

issue 46

september 2006

**a forum for people grappling with faith and church issues**

**values being real  
supports faith stage transition  
respects and validates the journeys of others  
allows questions and doubts  
lets God defend God**

## **The Bible & Our Culture**

### **Is there a better way?**

It doesn't require a lot of insight to recognise that the church in New Zealand is shrinking. Following a pattern begun in the 1960s, recent generations are giving church a wide berth. The faithful who remain seem to behave like a deck of cards; shuffled and dealt out to a dwindling number of players depending on which church has the best youth and children's programme or Sunday morning music - or both. In response, some church leaderships have sought to tinker or tweak the programme, desperately seeking to "keep up with the Jones" of the next parish. Others amalgamate or close the door altogether in the hope of refocusing the limited resources.

In the 1990s, this shrinking took a momentary reprieve due, in part, to some Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches developing a corporate model of church. Consumer research, branding and "economies of scale" featured in this model as churches bought warehouses, pubs or gymnasiums and converted them into multi-venue, multi-sensory, multimedia complexes. With the hardware in place, corporate churches then appointed a chief executive pastor, specialist ministry staff and administrators to rollout a strategic plan of growth that offered what punters were seeking; small group community vis-à-vis large group multi-sensory spiritual experience. However, in the cool light of the naughties (2000s), the church in New Zealand along with its European counterparts has continued to shrink. The disaffected continue to leave in higher number than "new-converts", and those that come have come from somewhere else! If you are still in doubt, grab a copy of the baptism figures for Baptists and

Presbyterians and attendance figures for Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal and Independent churches over the last 10 years and compare them to national research using data from the 1996 and 2001 census and Massey Universities' longitudinal study of New Zealand Life and Values.

Facing up to a shrinking national congregation offers an opportunity to explore some deep-stuff around what it means to be and do church in New Zealand. We live in a complex sociological system of relationships and communities. The reasons for any change in demographic profile are therefore complex. Studies by Massey University, the Church Life Study, New Zealand research on church leavers and our own Census seem to suggest that on the whole New Zealanders appreciate some form of spiritual dimension in their day to day life. Massey's research is quite specific about the high percentage of New Zealanders who regularly muse about God, the afterlife and ethical behaviour! What is consistent across all four avenues of research is that while people are curious about God they are very ambivalent about organised religious systems and their earthly dwellings; the Church (Dompost July 29, 2006).

Qualitative research into church leavers in New Zealand suggests that one of the reasons Evangelical, Pentecostal or Charismatic churches are not an attractive place to nurture spirituality is that as a sociological system the church is not able to provide a safe place for individuals to explore the mysterious dimensions of faith. Why might this be so? Perhaps the church as a social system is in conflict with base-line New Zealand cultural identity.

In New Zealand, social commentators suggest that our cultural identity finds its source and ultimate myths in values of freedom, fairness and an egalitarian love affair with luck (Riddell, Bell, Belich, & Darrah). Take for examples the recent advertising campaigns for Speight's and Tui Beer, Mainland Cheese, and Lotto..... each of these well-grafted snapshots of our cultural identity accentuate bass-line values of freedom, fairness and luck; freedom from state intervention in the private affairs of its citizens (Mainland's time-wasting codgers), freedom from domestication of the Kiwi bloke (Speight's Southern Man), fairness of an honest days pay for an honest days work (Tui's toilet sitting Tui deprived geek!) and a star-gazing romantic hope in luck (1000<sup>th</sup> Lotto draw special advertising compaign)!

Cultural values of freedom and fairness have provided New Zealand with some world firsts in terms of liberal sociopolitical activity:

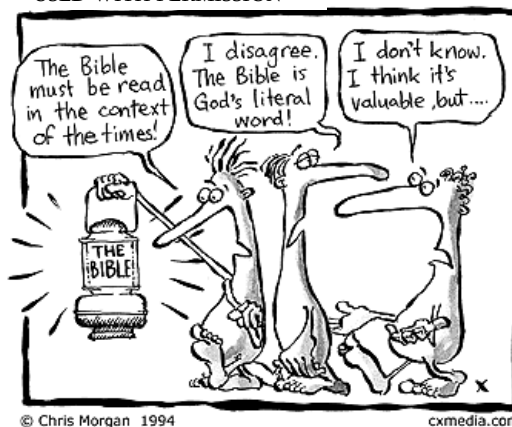
- As an emerging nation, New Zealand has the first English colonial powers accorded an annexed people in the right to vote (1853).
- The first sovereign nation in the world to accord women the vote (1893).
- The first to introduce old-age pensions (1898).
- First in the world to establish an all-encompassing social welfare system which included as a world-first, state funded housing (1930s).
- First industrial nation to legislate for an 8-hour working days for employees (1899).
- The first country to support China's accession to the WTO, which brought China fully into the world trading system (2001).
- First country to introduce a system of 24-hour, comprehensive, compulsory, no-fault insurance cover for people with accident-related injury or illness (1972).
- First nation in the world to introduce a quota system for the fair and sustainable management of fish catches (1984).
- The first country in the world to introduce a regime of fair and equitable tradeable radio frequency spectrum rights (1989).
- The first country to let people claim several ethnicities in a Census (2001).
- And perhaps not surprisingly..... New Zealand was the first place to develop a continuous beer brewing process! (1950)

