

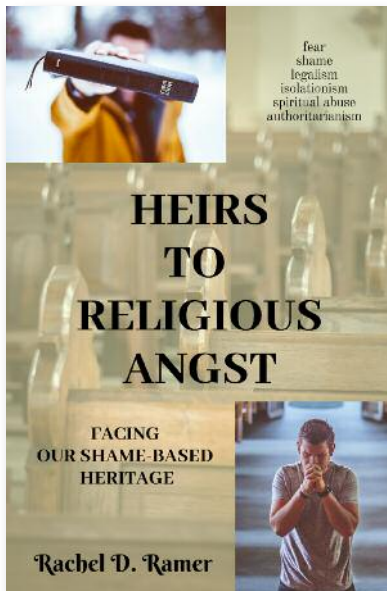
Heirs to Religious Angst

Rachel Ramer

The best argument I ever made to a religious crazy person was when I was standing in front of a mirror.

I was thirteen and my father had just given me a lecture. I slouched in the living room rocking chair—an old-fashioned, black beast of a chair with carved, austere swirls as a wooden edifice behind my head. I listened to my father's well-thought-out points which he must have rehearsed multiple times. I, on the other hand, was a novice.

The chair made a popping sound whenever I rocked. One rocker leg was loose from the bowed wood that worked against the floor. As I leaned back, the leg slightly left its slot, then snapped back into place as I leaned forward. *Pop.*



Our arguments centered on rules: length of skirts, the vanity of wearing make-up, promiscuity in the movies, the wantonness of rock music, and whether or not (not) I was allowed to visit other churches with friends.

He repeated his mantra, “I realize this is not a popular view...”

I rocked. *Pop.*

He sat rigid in his recliner surrounded by his Bible, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, and back issues of *The Sword and Trumpet* (much later I saw the irony of this publication's name since readership embraced nonresistant pacifism and a cappella church music). Close by, piles of recorded sermons threatened to topple over from careless stacking. He sometimes offered them at family gatherings in futile attempts to correct “backslidden” relatives.

I leaned forward, stopping the chair's protests. “But, Dad, nobody agrees with you.” Wrong answer. This was all I had in my meager, underdeveloped repertoire. I rejected his views on the shaky but democratic grounds of majority rule. This was America, after all.

But Christians belonged to a heavenly government. We were to be a “peculiar people” (I Peter 2:9), strangers on the earth. My

argument was not convincing to a man whose forefathers were martyred as part of the radical branch of the Christian Reformation. Of course, no one agreed with him; he wouldn't expect them to.

HOW COULD HE BE SO WRONG?

I was haunted by the fact that my father could pray, study his Bible, and pursue the will of God and yet get it so wrong. I recall the time he lectured his sister at a family reunion in front of her husband and her children. “I'd like to know,” he demanded, sitting across the table from her, “why you decided to cut your hair.”

She sat stunned, her curls hugging her head above her neck, a visual testament of disobedience to her upbringing. “Well, I...”

“You know what the Bible says about women having long hair. You've been taught not to cut it, but you went ahead anyway,” he scolded.

She and her husband attempted to explain their view, but my father would tolerate no other interpretation. I felt embarrassed for her and her family, and for me.

Frankly, I didn't want to be peculiar. I also didn't want to be rebellious. I wanted to fit in and

grow up normal—whatever that was. A desire for normalcy was seen as a desire to go the “way of the world” or to take the broad path to hell.

In our living room, my father leaned forward in response to my statement. “I don’t care what anyone else thinks, only what God thinks,” he clarified.

During the rocking of the chair and the pop of the loose leg, my father articulated how his views made perfect sense. His rationale etched into my brain and yanked at my emotions. His reasons faded from his tone and intonation, dislodging from his image and became my own. The echo adapted to my tone, my intonation, and my image in the mirror. The religious crazies claimed squatter’s rights between my ears.

I retreated to my room where I could formulate a defense—and deliver it to the person in the mirror.

The arguments continued between my mirror image and me. I gave up discussing religion with my father, but I didn’t abandon my internal disputes. I became a rule-keeper afraid of a misstep that would doom me to hell. Then, I became a doubting Christian, fine-tuning doctrine in frantic endeavors to avoid deception—that abhorrent category of being wrong. Next came an obsession with Christian apologetics--defending the faith intellectually--eventually acquiring a library of books in an attempt to quiet skepticism.

I had inherited a religious anguish.

The situation became markedly worse when, overcome with anxiety from my religious conditioning, I dropped to ninety-three pounds from the stress of trying to live a perfect life.

SHADOWS IN THE MIRROR

My best argument in front of that mirror was to decide I would not remain in the emotionally debilitating Christianity I had inherited. But I was boxed in, my thoughts running in grooved tracks. I could not easily correct my own flawed thinking.

For years, I thought my religious experiences were anomalies. Surely other Christians, other churches, had figured God out. Of course, there were groups with similar extremes, and occasionally I



The Christian package of that time included suppressed emotions, mimicking addictions with messages of “don’t trust” and “don’t feel.”

would hear about atrocities that surfaced revealing Christianity gone awry.

