vast majority of novels don't. For that reason, I myself won't call the literary prose I write in future "novels." Because a novel is only occasionally literature—most of the time it is either a trival reading experience or a modernist experiment, stuck in one mode or the other and unable to get any farther. I wouldn't want to call what I see myself writing a novel. "Prose" is good enough. Or "slow prose," as I like to say. Or else not calling it anything at all.

"*Die Sprache spricht als das Geläut der Stille*," in Martin Heidegger's words: Language speaks as the sonority of silence, or however we should translate "*Geläut*" ("sonority"). The dream is to write prose that speaks with the sound, as it were, of silence.

You've studied and read a lot of philosophy and written essays about philosophy. Has philosophy also influenced your literary writing?

Yes, maybe more than I realize. It almost seems like an author can get stuck in a certain period in their life, whether childhood or, perhaps more often, their teenage years, and that they keep going back to what they liked then, often the music and the movies.

I'm stuck a bit later, maybe in my early twenties; anyway the fact that I always go back to my intellectual heroes from then might mean that. I have nothing good or bad to say about my childhood. The same for my teenage years. And the music I listened to back then, and partly played myself—the books I read then (with some exceptions: Knut Hamsun, Tarjei Vesaas, Tor Jonsson)—I no longer have any relationship with, or if I do, I dislike them. Both the music and the literature.

It's different with my intellectual heroes from when I was in my early twenties. They've stayed with me: Beckett and Kafka in literature, Heidegger and Wittgenstein in philosophy.

That's why I thought that now, let's say about thirty years—or rather, precisely thirty years—after first encountering Heidegger, especially *Being and Time*, and Wittgenstein, I should reread these old heroes of mine. When I did, I realized I was still fascinated by the same things about them. So I probably haven't changed that much since I was a bit over twenty, which is to say, when I debuted as a writer.

Obviously I don't understand everything about Heidegger or Wittgenstein, I know too little of the history of philosophy and too little formal logic for that; also, Heidegger constantly quotes from both Greek and Latin, and I've studied a little Latin, but of course just a little. But I imagine I get their main point, what they're basically trying to say. Or at least I get something that matters to me. I might end up talking more about Heidegger and Wittgenstein in this conversation than I should. So be it. Or maybe we should think of them as other participants in our conversation.

What is there in Heidegger's philosophy that speaks to you?

It's hard to say. But I think you need to understand Heidegger a little like the way you understand music. Or poetry. We would have to say, in any case, that both Heidegger and Wittgenstein are "poet–philosophers."

Maybe what I take from Heidegger more than anything else is the insight that all language is governed by, or in a certain sense is, mood or feeling; it is governed by what Heidegger calls *Befindlichkeit*.* Everything is experienced and understood through

* Trans. Note: This is not the German word for "mood" (which is *Stimmung*), although it is often translated as "mood" in Heidegger's writings. *Befindlichkeit* means literally "the state in which you find yourself"; in Heidegger it means something like a person's "affective state" (ability or predisposition to have certain affects, moods, or feelings). The Norwegian word for "mood" (*stemning,* with the same range of meanings as the cognate German word) means "frame of mind,"

feelings, through the fact that a person is in this or that mood, in high spirits or low spirits, the variety of moods is endless. A person is always in some mood or another. Even apathy or total numbness is a mood.

And that's something I realized early on, in puberty. Everything was so full of feeling, of all kinds of moods. I often got the sense that I was the only one who experienced things in that way—that other people didn't live their lives with their feelings. That was probably why, quite early on, I started to see myself as, well, not an artist, but as a kind of artistic soul, you might say.

And the fact people are like this, in one or another mood—not least in the mood of fear, which Heidegger particularly takes up—indicates the fundamental nature of life, of existence: as he says, man exists as a being among other beings, but unlike every other being, man is aware that he is alive and that he is free to do what he wants, he even has the freedom to die, and he is alive in a consciousness, a soul, which is not something that is, which in a certain sense is a nothingness, and which says that we don't know where we come from or where we're going. We are just here, as a fact—that is our facticity: you there, me here. That's the nature of our existence, a kind of existence that only human beings have: Heidegger says that the mountain does not exist, it just is, like the tree, the horse, and even, according to Heidegger, the angels and God.

You say in a poem something like: God is but doesn't exist.

That's actually a hidden quote from Cioran. And to me it says that God is in everything that is, he is part of everything that is, but that God is not something

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also the "atmosphere" of a place, or most literally the "tuning" of an instrument, related to "temperament"; unlike in English, it can also be a verb: how someone or something is *stemt* is how they or it are "tuned." "In high spirits" and "in low spirits" are literally, in Norwegian, "tuned up" and "tuned down."

limited, something that can be defined as this or that; he is not any object, so in a certain sense he is not something that exists. God is "absolute being," he is "being itself," he is "pure reality," as Thomas Aquinas says. I feel that that's a good way to think about it; in any case, the answer to the question of what "being" is, of "*der Sinn von Sein*," the meaning of being, which Heidegger never arrived at, is simply God. As it was for Meister Eckhart as well.

It's a bit as if Heidegger is asking a question in order to lay the foundation for an answer that's already given. Heidegger called the question of being, being as such—that which is the same for every existing thing—the most fundamental metaphysical question. And then he is almost programmatically careful not to mention God. His ideas might have been too much like Eckhart's if he had. Heidegger thus goes as far as he can in thinking about human beings without bringing in God—and so he is tacitly bringing in God the whole time.