In addition, the cultural values of freedom and fairness have shaped New Zealand education curricular as a holistic life-long learning philosophy of tolerance and accepting others different perspectives as a point of learning, rather than as a point of departure or difference.

How can it be expected that in such an environment people would willingly enter the sociological environment of a church where each of these fundamental values is at times blatantly undermined. How can a reasonable person comfortably transition from an office environment on Friday where their immediate manager is a competent, business suave, and caring woman and attend a church on Sunday where that same competent, caring woman is not able to exercise such obvious leadership skill because the Bible says woman cannot lead men! Serious inconsistency! How can a reasonable and thinking Pakeha New Zealander feel the church is a place of spiritual nurture when their whole cultural identity is being assaulted by

people who tell them that the Bible makes it plain that they are chosen, right, saved, pure, and have a Christian duty to try and convince others of their error, because those not sharing this "enlightenment" need to be corrected, preached to, and saved, as they are in danger of going to hell! Serious inconsistency!

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Perhaps the church in New Zealand is shrinking fast because it holds tightly to values of absolute and unquestionable truth and its twin sister paternalistic evangelism, both of which operate in stark contrast to values of freedom, fairness and tolerance. How does a New Zealander freely process doubts and fundamental questions about life and death in an environment of triumphant and victorious faith? How can a New Zealander, known all over the world for our tolerant acceptance of diversity, sit in church to be told that they need to "reach-out" to a Muslim work colleague with a brand of Christianity that views his religious conviction as wrong and leading him to suffer a horrible afterlife.

The church seems to be able to maintain this disparity on the assumption that the Bible operates as an authority and referee for thought and behaviour in all circumstances, and in all ages. Perhaps the church needs to examine its relationship with the Bible if it is ever to become

attractive to the thousands of New Zealanders who indicate year upon year in surveys a yearning to connect with the spiritual. Can you imagine for a moment what it might be like if the Bible were to lose its authoritative role in Evangelical Christian faith. What might faith look like if scripture were a team-mate alongside tradition and experience rather than a referee? It might mean that Evangelical Christian faith would seek a place in the public marketplace of ideas on the merits of its richness and intrinsic value to human community, rather than its traditional perception of having the monopoly or guardianship on truth. Is there a better way, a real alternative in relationship with the Bible? - A way to bridge the growing divide between what a New Zealander experiences in the church and out in their community. I suspect that there is.

You get an invite to a special meeting where the chief executive of your organisation discusses how things have been picking up over 18 months and the workload of your current supervisor has increased markedly. He invites you to consider a new position as a supervisor of a new team. The position will sit alongside your current supervisor and will report as they do, to the chief executive. You are very excited about the promotion, but wonder how you will relate to your former boss in an environment of equal employment status. There are feelings of uncertainty as you move from an employee-employer relationship to a new collegial relationship of equals. Now things that were once off-limits because of confidentiality, are openly discussed. Your old boss seems now to be approachable, friendly, and open where once you had found them guarded, aloof, and always seeking to check and double check.

This reorientation with someone that once held positional power over you is essentially the same feeling when negotiating a shift of power of those things which hold ultimate-meaning in our life. For many Evangelical, Charismatic and Pentecostal Christians the Bible operates authoritatively; as a boss, referee and arbitrator. I wonder what would it be like if the Bible were to lose its authoritative role? The Bible might become for Evangelicals what some suggest it has always been..... a narrative, an epic story of faith..... and faithfulness into which we find ourselves drawn, rather than a box of principles to obey. What might our relationship to the Bible be like if it were to move theologically from above to beside us? What do you think?

