dlv

Wolfgang Bühne (editor)

rest for restless

Christliche
Literatur-Verbreitung
Postfach 110135 • 33661 Bielefeld

1st English edition 2003

© Copyright of the German edition:
by CLV · Christliche Literatur-Verbreitung, Germany
© Copyright of the English edition:
2003 by CLV · Christliche Literatur-Verbreitung
Postfach 11 01 35 · D-33661 Bielefeld
Internet: www.clv.de
Translation: Sarah Jayne Curtius
Cover: Eberhard Platte, Wuppertal
Typography: CLV
Printed in Germany: by Ebner & Spiegel, Ulm

ISBN 3-89397-492-X

Contents

Kurt Becker:
Deserting Life 7

Benedikt Peters:
An Illusion Shattered at the Foot
of the Himalayas 27

Ali Çobanoglu:
From Mohammed to Christ 41

Peter Hoffmann:
It happened on a Thursday 57

Eva Reiter:
My Life was sickening 71

Alois Wagner:
To the End of the Rainbow 83

Wolfgang Bühne:
How stupid do you have to be to believe? 123

Kurt Becker:
Deserting Life

My name is not important. The voices of the people who would call me by name can't reach me here. The people I can hear where I am now don't use my real name. My age would be a lie, because the winters I have experienced were colder than usual, just as the summers were hotter, autumn was always longer and spring shorter.

I was looking for a home where the sun comes up. But just when I thought I'd made it, the horizon disappeared and left me wandering around in the darkest night. Now I've come full circle and I'm back where I started.

My feet are sore from the stones I stubbed my toes on. My hands are covered in a horrible rash, infected by the things I touched when I was feeling my way through the darkness.

I feel tired. My emotions are more restless than before because a heart takes longer to die when it's gone cold.

Not a day passed when I did not see injustice, violence, clichés and lies get the upper hand. And although I managed to keep myself free of the impure feeling of hate, I still felt destruction spread through my soul.

I am with the Foreign Legion!

The contract bound me to obedience for five years, to serve with honour and allegiance to the point of death. I sold myself to this, although I don't know who or what led me to do it.

What can possibly make a person serve a foreign country, in a foreign place under a foreign name and be willing to die for their cause?

The harshest punishment in the Foreign Legion is reserved for deserters. Although, in reality, every legionaire is a deserter: deserting life itself!

Everyone who joins the Legion has a crack in their souls before they join. But in the Foreign Legion this crack grows to a rift and nothing but death can cleave that rift.

We were all running – running away from something or other. Some were running away from prison sentences or financial problems, others were running away from family or difficulties. Others simply wanted to escape the grey reality of every day life. One thing united us all: we were all looking for something.

It's a sad fact that few ask themselves what they are actually hoping to find. So they grasp the first things that come along to try and quench their thirst in their souls. These things make a legionaire's life easier, while making it more difficult at the same time.

It was like being bound by a rope and I know how tight it can cut into your skin and how tight the knots can be tied. I saw that every new legionaire was a refreshment for us. I always managed to find something human in everyone who joined, even if I had to search for a long time to find it in some of them. I was so happy when I discovered these human traits and I was all the more disappointed to find that they slowly disappeared. With time, there was no trace of these qualities at all and I asked myself whether these people were still human or whether they were machines. They were fully automatic and ready to fulfil their function until, one day, they would break down.

Once I started to think about things like that, I started to get afraid of myself.

I wanted to get out. But how?

I began to re-live the past seven years since I ran away from home at the age of 14. The scenes were in my head but each adventure had left such a mark on my memory that even thinking about them hurt. It was agony but I just couldn't stop thinking about it all.

I'd wandered all over the world. I crossed borders illegally and had been deported. I'd sat in different prisons and refugee camps, earned money by delivering advertisements, washing plates, selling newspapers. I worked as a barman, as a kitchen boy, as a

baker, as a hairdresser, as an electrician for ovens and as a chauffeur. I'd slept in hotels, as a lodger, on park benches, in unfinished buildings, and in cellars.

I hitchhiked for thousands of miles and travelled with gypsies for two months.

The ups and downs in my life were so extreme that my emotions became a rough sea, a stormy ocean in which all I had to cling to was a ridiculously small raft. I wavered between terror, fearing that my raft would be broken to pieces, and joy over the fact that it and I were still in one piece.

But my life had no aim and if I did manage to set my sights on anything, it felt as if strong winds would drive my little raft off course. If I did manage to get my feet on solid ground, I found that I had got so used to the ups and downs that I couldn't find peace. Nothing could gratify me – no drugs, no women. Nothing. I tried it all but sooner or later I left it all behind.

I had nothing that meant anything to me, except my friends.

I got to know Starin in a refugee camp near Belgrad. We didn't know his real name, but we called him Starin which means 'friend' because he was a real mate, always in a good mood and very helpful.

We never knew how he managed it, but he always managed to get hold of things which we were not really supposed to have. Things that weren't absolutely vital for survival. We didn't care where he'd got these things, we were just glad he'd got them. At 15, I was the youngest, although I told them I was 19. Perhaps that was why I was his best friend. The day that I was sent to a different camp, I wanted to give him my

watch as thanks for all he'd done for me. I'd managed to keep my watch despite all the checks. But he said he couldn't accept such a gift.

That same day I found out why he didn't want to have my watch: He had been living in this camp of his own free will for two years already. He wanted no more from life than his camp bed next to the dilapidated fireplace and the camp ration with the biggest piece of meat. For these privileges, he conveyed information to the camp administration. He got the refugees to tell him about their past and thus put an end to any carefully prepared escape attempts by Eastern European refugees.

I spent only five weeks in this camp but I know that four men are still in prison in Poland and Hungary today because Starin wanted no more than his camp bed next to the dilapidated fireplace and the camp ration with the biggest piece of meat.

Mahmud was from Lebanon. He was 24 and had fled the army in Beirut because he believed that war was madness. We met in Goriza where we illegally crossed the border from Yugoslavia to Italy. Neither of us had a passport.

Nothing in life seemed was a problem any more, because he would never have to carry a weapon again. He said to me in good English, "Take this if you want!" and gave me his flick knife.

Then he told me all about his country and the people there. They were very hospitable and deeply religious. He would never let a compatriot down or vice versa. He said, "I'll teach you Arabic and when the war is over you'll have to come and visit me. Beirut is unforgettable!"

The Italians wanted to deport him, but in the same week he was beaten up by three Lebanese Arabs in front of the Lebanese Consulate. They didn't agree with him about something.

When I visited him in hospital in Padritchiano a day later, he asked me to give him back his flick knife. When we shook hands for the last time, he murmured, "I'm sorry!"

Yes, and then there was my father.

It was Christmas Eve. I had heard that he had got married again and I knew that his new wife would not have me to stay even one night in his house.

When I came to visit him, he always got me a guest room somewhere in the suburbs where it was cheaper.

I visited my father this time without setting foot in his house. I stood outside the window for a while, looking in at the decorations in the room. It was cold and it was snowing. But just seeing all of that brought my blood to the boil. I couldn't make out what song he and his wife had started singing so I went to the telephone box opposite the house, waited until the singing had stopped and dialed his number. "Your son wishes you a merry Christmas and a happy new year!" when he asked where I was, I just answered, "So far away and yet so near, father!"

I could see him leaning on the table as he wished me a happy Christmas, too and asked me to come home again sometime.

I didn't even bother putting the phone back properly. I left the telephone box and went out into the 'Silent night, holy night'. Alone once again.

Some time later I met Bob. That is, at first, we didn't want to get to know one another at all. We were arguing about a train left in a small train station in the North of England which was ideal to spend cold nights in.

There wasn't just room for two – we would have had enough room to accommodate a whole cricket team. But he was there first and when I climbed in through a window, he wanted to get rid of me.

