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## John Updike Strikes Again

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Novelist John Updike may be at his best when describing the loss of faith. He seems to understand the reality all too well. When the Reverend Clarence Arthur Wilmot is described as losing his faith in early twentieth-century America, Updike traces his collapsing faith to the historical-critical method of studying the Bible — treating the Bible as nothing more than ancient Near Eastern literature. As Updike describes the moment of Wilmot's fall into unbelief in *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, he writes of the pastor sensing “a visceral surrender, a set of dark sparkling bubbles escaping upward.”

Put bluntly, Wilmot's loss of faith is tied to the loss of confidence in the Bible as revelation. The reader senses that Updike is speaking through the voice of Thomas Dreaver, the moderator of Wilmot's local presbytery, who advises the pastor with these damning words: “Don't give up your calling. I promise you, there is nothing in your beliefs or unbeliefs that can't serve as the basis for an effective and deeply satisfying Christian ministry.” How many pastors have heeded such pathetic and godless advice?

In *Roger's Version* (1986), Updike describes the conflict between a believer who tenaciously holds to orthodox Christianity and a more liberal professor of divinity — a man who has embraced the theology of Karl Barth and the morality of situation ethics. The believer does not come off well in the novel, as Updike points the reader toward the path of ambiguity and the embrace of theological mystery.

Now, in his newly-released novel, *Terrorist*, Updike replaces the evangelical scientist of *Roger's Version* with a Muslim teenager contemplating becoming a suicide bomber. As with the evangelical Christian, Updike uses young Ahmad as his foil for theological ambiguity and the danger of theological certitude.

As critic James Wood argues in *The New Republic*:

*Updike is acclaimed as an unfashionably Christian novelist, and much commentary, taking its cue from the author himself, dutifully trots out his interest in Barth and Kierkegaard—but there is a way in which Updike is a pagan celebrant rather than a religious explorer: His impulse is mystically broad rather than theologically exact. He is not especially interested in questions of faith or doubt, because aesthetics can always be wheeled in to solve such questions: the world is uncomplicatedly God's, and it exists to be lyrically praised. . . . It is the otherness of Islamicism that is missing in this book. Despite all the Koranic homework, there is a sense that what is alien in Islam to a Westerner remains alien to John Updike. What he has discovered, yet again, is merely the generalized fluid of God-plus-sex that has run throughout all his novels.*

“God-plus-sex” — that's just about the right way to describe John Updike's novel. In fact, it is a pretty good summary of all of his writing. Especially when it comes to sex, Updike does appear as “a pagan celebrant.” Do not waste your time with this novel.

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