**Craig Braun.**

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Our apologies for the mistake with the page order in the paper copy of the last newsletter - we had a bit of a 'mare' - though that's no excuse - SORRY ☹

# How do you relate to the Bible, and how does it relate to you?

Is it:

"I believe that the existence of the Bible is the greatest benefit to the human race. Any attempt to belittle it, I believe, is a crime against humanity."

Immanuel Kant

- a collective of documents and stories?
- the divine Word of God?
- a source of inspiration / revelation?
- irrelevant?

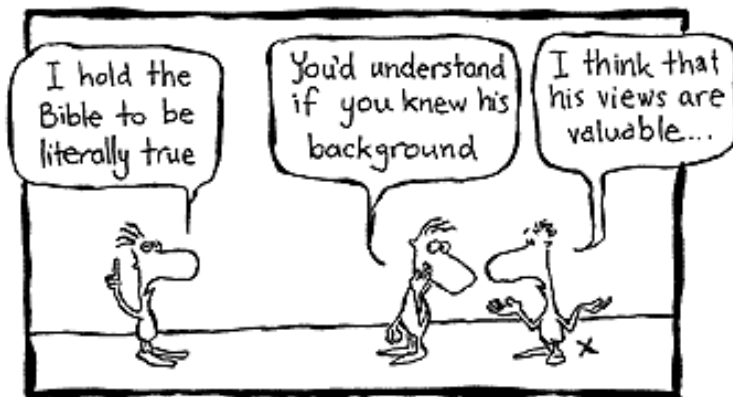
Literalism "is the cancer of the religious imagination."  
Sandra Schneiders

*"Reputable scholars now believe that the New Testament account is reliable history."*

*Time Magazine*

"Jewish authors would never have invented either that style nor that morality; and the Gospel has marks of truth so great, so striking, so utterly inimitable, that the invention of it would be more astonishing than the hero."

Jean Jacques Rousseau



"The Bible contains six admonishments to homosexuals and 362 admonishments to heterosexuals. It's just that they need more supervision."

Lynn Lavner

"Each epoch has found in the Gospels what it sought to find there, and has overlooked what it wished to overlook."

Ludwig von Mises

"The Bible tells us to love our neighbours, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people." G K Chesterton

*"This book had to be written by one of three people: good men, bad men or God. It couldn't have been written by good men because they said it was inspired by the revelation of God. Good men don't lie and deceive. It couldn't have been written by bad men because bad men would not write something that would condemn themselves. It leaves only one conclusion. It was given by divine inspiration of God."*

*John Wesley*

*"Unless the Bible is without error, not only when it speaks of salvation matters, but also when it speaks of history and the cosmos, we have no foundation for answering questions concerning the existence of the universe... nor do we have any moral absolutes, or certainty of salvation."*

*Francis Schaeffer*

"It is full of interest. It has noble poetry in it; and some clever fables; and some blood-drenched history; and some good morals; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies."

Mark Twain

## **Bible, where are you now?.....Truth, have you changed your name?**

When I was thirteen my grandmother gave me a 'proper' Bible..... a 'teen study version'. Since then, I've become attached to it, highlighted passages, written all over and in it, made it 'mine'; it's special to me. Growing up in the church and in a Christian family, reading the Bible was pretty much an expected part of 'growing in one's faith' along with praying and doing 'quiet times'. Throughout my teenage years the Bible and 'quiet times' were very much a part of how I saw my faith, perhaps in a formulaic way.

Over the past year or so, however, my relationship to the Bible has taken quite a dramatic shift. I reached a point where I felt I was simply reading the Bible out of a sense of duty. The parts of scripture that I did find significant never sank below the surface, something which frustrated me. I struggled to find 'life' both in the words and how it actually applied to me on a personal and daily basis. I lost the desire to read it for the inspiration I hoped I might discover. As a result, I now hardly ever consciously sit down to read the Bible, even though it occupies a nice space on my bedside table. Maybe I just put it there because it makes me feel like 'a good Christian'. Maybe it signifies the little bit of hope I still find myself clinging to. Either way, I actually find arriving at this point quite devastating.

Trying to explain the change in how I view the Bible to close family and friends has not been easy. They don't understand why, suggesting that not reading the Bible is stunting my spiritual growth. I struggle to accept (and respect) their point of view, whilst trying to defend my position, and avoid having a theological debate (often all at the same time!). Some people seem to equate my current stance as a way of saying 'I'm never going to pick up the Bible again, and I don't believe in it anymore'. I don't think that is what I'm saying; I still want to respect the place the Bible has within faith. I still acknowledge its power.