He said, "If there are two of us here, then somebody else won't be long in coming and then the police will catch us all." And apart from that, he wanted to be alone. That was something that I couldn't accept though and as we couldn't resolve the conflict any other way, we did so according to the rules of the jungle. I was lucky and he had a broken jaw. We both spent the night in the train but neither of us slept: the pain stopped him from sleeping and his whimpering stopped me from sleeping. He had to go to hospital the next day and, for people like us, that meant trouble, money problems and sometimes even prison.

But Bob disliked prison even more than a normal way of life. So, after they had fixed his jaw, we went to work selling sweets to pay the hospital costs. He sold ice cream and I sold lollipops. When we had earned enough to pay the bill and I'd got fed up with selling sweets, I moved on. Bob stayed in the business and today he has 4 cars which supply a whole area with ice cream and sweets.

Patrice was of Italian descent, brought up in USA and, when I met her, she'd already been living in Holland for three years.

I met her on some street and she asked me if I had some 'stuff'. I liked the look of her, so I lied and said, "Yes". She invited me to her flat, but when I confessed why I hadn't answered her question truthfully, her former friendly, polite nature disappeared. She had an astounding range of vocabulary but I was patient. I remained quiet until she realised that her abuse had no effect on me.

Finally, she showered her problems down on me. I wanted to help her and so I got her what she wanted. I wanted to see her happy. And that night she was happy – and so was I. Although I had no idea what it meant to be happy!

Yes, all of them and hundreds more – these people were precious to me. Precious, because they were my only 'possessions'. They were like a fire inside me, at which I could warm myself. At the same time, they were the fire which destroyed me.

In the meantime, I had joined the Foreign Legion. They offered me somewhere to stay, but that was all. I still felt a great darkness inside me and I longed for the unrest and discontent to come to an end. What makes me different from the others?

Once I started to think about the advantages and disadvantages of being different from everyone else, I began to feel worthless. What is a person worth? Can their worth increase or decrease? How much is my life worth? What makes someone precious?

I searched feverishly for answers to these questions. I had to find the answer because I knew that something was missing, something I had never known in every-thing else I had experienced. The feeling that

I had lived life to the full and there was nothing else to see, disappeared immediately.

As time went by, I became convinced that there was something waiting for me, something that I hadn't taken any notice of before.

This something was waiting for me: the answer to my questions, real freedom, assurance and a new beginning. All of this was a person, standing right behind me. And this person would soon get me to turn around!

It was in March of that year, when I came back to the garrison in Corsica after a four month campaign in East Africa. I had ten days holiday to accustom myself to the climate.

One evening I and two others from the Legion went to the city and planned to visit one of our favourite bars at the Calvi Hotel. But we were to be disappointed – the bar was closed. The hotel had been rented by some Germans and the taxi driver told us that we wouldn't be allowed in. For us, all the more reason to go!

It was early afternoon and we didn't meet anyone except Brigitte, the receptionist. She confirmed what we had heard from the taxi driver, but instead of telling us we couldn't come, she invited us to join the group that evening.

My friends Fred and Paul were from Holland and Sicily respectively, but both spoke German and we could remember a number of evenings we'd spent with tourists and so we accepted the invitation. We knew that we'd be the only soldiers there and we were glad. We'd seen enough of uniforms.

The room was full when we came back in the evening. I remember it well: a man with a beard was standing in the middle with a guitar. He smiled at us and sang: "I've got the joy down in my heart ..." and then everyone in the room started singing, "Joy, joy, joy, joy," and we felt nothing but this joy.

They brought chairs for us and, as we were used to doing, we took the chairs and were going to look for a place at the back. When we came in, I'd noticed an old lady not just singing but clapping her hands like the woodcutters in Tirol. When I took my chair and tried to take it to the back, she came up and stopped me. She took hold of my arm and I was forced to put the chair down and sit on it. She gave me a songbook and after the verse about joy, came verses about peace, love and rest and I started asking myself how there could be room in my heart for all these things.

Fred, the Dutchman said to me, "They liven up quickly," and I had to agree. But then we noticed that there were Bibles on the tables, not wine and beer bottles as usual. We were a little confused now. This wasn't a church service, so what were the Bibles doing on the tables?

"It's lovely of you to come. Perhaps you'd like to introduce yourselves," said the man with the beard. He seemed to be the spokesman. I got up and introduced myself, as I'd been taught. "My name is Kurt and ..." Without thinking about it, I had just introduced myself with my real name and not as Karl, the name I used in the legion. They'd really shaken me up!

Then my two friends introduced themselves and it was the first time I heard their real names, although

we'd known each other for two years! Strange, I thought to myself. But then the old lady gave me a poke because I'd forgotten to join in the next song that the man with the beard had started to play.

It was too high for me so I just moved my lips and I started sweating. "I hope the old lady doesn't notice anything." But she grinned at me, winked and nodded, like my mother used to when I was young and was telling someone about my most recent roguish pranks.

The man with the beard spoke again, "Let us bow our heads in prayer." So it *was* a service! I desperately tried to remember the words of the Lord's Prayer, which I'd learnt off by heart in school. Now I'm going to make a fool of myself, I thought. I couldn't remember anything relevant between Father and Heaven and Earth. But then the old lady started to talk. What was wrong with her? She was thanking someone for the lovely boat trip but who was she talking to? I didn't dare open my eyes although I really wanted to know. But perhaps the man with the beard was watching me, I thought. And then he would know that I wasn't a Christian. And then it would all be over. They wouldn't treat me like one of their own and the joy that I had felt would disappear just as quickly as it had come over me.

"God, we thank you for these three legionaires who You have led to us. And we pray that they will come to know You. That they will come to You and that You will give them new, eternal life!" These words came from a corner somewhere and I don't know who spoke them but I was deeply moved. All

that about a new life would have to wait though. My contract with the legion ran until 1979.

One by one, they prayed for my friends and me.

They talked to God in a very simple manner, as if they were talking to a friend. You got the impression that the Lord was sitting on one of the free chairs in the room or on the chair the man with the beard had been sitting on. Or was he inside each of the people present?

Everyone thanked God for something or brought him their problems. The others confirmed their support with a loud 'Amen'. They asked the Lord for forgiveness for things that would never have given me a guilty conscience and I started to envy these people. How free and pure they must be to be thanking God and praying for things that I took for granted. I wanted to start praying like that, too but what would a good God say if I just emptied my soul out to him? And what would the people think? No, that was impossible! And so I kept quiet. But as I did so, the first part of the joy I had felt started to slip away and I no longer felt like I belonged.

This problem was soon to be resolved, however. Every spare minute that we had, we spent with these people. And every conversation we had with them led to the same conclusion: "Jesus Christ is risen from the dead!" That was something we just couldn't understand.

The more I thought about that, the less important everything else in life became.

These Christians were so friendly and they provided us with tracts and Christian books. We put most of them aside for a while.

One book title really jumped out at me, though: "From Prison to the Pulpit". Were there really men who stand in the pulpit and preach but who weren't theologians but dropouts like me.

What would a criminal have to say from the pulpit? Even before I'd finished reading the book, hope began to grow in my heart. Only God could change a person like that.

I looked at my messed up life once again and one question kept recurring in my mind: what is the meaning of my life? I couldn't get around this question any longer.

Once in our lives, every one of us has to put their finger through the wallpaper of our lives and ask, "What's behind it all? Have I lived my life or destroyed it? Is there any more to life than what I have experienced?"

Although I had experienced a lot of different things, I asked myself, Was that it?

Is my purpose in life just to fulfil other people's requirements? It's not a coincidence that we start asking questions about the purpose in life: Each one of us is meant to ask ourselves this question. Perhaps we try to push the question aside, or try to forget it by trying to escape in work, hobbies, love affairs, alcohol, drugs or, like I did, in adventure. But we can't ignore this question. If you can't find an answer to it, it'll destroy you.