Incidentally, Heidegger studied theology before switching to philosophy. And his father was a sexton in a Catholic church in a small town in Germany.

For me, in any case, his philosophy lays the foundation for faith.

And so our existence, the way we are in the world, is shown through moods, especially through fear?
Yes, our sadness, or our joy, and especially our fear, are precisely what reveals our facticity: we are one of the things that exist, but in such a way that we are at the same time separate from other beings in that we are aware of our existing, not just as this or that being but as something that is, something that has being, as Heidegger says. And I am aware that I myself, like every other being, exist and will at some point no longer exist. And that's why I think many people try to avoid feeling or moods as much as possible—even though it's not possible—or else collectivize them and talk about, for instance, "the Christmas spirit," or sports reporters go on about "what an atmosphere

we have here tonight."[*] No. The Christmas spirit or the thrill of winning are the opposite of mood as such—they are a feeling that tries to shut out feeling as an external reality. It is precisely those actual feelings that make our facticity, our existence, clear: they make clear our being-towards-death, as Heidegger puts it.

This doesn't mean that I want everyone to prattle on about feelings, or that I think "people have to talk about their emotions." I actually have a lot more sympathy for the old masculine ideal that feelings are what a person *shouldn't* talk about. Talking, chit-chat, pushes a feeling away.

Instead, look around you, look at the mountains, the sky, the stars, and ask yourself what all that is, why it's there. Does the fact that it's there mean anything? Why does it exist at all? Is it there for a reason, a purpose, or is it all just random?

Are you talking now about the basic Christian truth that everything there is has something of God in it?

That's how things are for a Christian, but it's not just Christians who feel wonder when they look at the world. In fact, maybe they feel less wonder at the world than the people who don't consider themselves Christian. But I do think that if you don't feel wonder then the word God doesn't mean anything. And then you just feel embarrassed to hear the word *God* spoken, because merely saying the word *God* means that in a way that you're presupposing that God exists.

Life, existence, means that at every moment we are face to face with the end, with ceasing to be, with death—and if we want we can even draw the line ourselves at any time. Being alive is being free to die. That is humanity, its great strength and also its greatest weakness.

[*] Trans. Note: Both "spirit" and "atmosphere" here are *stemning*, the same word as "mood" or "feeling."

In a sense, that is almost the essence of being alive—life is a "border station," as Heidegger says, and he puts it in quotation marks himself. At every moment, we are faced with a choice, or you might say we are in a moment of choosing. And so freedom, our ability to choose, is so to speak the essence of being human, not as part of the greater human community—part of humanity—but as a single, separate, individual person: each and every one of us is unique, and is uniquely alone.

To escape themselves, a person tries to enter the world, disappear into the world, the everyday, into interaction with things. To disappear into the average, which increasingly in our day means confronting a media world, a trivialized popular culture: "everyone is someone else and no one is himself," as Heidegger says.

We can't actually be at home in the world, we can only so to speak face it, confront it, with our consciousness, with our soul, in our moods—but this is usually covered up, or rather, we do everything we can to cover it up, to hide this truth. All of the ideologies we see peddled in the media every day say that there is only one thing we should do: disappear into things, produce them, consume them, sink into the world to get away from ourselves, from our innermost solitude, which isn't seen as something linked to God, through silence, but as something threatening and terrifying. People are scared of themselves, and scared of God, that's all there is to it.

Do you try to create your own language for this innermost solitude, like Heidegger did?

Yes, he creates his own concepts in order to gain the distance he needs to say what he thinks needs to be said about what it means to be human, and in this way he is like every artist worthy of the name. Every artist has, or creates, their own language, which lets them present their existence as just as unique, particular, and idiosyncratic as it actually is.

That's what I'm trying to do anyway. I write by bringing form and content together into a unity, at a kind of distance that means we can maybe see it as something so self-evident that it can't be seen any other way. In other words, so we see it as fundamental, as basic or in a certain sense banal.

Another way to say it is that every real writer can only write one poem (or novel or play), they actually have only one, and in any body of work worth the name the writer sticks to this one thing—listens to it—tries again and again to get it said. Because this one true poem (or novel or play) can never be expressed. It isn't the kind of thing that can be expressed. But you can try to express it, and try again and again. And the closer you get to this one poem, the better you're writing.

The same thing is true for art in general. A great painter, too, has their one single poem, or picture. A great musician has their one piece of music they try over and over again to play. As Leif Ove Andsnes said in an interview once: I'm actually always playing the same piece.

But you write in many different genres?

For some writers, "the one poem" can be prose and drama and poetry all at once. And of course I feel most akin to other writers who write in multiple genres. Marguerite Duras, for example. Or Peter Handke. Not to mention Beckett. Or Tarjei Vesaas. Or Lars Norén.

Maybe we can say that what's the same when writing in different genres is the poetry of it: good prose, and good plays, are just as poetic as a good poem. "Poetry" is a name for what characterizes good writing, not for one genre as opposed to others.

I usually feel like it makes sense to talk about three main genres: lyric, epic, and dramatic. It was probably Goethe who started that. But poetry isn't a genre. It's a quality, and so it's impossible to define; maybe it stands out especially clearly in

poems, but it's there in art in general, or everywhere in life for that matter. Poetry can suddenly pour out from a person's face, for example.

It's the same with poetry as Augustine said about time: As long as no one asks me what it is, I know, but as soon as someone asks me, it becomes almost impossible to say what it is.