

Samuel Smith
Messiah College
Grantham, PA 17027

Death by Religion

Late at night I tie my hair back,
put on my “serial killer”
look and walk the dim streets of this
ghetto. My outward eye surveys
sidewalk crevices for signs
of nightlife, but the dark lines
remain still. Even at this black hour
the doors of three small “holy-roller”
churches stand open, revealing
circles of the faithful unready
to cease the lingering conversation
that follows midweek prayer.

I am talking with the angel
inside my head, the angel who
appears now in black and white,
now in color. I have been reading
a book—this scholar of religion
describes “Bible-believers” and their
culture, and their way of doing
has me reliving—with grief and
pain—my youth and early manhood:
a youth stolen on the wings of the gospel
dove, an early manhood mocked
by a childhood of fear and trembling:
an anxiety of apocalypse.

The angel inside my head
wants to know if I will confess
my unbelief to a trusted friend,
but my integrity lies buried
underneath a mound of earth
and stone as I prepare my soul
to embrace the official myth
for one more year so I can feed
my flesh and the flesh of my only
daughter. I do this without any

promise that the rotting form
of this integrity will rise
again when a year, or three,
has passed: I pay a dearer price
for laying down the cross of Christ
than I ever have for taking it up.

When I return to my one-room
hovel I will read more, despite
the grief, searching for a new kind
of strength to fight the siren song
that calls me back to what I fear
may be a fundamentally dead
marriage, a tempting harmony
moving in my fear that a little girl
will suffer the fate of her father.

My father, God bless him, needed
this old-time religion to order
the chaos of his childhood terrors.
This religion has been, by God's grace,
the death of me. I am killed
instantly, again and again,
like Isaac in his memory,
and Jesus in his one dark
moment of eternity.

[published in *Spume* 3 (2004): 20-21]