And then these people came to me with their Jesus. They claimed that there is only one answer which stands the test when everything else is proved untrue. All the answers offered by people, all their ideas which

seemed to be true, are worth nothing when we are confronted with death. There is only one answer which remains then and that is from the person who claimed to be personified truth and calls to every living thing:

"I am the way, the truth and the life!" Jesus Christ. I remembered a story about our former mayor in the small village where I used to live. Two women had had an argument. The first one went to the mayor and told him what had happened. He listened to her and then said, "Madam, if that is what happened, then you are most certainly in the right." The woman was very pleased and went home.

Shortly afterwards, the other woman came to the mayor and told him what had happened from her perspective. He listened, and when she had finished, he said, "If that is what happened then you are in the right."

The secretary who had been listening to all this shook her head and said to the mayor, "But you can't do that. You can't say that both of them were in the right!"

He laid his hand on her shoulder and said, "I think you're right there!"

In today's world, we are in danger of agreeing with everyone just to keep the peace. We are inundated with so much information. A lot of people feel the need to shut themselves off just to retain some sort of emotional space. But we can't avoid being influenced by these things. Just think about radio, television, magazines, things we get in the post. Inside, our souls are shouting, "Stop it! Leave me in peace!" We are no

longer able to react to new information. We couldn't apply it to our lives, even if our life depended on it.

One consequence of this is that we have changed the way we listen. In order to protect ourselves from the noise around us, we have developed a psychological defence system, a sort of filter. This filter only allows certain messages through. We only hear messages which appear to meet our needs or to help us to reach our own personal goals.

We are trying to be happy with what the advertising business tells us will make us happy. We aren't but the advertising industry still tries to convince us that product A or system B will make us truly happy. If we do buy this or that product, we feel discontented and think there must be something wrong with us. We have to hide this from everyone else though and so we make every effort to appear nice, attractive and balanced even if we actually feel lonely, empty and hopeless. We all know how to play the adept, open-minded modern man. We see it everywhere. And as we all know how to pretend to be happy and balanced, the loneliness increases when we meet someone else who is wearing the same mask.

I soon realised that there was much more involved than just acknowledging that someone was 'in the right'. I'd been searching for an answer for too long, had all too often reached out my hand to find that there was nothing there. I didn't want to fall for another deception or fail to recognise the truth.

The Christians maintained: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. He is alive. He is nearer than the air we breathe. This was too challenging an allegation to

answer with "Yes, maybe you're right!" Either Jesus Christ is a fairy tale figure and the Christians are lying. Or this man is God in the flesh. All sorts of people, from Muslims to Catholics, have covered up so many of the facts, added to or taken away from the central message, that it is often hard to find it at all. Often we can only find our way past the lies and false teaching when we turn to Jesus Christ himself, when we look at the cross.

It was the cross of Christ which fascinated me. God said that on the cross, the punishment I deserved was paid. The price I and everyone else should have paid – death!

When I read the account of the crucifixion in the Bible and some other historical accounts about crucifixion it all came alive for me.

I had the feeling that it was happening before my very eyes.

The man who had been condemned lay on the ground and was nailed to the crossbeam. The nails were driven between the bones in his wrist, causing unbearable pain.

Then he was drawn up on a pole that was three metres high. His feet were crossed one over the other and a long nail driven through them. The soldiers responsible for the execution got his clothes. The man on the cross was terribly thirsty, had awful headaches and high fever. Hanging on the cross made breathing very difficult and the only way to prevent suffocation was for the man to push himself up on the nail that was through his feet. It was a fight with death, the man on the cross pushing himself up and catching his

breath and then letting himself down again and almost suffocating.

I could no longer say: I wasn't there when it happened. No-one can say that because Jesus died for us then, and if we don't want to have anything to do with him then we continue to crucify him today. Our desires, our aims, our words and deeds are like the strikes of the hammer on one of the nails on the cross. A life lived without him is our death sentence.

I had lived wrongly up until that point. I had ridiculed him and hammered the nails into his hands and feet. And he said to me, "That hurts! Every time you hit the hammer, every desire, every aim, everything you say, everything you do without me, hurts me. But I love you! I love ***you*** and I want to save you!"

I longed to have this new life that Jesus offered and which is on offer to every single person. I understood that Jesus Christ wanted me, that his words were meant for me and that his death could be my death so that I could receive new life through his resurrection. Suddenly I realised that I could die once and for all and then live once and for all. This Jesus said to me, "Kurt, you're a sinner, but I love you. I want to welcome you, as I want to welcome all. Come to me!"

I heard this message while I was on the load area of a lorry on a manoeuvre. I was reading John's gospel during the journey.

If you are familiar with the roads in Corsica, you'll understand why I read each word seven times.

I could still see the crucifixion in my mind's eye as I put the gospel aside. I couldn't wait to speak to this Lord in peace and quiet that evening.

I couldn't do anything but fall on my knees and say, "Lord, here I am. I give my life to you. Please keep everything about me that is artificial, everything that I have added, that is false. And give all that is natural. Fill me and take over control in my life!"

I remembered the words that Jesus had spoken, "Whoever believes in me will have eternal life." I saw the cross before me once again. The cross which is such a familiar symbol, but which we have barred from our lives. We love to see it on towers, on walls or on chains around our necks, but in reality we hate it. We confess it with our lips but our lifestyle denies it. Perhaps there is no hypocrisy comparable to the hypocrisy in our relationship to the cross.

For some it is an idol, for others a magical miraculous sign, for someone else it is a flaming battle standard, and for the next person, it's a valuable piece of jewellery. Some have made a black symbol of mourning out of it and for others again it is an outrage. And yet, it is the gallows on which Jesus died for me.

I was filled with peace and I knew that I had been forgiven.

I began reading the Bible and I understood it. Since then my prayer has been that God would make me a man who believes in life and always grasps life without haste but also without hesitation.

I want to be someone who knows that what God has prepared for me is good and who knows that there is no point in desiring something that God has not set aside for me.

I want to be someone who believes that every day should be lived to the full, that our efforts will be

rewarded and someone who trusts in the One who knows the reason for all things. I pray that God will make me a man who has his passions and interests, his demands and moods under control. I want to be a man who knows how to fight and has learnt to suffer for all that is given to us.

I want to be a man who detests his enemies and can, if necessary, use violence against them. I want to do this in the knowledge that my only enemies are the power of evil and my own heart.

I want to learn to love the Lord God with all the force of sacrifice, with all my emotions, with all my intelligence and all my energy, all of which are given by God himself.

And finally, a man who knows how to die. Who knows what it means to give his life: not to lose his life, but to have saved it. Who knows that transience will be penetrated in eternity.

Benedikt Peters:

An Illusion Shattered at the Foot of the Himalayas

"Ahl-ul-kitab" – "People of the Book" – This is how Muslims describe Christians.

I would never have thought that I would belong to this 'People of the Book' one day. But the Bible, the Book of Books, has changed my life.

I was born and grew up in Finland, in a country where it was quite normal twenty years ago to have a Bible in the house and read from it now and again. However, my family had nothing to do with the Bible.

My family moved to Switzerland and when the time came for me to be confirmed I made a clear decision. I was only really going along with it because it

was the done thing. At the Confirmation service, we were supposed to swear a sort of an oath in which we promised to live our lives under the guidance of Jesus Christ. We didn't have to speak this oath out loud, though, in which case I would have been lying. We could just answer the Pastor's question in our hearts and so I answered with conviction:

"No, I don't want to do that. I'm not the slightest bit interested in following Jesus."

Of course, I still got confirmed but my confirmation was my way of saying farewell to religion and Christianity. In the four or five years which followed, I never touched a Bible and never went to anything that had the slightest thing to do with Christianity.

