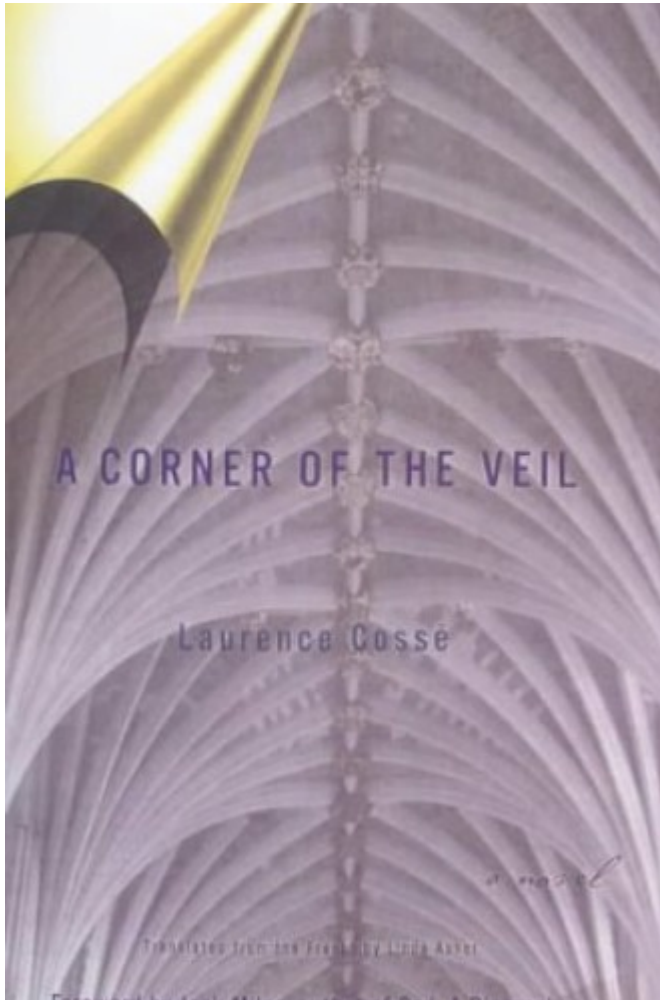


From faith to proof

By [Janet Potter](#)

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In Review



A Corner of the Veil

by Laurence Cossé
Scribner

In Laurence Cossé's *A*

Corner of the Veil, a French novel translated into English in 1999, a society of priests known as the Casuists come upon the proof of the existence of God. (The proof is a document mailed to the editor of the society's magazine, a point of fact that endeared the book to me right away, since I open the *Century's* mail.)

After the proof is discovered and verified by two of the society's experts in theology, the rest of this slim volume is taken up with various church and political officials deciding what to do about it. The pope must be informed, of course, but the prime minister is tipped off before that can happen, and his men start interfering with the proof's fate.

It's not a well-structured or well-written novel; the action is essentially one man after another finding out about the proof and reacting to it. But it seems as if this is what Cossé wants to do: create a catalog of different possible reactions to the absolute confirmation of God.

There are three main reactions: ecstasy, anger and regret.

The first two are fairly predictable. Many of the priests, after reading the proof, want to shout from the rooftops, causing their principal to be cautious about sharing the proof. As he says, "we can't have our whole Casuist province in France slipping into a way of life that is positively Franciscan, and the *ecstatic* branch at that."

The second reaction, anger, is what causes many more to want to keep the proof secret. As they say, far from being receptive when proved wrong, some atheists will merely be resentful, perhaps even violent. One priest says this:

The proof will be a harsh blow for them of course, but only slightly more than for the believers, you know. We have so little belief, we believers. We hope for so little from God. We take what suits us from our faith, and leave the rest behind. We live for so many other things.

But by far the most interesting aspect of the book is the reactions of men who realize that they have heretofore not believed, and then are surprised by their surprise:

He had believed he believed, but he did not believe....I was living neither more nor less as I would have lived if I were certain that God doesn't exist. As an atheist I would have been just as courteous, just as decent, concerned--a little--with social justice and--a lot--not to undercut the elite of the land.

As the plot spins out to its inevitable conclusion, this reaction happens again and again. Cossé neither condemns nor lampoons these unbelieving believers; she just seems to find them intriguing. In a very French way, she's elusive about why she wrote this book, but one can't help noticing that as more and more characters learn about the proof, every one of them is at least a little surprised.