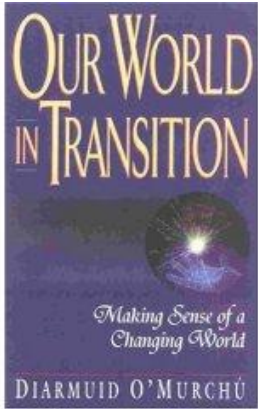
For the moment, you could say I've lost faith and trust in the Bible. It's a slow process of rebuilding that faith and trust. At times I feel like the Bible has let me down, or perhaps that I've let myself down by not reading it frequently, or at least living in, and with, that expectation. I guess I'm attempting to protect myself from reaching a point of total disillusionment with the Bible.

I used to see the Bible as 'the main way' in which I was 'supposed' to connect with God. As far as I was concerned if it didn't work there was obviously something wrong with me or my attitude. Now, I'm beginning to see and explore other ways that are 'life-giving' to the way I connect and communicate with God. I'm realising that there are many ways to engage with God, rather than simply trying to conform to the 'good Christian' models and ideals I've grown up with. I find this realisation extremely liberating. I see being in this place as part of searching and longing for a deeper dimension to my faith; of journeying off the well-worn track and choosing to stand on the edge, on top of unstable rocks and letting the ocean crash at my feet, because I have found a new way, a way that takes me further and deeper into discovering the essence of who Christ is. Some would say the only way forward into that journey is through the Bible. Whether it is or not doesn't concern me as much as the deconstruction of my faith that's taking place in the process. For now, for this moment, this is me. And for the briefest of moments I sense God whispering "*I do not condemn you, do not condemn yourself. It's ok to be in this place.*"

### **Anon**

The author is a young woman in her early 20s She lives in Wellington whilst studying to become a social worker. Her interests include writing and developing her new found creative streak.

If you would like to contribute an article, suggest a topic for discussion, comment about the newsletter or come off the mailing list please write to the Editors: Jenny McIntosh & Donia Macartney-Coxson at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington or email: [spiritex@central.org.nz](mailto:spiritex@central.org.nz) or jenny on [jenny@central.org.nz](mailto:jenny@central.org.nz) or Donia on [donia@central.org.nz](mailto:donia@central.org.nz). For Alan Jamieson: [alan@central.org.nz](mailto:alan@central.org.nz) or [aj@paradise.net.nz](mailto:aj@paradise.net.nz) Website: [www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz](http://www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz)



## Book Review

**Our World in Transition:  
making sense of a  
changing world.**

**Diarmuid O'Murch**

Diarmuid O'Murchu is a priest and social psychologist currently based in London, who has lectured internationally and written extensively on new paradigms from a multi-disciplinary point of view.

I have only recently come across his writings. His books give insight, challenge and very much extend my horizons and thinking. I realise how blinkered I have been about the history of the cosmos, its current evolutionary movements and just how small and insignificant I am in the process. O'Murchu brings a refreshing mix from his wide understanding and knowledge of life, science, psychology and theology to help us understand our rapidly changing world.

Although written in 1992, his book *Our World in Transition* is very current for today. He attempts to read the signs of the times and explore their implications for our world. He sees us at the beginning of a new threshold; the old securities are gone though some still seek shelter from these. And why not? They have served many very well. But what happens if we continue to cling to these?

What he describes as happening as the world evolves and makes substantial shifts, while bringing insecurity, is also exciting if we can ride the waves to get there. Amidst this turmoil our systems and institutions, including the church, are becoming more inept and incapable of grappling with the realities of our world. This, of course, only serves to create further ambiguity and instability. New possibilities at this point are as yet vague.

He describes the transition between the 'old' and the 'new' and transition as we know brings chaos and insecurity - an explanation as to why things are as they are in our world, our churches and some of our uncertainties of faith?

Throughout the book he gives an excellent series of summaries of the shifts in different spheres of life paradigms - systems, institutions, spirituality, thinking, authority, theological perspectives, and evolutionary growth, to name a few.

He sees that people have no option but to change, as the world changes around them. He encourages us to become informed, to understand something of what is going on and thus 'participate consciously' in this new evolutionary thrust so that the 'long-term experience is one of breakthrough rather than breakdown.'

Jenny McIntosh



**Faith Evolving:  
A Patchwork Journey  
Trish McBride 2005,**

If readers would like a copy of the book reviewed in last months newsletter, then please send either a cheque to Patricia McBride PO Box 13410 Johnsonville for \$30 plus \$3 p&p or the book is available from Epworth & Pinnacle, Willis Street, Wellington for a few more \$s.