After my 'A' levels, I wanted to see the world. I thought everything was so small-time, so inhibited, far too exact, too formal and too conforming in Switzerland. I wanted to be free and do what I wanted. And as far as I was concerned that was only possible in one country. A country where they didn't take life so seriously, where I wouldn't have to work, where I could easily get the things I enjoyed.

For me there was only one place to be: India, the promised land. A year before I left, I would often meet up with a friend of mine and we would imagine how it would be in the land of our dreams. We dreamed of being somewhere at the foot of the Himalayas, in a world of peace, where the people are content, where we would have a house, not have to work and, most importantly have a sufficient supply of the drugs, which we were taking at the time Without drugs life was unbearable.

They were wonderful dreams, but dreams like that rarely come true. The amazing thing was that our dream really did come true.

There came a day when I was living in peaceful India, at the foot of the Himalayas in a house I'd rented. I had enough money not to have to work just yet and, most importantly, I had drugs. My dreams had come true and I should have been the happiest person alive. I couldn't have been more wrong! My illusions were shattered and I was unhappier than ever before.

Living there in the tranquillity at the foot of the Himalayas, I realised that I had everything I had ever wanted and yet I still didn't have what I was really looking for: happiness and contentment.

After thinking long and hard about this, I came to the conclusion: I haven't found happiness here in India. I'll have to try something else. I'll go back to my formal Switzerland, stop taking drugs, get a proper job, get married and lead a normal, middle class life. That's probably the way to contentment.

So, I went back to Switzerland, stopped taking drugs and got a proper job. And yet in the autumn of 1971, a few months before my 21st birthday, I was standing on the balcony of our house and cursing the day I was born.

I didn't argue with God because I didn't believe he existed. I just hated the fact that I existed. Why did I have to live on this earth, without having been asked, without me having had the chance to agree to anything?

Life was an awful burden and as I was standing on that balcony, I thought, "If only I could cease to exist! If only I could just stop living!"

If I had been braver, I would have jumped to my death. But one thought held me back: If I jump then my body will be dead. But my body hadn't given me any trouble up until that point. I wasn't ill, physically I was fine. But what would happen to my ego, my personality? That was the part of me which was causing all the trouble. Would my ego be destroyed too, or would I continue to exist somehow?

This uncertainty made me hesitate.

At this desperate time in my life, I had a visit from an old friend who used to lead the same sort of lifestyle as I did. I hadn't seen him for more than a year and when I set eyes on him I realised that he had completely changed. I'd never met anyone who looked at life like he did. It didn't take long before he let me in on his secret: He'd started to read the Bible and now he was following God, who had given him new life. That was the way he put it. Then he gave me New Testament and told me, "Read it!"

Seeing my friend so changed made me curious and I started reading the book that I had always thought to be unbearably boring. For the first time in my life, I read the New Testament voluntarily and with interest. I started with the gospel of Matthew and while I was reading, it spoke to me. This book had something that I had never read or heard of before and, although I couldn't say what it was, I found it compelling. I just kept on reading until I came to Matthew 11 v 28: ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."***

Jesus' words really hit me. I couldn't explain why, but I knew it was true!

I read on, *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*

That was exactly what I was looking for: rest, contentment, fulfilment, peace. I thought, if that's true then I want to learn from this Jesus! I'm going to read what else he has to say and then do what he tells me to do.

I was about to change my job and I had an interview in a company in St. Gallen. I had an hour to kill before my interview and so I went for a walk. I felt drawn to the town's magnificent cathedral. I thought this would be a good place to read the Bible so I went in, sat down in one of the pews and began to read John's gospel. While I was reading, I suddenly knew: God does exist, he ***is***! This revelation overcame me and I fell to my knees. I didn't care if there were people there who would have laughed at me. I prayed one short phrase: O God, forgive! No more than that. Then I got up, sat down again and knew that God had heard my prayer and forgiven me.

As I was sitting there I thought back on my life. I had denied God and lived as if I were my own God. I realised how wrong my life had been up until then and all I could say to God was: Forgive!

That was my first real encounter with the living God.

Now I wanted to live with the living God that I had encountered. I wanted to get to know him better and let him have the say in my life. So I carried on reading the Bible and I got hold of some more literature to get to know more about God. Because I didn't know any

better, I read books about Hinduism, studied Buddha and started to read the Koran. All because I wanted to know more about God.

At the time, I was spending a lot of time with my friend Peter who had the same questions as I did. Together we went to different churches and heard both Catholic and Protestant sermons. We read the Bible together and talked about what we'd read.

Looking at the different denominations and religions at least helped us to give our lives some sort of purpose.

However, we soon came to the conclusion once again that life in Switzerland was far too materialistic. We wanted to go back to India because we were convinced that the people there were far more spiritual. We planned to go to India and find a spiritual leader, a Guru to help us become united to the Godhead. According to Hinduism, that is only possible through a medium, a guru who has already realised complete consciousness of God. We were determined to learn under a guru.

It seemes only natural to us to take a New Testament, Buddha's Proverbs and the Bhagavadgita along with us to India.

We arrived in Pakistan first and were forced to stay because the war between Pakistan and India had just broken out.

Whenever we read any of these religious books I would pray again and again, "O God, show me the right way!" I wasn't sure whether all the books said the same thing or whether it didn't matter which religion you chose as long as you practised it with a sin-

cere heart. That's why I prayed that God would show me the right way. I was looking for confirmation.

God often answers our prayers in amazing ways and sometimes he even uses a theft.

We had gone into the town to do some shopping and had hidden our luggage in what we thought was a safe place. For some reason I went back and took the New Testament out of my bag. I took nothing else, though.

When we got back from the town that evening we found that our bags had been stolen. The only thing I had left was the New Testament!

At first I was really angry about the theft and wrote straight to my brother in Sweden asking him to buy copies of the stolen books and send them to me. But when I'd calmed down a little and thought about it, I began to ask God whether he was trying to tell me something by leaving me with just the New Testament.

Soon we got to know some committed Christians in Pakistan who invited us to their meetings. By spending time with these Christians, I heard more and more of the biblical message and had time to study the Bible intensively for about a year. It was then that I decided to follow Jesus Christ and not the founder of any of the other religions.

While I was in Pakistan I met my old friend from Switzerland again. The one who had given me my New Testament. As we both desperately wanted to follow Jesus, we stayed with the Pakistani Christians and read the Bible eagerly. We got into the habit of having a 'Quiet Time' every morning and had agreed that whoever was awake first would wake the other.

We then took it in turns to read the Bible, always reading the page which fell open first. Our greatest desire was to receive instructions from God so that we could follow them without compromise.

One morning we opened Matthew 10, where Jesus sends out the disciples and says to them in verse 9: ***"Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts."***

So, we weren't to possess any money!

"Take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff..."

So, no coat and no shoes!

So, that's what we did: We took our shoes and threw them away because we wanted to be obedient to God. We didn't have any problem as far as clothing was concerned because we only had the clothes on our backs anyway. I only had one worry: I still had $100 in travellers' cheques. We wondered what we should do with them. Finally, we decided to change them into rupees and then change the rupees into karachi and give it to the beggars.

So we set out, hitchhiking, and slept in a mosque that night. A mosque is quite a good place to sleep because there are so many mats on the floor and it's warm and dry.

We obviously slept particularly well that night because when we woke up all our worries were gone: our money and passports had been stolen!

By the time we got to the police station our passports had been handed in. The money was gone though and we got on our knees and thanked God for taking this burden from our shoulders!

We wanted to do everything that Jesus told us to do and so we reminded ourselves of his words: "... the worker deserves his wages ... When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you" (Luke 10 v 7-8).

We said to ourselves that if we trusted in Jesus Christ and his word, then he would look after us, even if we didn't have any money. So we decided that we would take food but no money from people who took us in. Looking back now I can only say that God had the most amazing patience with our ignorance and provided for us in amazing ways. We learnt valuable lessons about the promises and faithfulness of God.

