



Confused, I wrestled the angels. Who was I in the parable of the sower? Was I the seed thrown among the thorns? Or the seed fallen beside the road and eaten by the birds? These questions plagued me and ate away until I accepted the only way to truly know God was to “deny myself” and “surrender all”. And so I did. By conscious decision, I ignored my questions and my desire to understand in return for the security of the community. God stayed

simple, I stayed blind. I became tortured by conformity.

Ultimately, the sums failed to add up.

It is tragic that sometimes it takes a total collapse, crisis, or personal breakdown before we find the courage to admit that the concept of God we have been following is merely a product of wishful-thinking. For me, a personal crisis and reversal of those fundamental beliefs about "how God worked" has taken me on a journey that I will not return from.

I stopped believing in the God I had been taught to believe in, and set out to discover who this Jesus was to me. I made another conscious decision - to

relish the mystery of spirituality rather than allow myself to be cornered by ill-informed suits wielding fear as their weapon. I left the community (or did they leave me?) and went looking for those like-minded people who would be prepared to put God in the docks and let him defend himself.

**Reality robbed by politeness
and modesty"**

**Real life constrained by abstract
codes**

**Never daring to reveal the
truth**

personality stifled by conformity

It did not take long for me to discover a new community. This one characterised by its fearlessness and honesty. The people involved in this group offered a platform for discussion where nothing was sacred. I entered into it whole-heartedly, and as a result I was able to discover a new faith. A faith where mystery is celebrated rather than spurned. Where "back-sliding" doesn't exist, and acceptance of doubt and anomaly only make the journey more rewarding.

As a result, spirituality and faith have become integral to me - as an expression of my self and who God is *through* me, rather than who God is in *spite* of me. Every day, God becomes more mysterious, more frustrating and at the same time, more comforting, loving and benevolent. It is in this duality that I can connect with the world around me.

Conan, the angel wrestler

**So...what happened to life in all it's
fullness**

It's unexpected joys -

Dancing

a free spirit,

Smothered by rules:

"should, can't, don't, won't"

Like a dancing flame or a small child

**self expression extinguished under a cloak
of lead**

Poems by Andrew Wheatley

MY STORY OF CRISIS WITH CHURCH

I guess I have to accept that you can't come out as gay to your fellow church members and expect that they will all embrace and accept you. But I was naïve. I thought that telling them the truth would help them to help me as I sought to resolve where I was at. I was eager to talk because I thought people could help me.

It's 16 months later for the big public showdown and I don't want to tell the whole story now. One day I guess I will. It isn't finished yet. I am back at the point of being able to contribute a little bit to the church. But I don't yet see that there is a space there for me.

When I talked to the church, I spoilt my case by a little slip. I'd written down in advance that I 'accept it [my sexual orientation] from God, even though I would never have chosen it'. That sentence came out as my accepting it as a **gift** from God. Actually that was and is exactly the point I had come to. There was nothing condemned, nothing flawed about me other than just the average battle with sin. Yet funnily enough this upset people more than almost anything else I said. I'm still answering questions from people who are sure that I want to overturn the whole basis of biblical morality.

What I hadn't counted on was the enormous power of people to operate from polemical positions and to blank out any interest in me as a person. I forgot the huge security that most people gain from clear and simple positions. Fundamentalism is a very natural position; perhaps the first position for the religious person. In an age when most people drift around, probably the start of the religious life is the place of the discovery of deep convictions.

True, these were not the only voices I heard at church. There were others with other more generous attitudes; those who reached out from their hearts. I felt their love, but it wasn't easy to treat it as a restorative experience. I can see on reflection that these were the truly noble people with the depth of faith and love which is the real substance. But they never

seem to have any chance of influencing others. In my denomination, long ago someone warned that whenever legalists conflicted with open-minded people, the legalists would win, because they could not and would not give way, whereas the open-minded were always prepared to wait for others to get to where they are.