Then, I found similarities elsewhere, as when I overheard friends chastening themselves into restrictive lifestyles to please God. Later, I heard a student use the Bible to shame classmates.

I watched pastors in less rigid churches than my own apply the same methods with similar outcomes. Those who spoke of grace could deftly walk back from grace with little prompting.

While my experiences were somewhat extreme on the scale, I soon discovered other Christians quietly populated the spectrum. While contemplating what had trapped my father in his thinking, I wondered, could all of Christendom be wrestling with shame and doubts? Could I see

the shadows of others in the mirror?

WHAT HAVE WE INHERITED?

While sorting through what I was taught about God, I didn't fully realize the influence of the time period in which I was born. I didn't understand how that contributed to my anguish. Here are a few of those influences:

+ Theories

My shame and fear were the result of particular theories of Biblical interpretation—hermeneutics—the words of the Bible filtered through human constructs. Even a preferred fundamentalist's "plain reading" is a theory, which can be a complicated, intricate system with elements of recklessness.

+ Minimized emotions

The Christian package of that time included suppressed emotions, mimicking addictions with messages of "don't trust" and "don't feel." Christian practices developed, in some cases, into spiritual abuse or religious trauma while discrediting emotional monitors.

+ Taking God to court

While modern atheists advocate taking God to court, Christians have developed their counter version of defending God. There's much to glean from apologetics but there is needed caution.

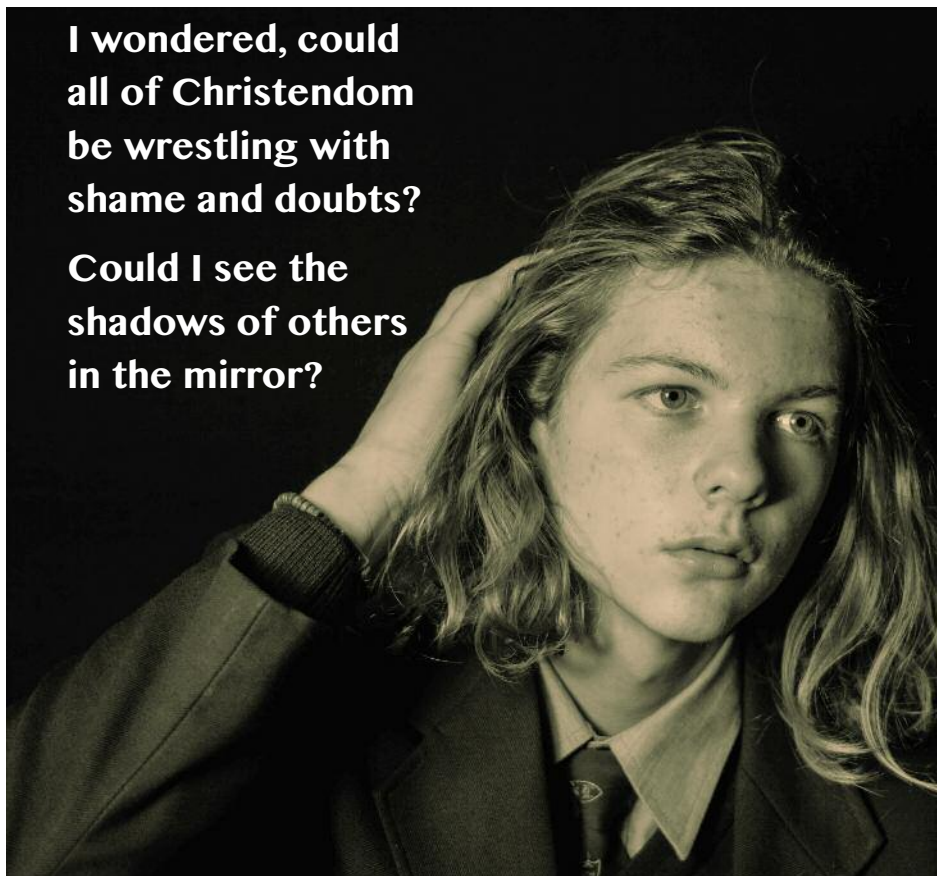
Spiritual dynamics cannot be measured in modern courtrooms or science laboratories.

+ Enlightened arrogance

The Enlightenment's historical pivot towards knowledge and reason made significant advances for humankind. For Christians, this also shifted the focus to knowledge about God instead of knowing God. C.S. Lewis called this "walking alongside ourselves." The modern obsession with doctrinal certainty can be spiritually strangling. The Enlightenment redefined faith and altered how we apprehend God.

Learning how to address this historical positioning helped free me from the crippling Christianity I had inherited. □

Rachel D. Ramer is a writer and teacher. She has an M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition. Read her next installment of Heirs to Religious Angst at www.narrowexit.com.



I wondered, could all of Christendom be wrestling with shame and doubts? Could I see the shadows of others in the mirror?