Once, we were hitchhiking and spent the night in a grove with palm trees. The next morning we marched on, without breakfast. We had a rest at lunchtime, before setting off again at about 3 or 4p.m. So there we were, setting off and feeling very hungry, when a man came up to us. He invited us to sit down at a table laid for two. He didn't speak much. He just said, "Eat!" And when we'd finished eating, he said, "Goodbye. Take care!"

We set off, knowing and rejoicing in the fact that God had taken care of us.

We both knew that being a Christian meant following Jesus. We were soon to find out that there was more to it than that, though. We didn't have any difficulty doing superficial things, like walking barefoot, etc..., but following some of the other commands that Jesus gave was a little more difficult.

For example, I was aware that I was often very im-

patient or annoyed with my friend. Every attempt to change my behaviour failed. I knew that my behaviour was sinful. My Lord and Saviour would never have lived like that.

Finally, our sinful nature became so unbearable for us that we decided we would fast for 10 days so that we would become 'real' Christians. Jesus had fasted for 40 days but that seemed a bit much. So off we went to look for a little hut and then we started 'fasting' – we neither ate nor drank a thing.

After three days, I fainted and when I came round again, my friend said, "Perhaps we ought to drink some water at least."

So for the next seven days we drank water but didn't eat.

While we were fasting we read two books. We'd decided to read nothing except Revelation and the book by Thomas à Kempis the 'Imitation of Christ'. In the ten days we spent reading Revelation I hardly understood a thing. The only thing I did understand was that everyone has an eternal destiny, either in God's glory or in eternal condemnation. And then there was a phrase which kept recurring in Revelation about those who would 'overcome' and received a wonderful promise. Those words really hit me. I asked myself whether I would be among those who would remain faithful and hold on to Jesus, no matter what the price.

I didn't receive an answer to my question while we were fasting, but I didn't have to wait long for it.

When the ten days were up we went back to our Pakistani friends quite disillusioned.

A few nights later I couldn't sleep. So I got up and went out into the field. That night everything just fell into place. All of a sudden I understood Bible verses that I had often read but never understood. And as far as my question was concerned, Jesus' words came to mind: ***"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"*** (John 16 v 33).

I realised that I would never be able to fulfil everything that God wanted and that it was impossible to follow Jesus in my own strength. And because I can't do it, Jesus had to die for me. He died for my sin and for my inability to do anything good at all!

That night in the field, I fell down on my knees and asked Jesus to take my life in his hand and to come into my life to guide me and help me reach the goal. "You alone can overcome – I cannot."

That night, sometime in January 1973, I became a child of God.

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1 v 12).

It was then that I accepted Jesus and allowed him to take over control in my life. From that day on, I knew that I had received eternal life by his grace. A few days later, I heard an American who was working in India preach about how to be sure of your faith. Since then I have never doubted that a child of God has eternal life.

Because of this certainty about eternal life I knew no greater joy than to bear witness to my wonderful Lord and tell other people about him. While I was living in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, I spoke to lots of

Hindus and Moslems and some of them came to faith and it was wonderful to see them find life, rest and peace in Jesus Christ.

After living in Pakistan and India for two years, I came back to Switzerland. I married Helen, a Swiss girl and God gave us four children. We are glad that we both love the Lord and live for him.

I really came to love and treasure the Bible while I was in Pakistan and it has become even more precious to me since.

When I was a young Christian in India, I longed to have more faith and I would often pray: "Please, let me see you, just once so that my faith will grow and I won't doubt your power any longer!"

I am thankful that God never answered this prayer because something like that wouldn't have made my faith grow. In fact, the opposite is true. It would have made me dependent on things that I can see. There are only two things that can make our faith grow: the Word of God and an obedient heart.

The longer I read in this old and yet up-to-date book, the more I can confirm what the psalmist wrote about the Word of God thousands of years ago: *"I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil."*

Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them" (Psalm 119 v 162, 140).

I dug and dug for so long
But all I found was desert sand
Until I came across this book
Like gold and silver in my hand.

This wise book gave me the answers
To all the questions in my mind,
Peace like a warming blanket
Has been wrapped 'round my cold heart.

H. Dannnenbaum

Ali Çobanoglu: From Mohammed to Christ

"Don't move – this is a robbery!"

There I was, standing in front of two shop assistants in a grocer's shop in Westerwald with a gun in my hand. They were horrified and shouted, "Help!" but there was no one there to hear them. We'd waited for lunchtime and there were no customers in the shop.

We – my friend and I – weren't professionals. We burst into the shop, without anything to cover our faces. What turned out to be a more ominous mistake was that we had no experience whatsoever. While the scared women stood there with their hands in the air, my fiend ran to the till, emptied it, ran out of the shop

and he and the money disappeared in his car, leaving me standing there with the two women.

So there I was. Standing there with the gun in my hand, having been conned by my 'friend'. Now I was the one who wanted to call out for help. Now I saw through the game he'd been playing with me. The illusions were shattered. My life flashed before my eyes. When I realised there was no way out of this mess, I through the gun away and said to the two women who were still standing there with their hands up, "Don't be afraid, I won't harm you. I've made an awful mistake and I'll have to be punished. Call the police!"

As I said that, a young man came into the shop. Once he realised what was going on, he turned around and was about to run out again, when I shouted, "Call the police. I won't run away."

Ten minutes later, two policemen with guns came into the shop, which was now full of people. People had gathered in front of the shop to have a look, too, so I could well understand that the police were a little confused. "Who's the robber, then?" they asked. I answered and put my arms forward for them to put the hand cuffs on me. One of the shop assistants had now recovered from the initial shock and felt strong enough to start hitting me. Even if I could have, I wouldn't have tried to defend myself. I deserved it.

The police took me to the police station in Montabaur and put me in a cell. The next day I was taken to the magistrate and was then taken to Coblenz, where I was detained awaiting trial. I spent a sleepless night in that 2m x 3m cell in Montabaur. I was agitated and

extremely disappointed after what had happened and I thought long and hard about my life. So that was it. Where are my 'friends' now? For the first time in my life, I cried out to God, "Was it right that I stopped believing in Mohammed? Please show me your way and help me!"

In my mind's eye, I could see my home, a small village in East Anatolia where I grew up. We lived there in great poverty, not far away from the snow covered peaks of Mount Ararat. My father was a shepherd in this harsh, barren area which was often plagued by famine. In the summer it was unbearably hot and in the winter we had metres of snow. We didn't have enough dried manure to heat our little house with its two rooms, home to 12 people.

My parents wanted me, their second oldest son, to become a 'Hodja' (Muslim priest, prayer leader). Although my parents couldn't read themselves, they made sure that we children went to school. I also went to the 'Medrese' for 2-3 hours every day. That was an unofficial school, led by fanatical Muslims to teach us the Koran and Arabic. At 13 I started going to an official Hodja school where I started training for my future profession. At 20 I passed my exam and my parents and relations were delighted when I became our village Hodja.

Every morning, 'before one can tell the difference between a sheep and a wolf' – as it says – I would get up, wash my hands, feet and face three times and rinse my mouth and nose. Then I would climb up a mountain or onto a roof top to wake the village in the twilight: "Allahu akbar...." "Allah is great. There

is only one God and Mohammed is his prophet. God bless Mohammed. It is better to pray than to sleep. Come to prayer!"

One by one the sleepy villagers came together in the house which was the substitute for a mosque. Here I prayed in Arabic five times a day and read the relevant surahs from the Koran, although none of those present could understand it. Those who were particularly religious then prayed "Allah is great, Mohammed is his prophet, Allah is merciful ..." 33 times while counting their 'Tesbih' (a sort of rosary). I was the most powerful, most respected man in the village, my parents' pride and joy.

