

One New Book for the Preacher

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FAITH STORIES: ON THE VARIETIES AND VAGARIES OF FAITH edited by C. Michael Curtis. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003. 311 pages.

Michael Curtis is a writer and teacher of writers. One day he wandered into a bookstore. At this point in his life, he had not made a profession of faith. Finding himself in the section marked "Philosophy and Religion" for some strange reason, he picked up a book by Paul Tillich and began to read. What followed was not only a "conversion" to the Christian faith, which he lives out in the life and ministry of a church, but also a deep devotion to and appreciation for the relationship between literature and the life of faith.

Michael Curtis believes fiction and faith have an affinity. He invites us to listen for ways God is experienced in the ordinary and extraordinary events of life. His first volume, *God: Stories*, is a rich selection of stories in which the authors wrestle with the presence of God or the lack thereof in our world. As a pastor, I along with many colleagues found this volume helpful in preaching and in our personal journeys of faith. Congregations use it for study and discussion in adult classes and book groups.

Michael has done it again! The esteemed fiction editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* has produced another volume, *Faith Stories: Short Fiction on the Variety and Vagaries of Faith*, that continues the search for moments of revelation in short stories. One of the books Michael Curtis must have discovered in the "Philosophy and Religion" section was *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James, for in this collection, Curtis introduces us to the diversity of faith in its many expressions. He includes stories about Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu beliefs, as well as Christian and Jewish tales. The range of authors is from Reynolds Price to James Michener to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, from Amy Tan to Mary Gordon to Alice Walker. It is a rich mixture from a variety of perspectives. There is also a helpful list of questions for discussion at the end of the book.

In her exceptional book, *A New Religious America*, Diane Eck from Harvard University shows that we are now the most diverse religious culture in the world. There is also tremendous diversity within various religious traditions. *Faith Stories* offers the potential to give its readers a greater appreciation of the faith experiences of others who are our neighbors. In addition, it stimulates readers to listen for the way God speaks to us and to others through the ordinary events of our lives, the going out and coming in and falling asleep.

In Elizabeth Cox's story, "Saved," which Curtis includes in this collection, two young girls are having a conversation in the evening. They have recently dedicated their lives to Christ and are discussing their plans to be missionaries in Africa when they grow up.

Alice said it was time for bed and they should say their prayers now.

"Do you think God likes jokes?" Josie asked.

“I don’t know,” said Alice. “Why?”

“Sometimes when I pray I tell him a joke. I think he likes for me to. I bet not many people do that.”

Does God enjoy jokes? Would you even consider sharing something humorous with God? Even though this was not the “main insight” in Cox’s story, it has stimulated my imagination about the role of humor in our relationship with God in a world where there often seems so little to make us laugh.

In another story by John L’Heureux, the main character is a comedian who is also pregnant and wrestling with the possibility of having an abortion. She has a tough job making people laugh in California where she lives.

Well, it’s a time of strain, Corinne tells herself, even though in California there isn’t supposed to be any strain. Just surfing and tans and divorce and a lot of interfacing. No strain and no babies.

Corinne thinks for a second about interfacing babies, but forces the thought from her mind and goes back to thinking about her act. Sometimes she does a very funny set on interfacing, but only if the audience is middle-aged. The younger ones don’t seem to know that interfacing is laughable. Come to think of it, *nobody* laughs much in California. Everybody smiles, but who laughs? Laughs: that’s something she can use.

We could all use a good laugh. Corinne’s manager tells her that she is making the audiences laugh, but only from the head. “You gotta get gut. You know? Like feeling.” The suggestion is that genuine laughter touches us in the depths of our being and helps us keep things in perspective. Laughter also puts our lives in context that reminds us of our dependence on a reality greater than ourselves.

In *Faith Stories*, Curtis presents stories that stretch the imagination and enlarge the vision of God whose ways and thoughts do not always conform to ours. I am grateful to Michael Curtis for giving us such a stimulating selection of the variety of religious experiences.