There are plenty of narrow minded people from the liberal side as well, and in all cases their intolerance shows when they name-call their opponents. I hope I never slip into that way of thinking. For many years I blocked the personal issue by an internalised homophobia. So I could talk convincingly of the problems of homosexuality for the church in the third person, as if it didn't touch me. I think it was a way of ensuring that it didn't. So I really can't call names.

It was a strange decision to keep going to church after what I faced in the initial reaction. I never expected that it would be that hard. Why did I do it? Maybe because I had said to the church that I wasn't giving up, even though I was stepping down from all formal roles because of the accusations and suspicions. So every Sunday I tried to go. And then the problems really began. A few people began to say the most astounding things. As these remarks sunk in, I saw my space dissolving to nothing. So I would come to the door of the church, and a wall of blackness would hit me. Sometimes I couldn't go in; at other times I could just get inside. For a while I sat between friends in my old position in the centre, but I found that I would end up in an almost hysterical state of tears. Eventually I found that if I sat against the far wall I was safe and I could detach myself sufficiently from people to be able to cope. I am still sitting there, and I really resent it if someone beats me to that seat. (There seem to be a few other people in search of that seat.)

It is hard to explain the grief and the pain. At least one person tried to explain to me that I had to leave, for my own well-being. And some Sundays I just couldn't make it

and would phone up the minister of another church and ask if it was OK if I came there.

In the end it was the death of my parents which gave me back my humanity. After nearly a month away I seemed to be accepted when I came in. The only problem since then is that worship for me has taken on a different dimension, and it seems missing in this service.

Book review

Faith and Feminism: An introduction to Christian Feminist Theology” by Nicola Slee. Darton, Longman and Todd, London. 2003

Feminism has been in existence for some time now and working for several years in the area of women's health, I find I have sub consciously absorbed some of the ideas which have grown out of the women's movement. A university course on ethics introduced me more formally to some of the ideas of the feminist ethic of care. I was therefore interested to read the recently published 'Faith and Feminism' which has allowed me to start looking at the Christian faith from a feminist viewpoint; a viewpoint which I find reassuring and alarming at the same time. It is reassuring because it expresses some ideas that have been part of me (though unexpressed) for a long time, and its good to find others think the same way. It is alarming because some of the ideas are completely new and different to me and question many of my previous assumptions about the Christian faith.

'Faith and Feminism' is part of a series entitled 'Exploring Faith - Theology for Life' which is "designed for people who want to take Christian theology seriously in a way that engages the mind, involves the heart and seeks active expression in the way we

I think that in a way knowing God is an experience that goes on deep in your being, and sometimes the development is disconnected from everyone and everything else. It is really good when you are a fellow pilgrim with others. And I am. But that pilgrimage seems to have little to do with church.

(If you would like to respond to either of the people who wrote their stories in this issue, please email spiritex@central.org.nz and I will pass it on.)

live.” It is therefore written in a straightforward and readable style with short chapters on each topic and clearly titled subsections. The author suggests exercises and reflections which use the imagination as well as the brain in an attempt to engage the reader fully with the topic under discussion. As a newcomer to feminist theology, I found the combined glossary and biography useful and have added several new words to my vocabulary! The suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter would keep the enthusiastic reader busy for some time to come.

I enjoyed this book because Nicola Slee clearly presents key concepts of feminist theology in a way that is easily understood, but not simplistic. Key topics addressed include sin, salvation and atonement and the future of the church. The author stresses the variety of approaches found within current feminist theology and appears to value each while allowing the reader to respond individually to the ideas presented.

'Faith and Feminism' has proved to be a challenging read and I would recommend it to anyone interested in feminist theology or to those who want to be open to different ways of understanding the Christian faith.

Fiona McDougal

For any contributions to, or comments you would like to make about the newsletter or if you would like to come off the mailing list please write to the Editor: **Jenny McIntosh at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington** or on email: spiritex@central.org.nz (note change of email). For Alan Jamieson: aj@paradise.net.nz