But this joy was only to last about 10 weeks. I was plagued by doubts about the credibility of the Koran. These doubts had begun years earlier, when an Armenian friend of mine offered two arguments against my beliefs:

1. It is ridiculous to believe that Arabic was a holy language and the only language spoken in paradise. My friend said that God speaks and understands all languages. That seemed reasonable, as I could speak three languages myself: Kurdish, Turkish and Arabic. If that was the case, would my God and Creator only be able to understand one?

2. That Abraham was supposed to sacrifice Ishmael and not Isaac was false. The other holy books (the Bible) taught something different. Although I couldn't check his arguments, as we didn't have a Bible in our village, my trust in the Koran was shaken. In every service I led as Hodja, I felt like a hypocrite. I didn't believe what I was teaching others. One Friday, I

couldn't stand it any longer and I told the believers who had gathered, "Dear brothers, I feel like a liar. I don't believe what I'm preaching. I can't be your Hodja any longer."

Those present couldn't believe their ears. They got aggressive, started to hit me and spit on me. Others ran to my parents and told them they could only rid my family of the shame I had brought upon them if they killed me.

My parents cried. Their son had finally done something they could be proud of and now this!

I knew that this meant I couldn't stay at home any longer and so I moved to Bingöl, the next biggest town. My search for a job was hopeless and desperate. After a few days, I met some Kurdish socialists who were very friendly and invited me to visit them. I was impressed by their friendliness, their love of their homeland and their ideals. Soon I was a proud Kurd, too.

When the situation got critical in 1978, I and a few others went to Germany to study there, earn some money and support the Kurdish patriots.

First of all, I lived in Bad Godesberg and then in Westerwald. I studied the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and I became a convinced socialist, as I could see no alternative to their teaching. I worked hard and I earned enough to be able to support my parents as well.

In order to be able to stay in Germany, I was persuaded to marry a German woman. The marriage was a pretence. We met for the first and last time in 1982 at the registry office. Three years later she applied for

divorce because I couldn't see why I should pay maintenance for a wife I'd never lived with.

Among all the Kurds I knew in Germany, I had one good friend. We had shared a flat in Hachneburg. Later, he got married and got into financial difficulties. He asked me to lend him money. It was a large sum but he paid it back punctually so I had no qualms about lending him some more. However, when, after a few weeks, he asked me a third time, I had nothing left to give him. We were in his car on the way to Montabaur when I told him that I didn't have any more money to lend him. As we were approaching the village, he suddenly asked me, "What do you think about doing a robbery in this village?" I was sorry I couldn't help him out financially I was also shocked. His suggestion had taken me completely by surprise. Then he grinned at me and whispered, "You're afraid, eh?"
My pride was hurt and so I answered with a laugh, "Afraid? Of who then? I'll do it!" A few minutes later we were in the middle of that ridiculous robbery I described at the beginning.

Afterwards, I just wanted revenge. I wanted to kill that traitor!

After 13 months of detention, I was finally put on trial in March 1987 in Coblenz. Because I admitted everything and given myself up, my sentence was four years imprisonment. At first, I was put in prison in Duisburg-Hamborn and then in Schwerte-Ergste.

My prayer in the cell in Montabaur was answered while I was in detention in Coblenz where I was given a Turkish New Testament. I'd been in Germany for 8 years and I'd never been approached by any Christians

or been given a tract. I read the New Testament for about a year and I realised that God wanted me to turn to him and give up by godless lifestyle.

In Duisburg-Hamborn, I met Mr Schneider. He was the first dedicated Christian I'd ever met. He led a Bible Study group in the prison once a week. The first time I went along to this Bible Study group, I just burst out at the end, "You've told us a lot about Jesus Christ. But there are a lot of other things worth talking about, too. What have you got to say about peace in the world?"

He answered, "I belong to a peace group. My peace is Jesus Christ. Whoever believes in him will have peace and whoever rejects him will never find peace."

This simple answer struck me to the core. I was speechless and he asked me, "Why have you gone quiet?" I said, "Your answer was enough. I haven't got any more questions."

"I can tell, you're searching for something. What cell are you in?"

"Cell 153, Department II."

"I'll come and visit you." I didn't really expect him to come and visit me. But an hour later, he came to my cell and brought me a Turkish Bible and some postage stamps. He asked me whether he could pray for me there and then. I said yes and I expected him to recite some prayer, like the Muslims do. Instead, he got down on his knees and spoke to God as if he were talking to a friend, "Lord Jesus, help this young man to find you and please solve his problems! Amen."

After that prayer I couldn't stop myself from crying.

It was the first prayer that I had ever heard a Christian pray and I asked him, "When will we be able to meet up again?"

"I don't know whether we will meet again. But if you repent and accept Jesus Christ as your Saviour, then we'll meet in heaven one day."

That was the only time I met this man. A week later I was transferred to Schwerte-Engste. Now I had plenty of time and opportunity to study the Bible in search of answers to the questions I'd had all those years. Was Abraham supposed to sacrifice Isaac or Ishmael? I started reading Genesis and after 22 chapters I had the answer to my question. My Armenian friend was right.

A few days later the door of my cell was opened by an woman who introduced herself as Mrs Lehmkühler, the prison chaplain. She invited me to a Bible Study group and gave me a bar of chocolate and a packet of coffee. Only someone who has been in prison themselves can imagine how valuable those two things can be! I told her, "If I have time, maybe I'll come along to your group."

Well, time is one of the few things there is plenty of in prison, so it didn't take long before I started visiting the Bible Study group regularly. In the evenings, on my own in my cell, I had plenty to think. I realised that God wanted me to make a conscious decision for him. Yet a voice in my heart said, "You don't need to do that. You're not a sinner. You may have carried out a robbery but that's why you're in prison. Your prison sentence more than covers that little slip." I also had trouble with the question which only a Muslim can

understand: How can it be that God has a son? For a Muslim, or former Muslim like me, this was blasphemy. 'Shirk' (which means literally 'joining') is the greatest sin that a Muslim can commit. That's why Jesus Christ is rejected as the Son of God. For them it means that Mary was God's wife and fathered Jesus in that way. Giving God a partner like that is the sin that can never be forgiven, according to Muslim law.

And yet my heart grew more and more restless. What would happen if I had to stand before God? This thought plagued me for about 6 months. But then in November 1987, I experienced the greatest miracle of my life. The officer had just locked the door of my cell and wished me good night. While it was completely still all around me, a struggle began in my heart. I was desperate and plagued by thoughts of suicide and I said to myself, "Now or never!"

I opened up my Bible again and read John 14 verse 6: ***"I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."***
In my distress, I cried out loud, "Jesus, I want to come to you. Why can't I?!"

I fell on my knees, crying and shaking, and prayed, "Lord Jesus, you came to this earth to die on the cross for me. Please forgive my sins!"

When I got to my feet after this prayer I was a new man. Deep peace had driven out my hopelessness. All thought of revenge had disappeared as had the loneliness I had felt. I knew that Jesus was with me. Because I had received love and forgiveness, I could even forgive my 'friend', who had deceived and betrayed me. I was so happy, I couldn't keep it to myself.

I wrote it all down, three pages full, and sent it off to the Calendar Missionary Society who'd printed the calendar that was hanging on the wall of my cell.

The next day I couldn't wait to tell the others in the Bible Study group about my conversion. I will never forget how Mrs Lehmkühler reacted when she heard. She came up to me and hugged me sang the old song by Isaac Watts, in which he talks about blind eyes being opened. That was just what I had experienced the night before: my eyes had been opened for the Son of God!

It didn't take long before the men in my section started calling me 'religious'. I remember the first time I applied for a weekend out of prison. It was granted me but I was really sad because I didn't have anyone I could stay with for the weekend. One of the prisoners had noticed how sad I was looking and asked, "You look so miserable. Won't your Jesus help you anymore?"

I tried to explain to him that I didn't doubt that for a minute, but I was sad because I didn't know where I could spend my weekend. Then he said, "I know a religious nut a bit like you. I'll give you his address. Perhaps he'll have you."

I was delighted about this small ray of hope and said to him, "See, Jesus does help me after all ... even through you!"

A few days later the couple whose address I'd been given came to visit me for the first time.

Although I had never seen them before, I felt like I knew them. After I had told them my story, the man said, "You are my brother and you are always welcome to visit us!"

I spent the following weekend with this lovely couple and in the months that followed they became like parents for me. With them I went to a Christian meeting for the first time. Even though I didn't understand everything that went on I felt very at home.

When they took me back to prison in the evening, they gave me a very important piece of information: In Germany you can be released on parole for good behaviour. The next day was one of the days on which we were allowed to visit the other prisoners in the same section. I went to visit Ulrich, the one who had given me his friend's address, and asked him whether he would type my application for parole. He told me I must be completely mad and that an application for parole was a waste of time unless I had a lawyer. I just asked him if he could write the application for me because my German wasn't very good. Jesus would be my lawyer, I told him.

The prison administration laughed at me when I handed in my application, too and one of the prison officers who I usually got on well with, made fun of me. "If you believe in Jesus Christ then you'll experience even greater miracles," I told him and prayed for my application.

The evening before I was released, I could feel the presence of God in my cell. Somehow I knew that I would be released soon. I was really excited.

When the officer who had been making fun of me called me and said he had something to tell me, I told him that it wasn't necessary. I already knew that I was going to be released. A few minutes later the prison chaplain came along with my new friend who had

come to pick me up. At 3 p.m. I left the prison with two cardboard boxes under my arm containing everything I owned. I was so happy – I was free!

But then I was faced with a whole new set of problems. I was branded a jailbird and had no professional training to get a job.

Shortly after my release, a civil servant said to me, "We'll send you back to Turkey just like we've done with all the others!" I wasn't given a permanent residence permit. My residence was merely 'tolerated'. However, my release had come about so quickly that the authorities hadn't had time to prepare the papers for my deportation. I lived in a dusty cellar without any windows. In the nights I tossed and turned. I kept thinking, "You're going to be deported tomorrow!" Some of my old friends had been deported and they were already dead. The pressure kept increasing. The piece of paper on which the authorities had certified that I was 'tolerated awaiting deportation' was extended for three months at a time. I felt so miserable and lonely that I started to pray, "Lord Jesus, take me from this earth!" But God comforted me with the promise "I am coming soon!" The knowledge that he would then wipe every tear from my eyes and that there would be no more suffering and no more crying kept me going through that very difficult time.

Although a previously convicted foreigner had little chance of getting a job, I soon managed to get a job as a manual worker and plasterer. And not only that. I met the woman who is now my wife. She had become a Christian shortly before and in September 1989 we got married.

There were difficulties here, too, though. A week before the wedding the registry office refused to carry out the marriage. We'd already sent out all the invitations. But the living God had a way out – we got married in a registry office in Denmark and celebrated with a church service later in Germany. ***"So do not throw away your confidence; it will be greatly rewarded!" " Do not fear, for I am with you."*** These promises from the Bible gave us strength and encouraged us in times of need, when we could see no way out.

I longed to hear something from my family in Kurdistan. In the summer of 1998, my brother, whom I hadn't seen for more than 10 years, came to stay with me. He was still young and he couldn't speak much more German that 'ja' and 'nein'. He worked as a paver but the work was hard and he was very lonely. As I was working hard as a paver as well, I didn't find much time to spend with him. He stayed with me for six weeks and then disappeared just as suddenly as he had come. But he took a Bible back with him.

A few months later I got a letter from my sister-in-law. She had been married to my brother for seven years but hadn't been able to have children. A doctor had recommended special medication which might help. The tablets were extremely expensive in Turkey, so she asked me if I could buy some and send them to her. I asked a friend of mine who was a doctor what he thought about it and he told me not to do it. There was a good chance that the medication could result in the baby being disabled. So I prayed and sent her a cassette on which I told her it would be better for her not

to look to doctors for help but to give her life to Jesus. If God so desired, he could give them a baby. I also sent the DM150 which the medication would have cost, so that she didn't think I was trying to palm them off. Two months later I heard that she was pregnant, and another five months later, my brother Abraham phoned me up and cried down the phone, "We worship the same God as you now. My wife followed your advice and we experienced this wonderful answer to prayer." This was the second miracle God performed in my family.

One of my favourite Bible stories is the account of the man born blind who was healed by the power of God (John 9). As a Muslim, I was blind to the truth of the Bible for many years but God opened my eyes. My wife and I long to make our wonderful God known to the Turks and Kurds living in Germany as well as in my home country. That's not easy. Fanatical Muslims believe that they can earn themselves a place in heaven if they kill someone who has converted from Islam. It's quite understandable that I'm often confronted with hate when I tell fellow countrymen that I have become a Christian.

Once I was asked to help at a book table on the streets of Dortmund. It was a public declaration that I was on Jesus' side and at first, I was afraid. But as I prayed and read the promise in God's word: "Do not be afraid for I am with you!", I was encouraged.

So I went on the streets and, as I had feared, three Turkish men came up and threatened me. One of them was a 'Hodja'. "We're going to kill you! We're not going to stand by and let you spread this Christian

propaganda among our people!" But God helped me to stay friendly and I said to the Hodja, "Do you know what you've just done? In God's eyes you're a murderer. You threatened to kill me because you are filled with the spirit of Satan. I'm not spreading propaganda and I'm not being paid for what I'm doing. I'm just bearing witness to what God has done for me. My heart is no longer filled with thoughts of revenge, but with the Spirit of God and his love."

He refused to take a Bible off me and ripped up the tract I offered him. I asked him one more question, "Can Mohammed give you eternal life? Jesus Christ gave me eternal life!"

He was furious and, after he had tried to get me to go the mosque with him, he stomped off.

God gave me, a former Muslim, a new life and a wonderful future. A Muslim doesn't know what will happen to him when he dies. If you ask them, they just reply, "Tanri bilir" which means "Only God knows". They only know God as the judge who will weigh up all their good and bad deeds when they die. They only know the five things you have to do to please God: pray every day, acknowledge Allah every day, celebrate Ramada once a year, make a pilgrimage to Mecca yourself or have someone else do it on your behalf and give alms regularly. They reject Jesus Christ as the Son of God. They can't imagine that he died for them on the cross at Calvary. The Koran only accepts that Jesus was a great prophet in the line of Moses, David and Mohammed.

For me, he is my Saviour and I long to be able to bear witness to as many Muslims as possible – espe-

cially Turks and Kurds – as to what God has done in my life and what price he paid to set me free.

A pseudonym has been used to protect the identity of the man telling this story.

Peter Hoffmann

It happened on a Thursday

The shot tore my legs from underneath me. I fell to the floor and I knew, "Serious body wound– I won't survive it. In a couple of minutes it'll all be over." I was familiar with the ammunition and there was no deluding myself.

I couldn't move but strangely enough I didn't feel any pain and, faced with death, I was filled with peace. I knew that in a few moments time I would be with the God I had trusted my life to a few years before. In this knowledge, I prayed, "Lord, if I have said or done anything today which did not please you, then please forgive me. Receive me into your kingdom! Amen."

Then I heard footsteps. My colleagues came running and the team leader shouted, “Hang in there!”

Some of them tried to undo the belt of my gun. One colleague ran to the next stand and got a first-aid attendant but he didn’t have a medical case. When he saw me lying there after the others had cut my overall open, he just shook his head. No chance.

“Can we do any thing for you?” someone asked embarrassed.

“Pray to the living God!”

They stood there – feeling quite helpless. Men in their mid-twenties. Physically fit daredevils, on the lookout for the ultimate kick in their work in the day and living life to the full at night. Now they were kneeling around me. One of them stuttered:

“What is praying? How do you do it?”

“It doesn’t matter how you do it. Just believe in the living God!”

While the boys were quietly praying for me, or at least looking like they were, my friend Norbert ran up to us. In the meantime he’d been to radio for an emergency doctor. “Hang on in there!” someone said, “’Him upstairs’ has got no use for you just yet!”

He was trying to comfort me and he was quite shocked when I shouted with all the strength I had left, “Don’t blaspheme the name of the living God!”

Someone else asked, “How do you feel?”

“I can feel my stomach filling with blood. Breathing is becoming more difficult. I have inner bleeding. I’m going to die.”

The emergency helicopter landed the same time as the ambulance arrived. They laid me down and the

emergency doctor gave me an anaesthetic. Then I saw a white light which didn't blind me and I felt joy and deep peace before I lost consciousness.

Hostages in Cologne

Three years before, in the summer of 1995, Germany held its breath as we watched a hostage at the exhibition centre in Cologne. An Israeli from Russia had planned to hijack an aeroplane, but he got on the wrong bus and, instead of going to the airport, he found himself on a sightseeing tour of the city.

When they reached the exhibition centre, he shot the bus driver and forced the passengers into the back half of the bus. He blacked out the windows by hanging up clothing and fixed dynamite to the doors and to himself and kept the passengers covered with a pistol.

This was a case for the police special unit. We were alerted and we blocked off the exhibition centre.

We were taken to a building in the exhibition centre, just 15 metres away from the bus. Norbert and I stood behind mirrored glass so that we could watch everything that was going on but the hijacker couldn't see us.

We saw the dark, masked figure come to the front of the bus, where the dead bus driver was lying. He went to the cool box and took out something to drink. We noticed that there were 2 metres between the steering wheel at the front and the passengers squashed together at the back of the bus. When we realised this we worked out a plan and as our colleagues failed to come up with a better one, we were given the order to carry it out.

It was very hot that day and I was quite sure that the hijacker would soon go back to get something else to drink. When he did we would act. One colleague was to separate the hijacker from the passengers with a barrage and the other marksman was to aim at the hijacker. They took their positions and waited for my orders.

It was a very tense situation. The Israeli was shouting his demands in a mixture of Russian, Hebrew and German but no-one could understand him. One of the hostages, a boy, tried to break one of the windows. The hijacker held the gun at his head and I could only pray, "Please, Lord, don't let it happen!"

Suddenly we heard a loud bang. We later learned that, as the hijacker was going through the rows of seats, he stooped and asked a woman what nationality she was. She answered, "German", and he shot her on the spot. She fell to the floor, dead on the spot.

Two minutes later the Israeli came to the front of the bus, as we had expected and I gave the order, "Fire!".

The Israeli sank to the floor, wounded, but not dead and then shot himself. The dynamite on his body and on the doors of the bus turned out to be false.

No Tragic Coincidence

This drama took place three years earlier. I was a trainer and I wanted to practise a similar scene with my colleagues. They, as precision marksmen were to practise shooting at moving targets through a bus window. Of course, we were going to use special live ammunition.

I fixed a cardboard figure on to a cart which they were to shoot at when I had taken cover and pulled the cart towards me. I would then give the order over the radio, “Aim – Open fire!”

Once this exercise was successfully completed, I set the bus windscreen up for the figure to move behind it. I explained the exercise over the radio and said, “When the figure is behind the windscreen, open fire!” Then I disappeared with the cardboard figure on the cart so that I could pull it across towards me from my cover.

Just at this moment a colleague who happened to be a good friend of mine, arrived. He came too late to hear the security instructions. He just saw a free gun and heard my last instructions, “When the figure is behind the windscreen, open fire!”

He saw the figure moving and when it was behind the windscreen, he aimed, fired and had no idea that I was standing behind the figure and that he had hit me.

A Close Encounter with Death

18 hours later, I woke up briefly as I was being lifted from one bed to another. I regained consciousness a few hours later in intensive care. My wife and a colleague of mine were standing at my bedside.

My first question was, “What are my chances of survival?”

“About 90%!”

“Not bad.”

And then I slipped away again. Later a doctor came

and explained that I would be paralysed and would never be able to walk again. One of my kidneys had also been hit and it would probably have to be removed.

I was prepared for this news and yet still I was deeply aware of one thing: I was not the victim of a tragic accident. This was God's will. And God never makes any mistakes! This was the start of a new life. Completely different to my life up until now.

This 'new' life began with excruciating pains. My stomach had been opened up and my intestines completely removed in order to stabilise my smashed spine with metal plates. After the operation, my intestines didn't work properly and I felt like I was going to explode. I found the pain so unbearable that I begged a police doctor who came to visit me to kill me because I couldn't bear it any more.

I was so desperate and angry that I shouted, "Lord Jesus, you said that you carried my pain. You lied to me, you let me down!"

The doctor, who heard what I had said, came to me and said, "Jesus promised to save us from our sins not our pain."

I was so furious that I was not willing to consider this fact. I my anger, I did something awful – I cursed God!

After that I fell asleep and when I woke up - I could hardly believe it – I didn't have any more pain. I did have a very guilty conscience though.

The next day my friend and fellow policeman Albert visited. He is a Christian, too.

"Alfred, I cursed God!"

My friend is no stranger to suffering himself – a hand grenade tore his hand apart. He was shocked by what I had said, but after a while he said, Peter, God is bigger than your anger and your pain. He won't forsake you even now!"

Then we prayed together and I confessed my sin and asked God for forgiveness.

The pain returned and was even worse than before. But now I could still praise God despite the pain and in the weeks that followed I had plenty of chances to speak to doctors, nurses, patients and visitors about life and death, and about God and eternity.

How it all Began

How did I come to join the police special unit? How did I begin a relationship with God?

I started off as a police officer in a patrol car. Then I trained to become a police inspector and then I changed to the criminal police. This was too bureaucratic and boring for me, though. Sitting at a desk and writing reports wasn't the right thing for me. So I applied for the special unit, was accepted, did special training and later became squad leader. I enjoyed this job so much that I did extra training and flew to USA, for example, to find out more. I was finally made responsible for training. I wanted to give my fellow policemen practical experience and, at the same time, make it fun.

I think I succeeded in doing that. At least, there was a good atmosphere in our squad and we all stuck together. We worked hard in the day, usually training

with live ammunition and in the evening we 'relaxed' and 'recovered'.

I wasn't a very good example for my colleagues. I lied and cheated to get what I wanted and reach my goals.

While I was in USA I had seen police equipment, like extremely bright torches and other things which we didn't have in Germany. So as well as carrying out the training, I started up a mail order business for special equipment for police and it really took off.

Towards the end of 1994, a magazine invited me to an award ceremony in Stuttgart because I had won the first prize for a particularly innovative product.

The award ceremony took place on a pleasure steamer on the Neckar river and it soon became evident that all the people there had won a 'first prize'.

I was sitting at a table with a sales representative whom I didn't know. He asked me what my business principles were.

"I haven't got any particular principles."

"I work according to biblical principles and I'm a born again Christian!"

I groaned inside, fearing I had come across a Jehovah's Witness who would start pumping me for money any minute.

"There are principles set out in the Bible which God rewards, " he continued.

"And what would they be?"

"For example, honesty, good quality products, paying on time."

"I do that, too."

"And how is your company doing?"

"Very well, thanks."

“There you go then. You can see - it’s worth working according to biblical principles.”

I got through the evening, somehow. But one thing bothered me: what if God really did exist – a God who rewards those who live according to his rules?

When I got home that evening, for the first time in my life I felt grateful to a God I didn’t know but who did perhaps exist. Perhaps I could do a deal with God!

That was the reason that I went up to the attic to look for the Bible we were given when we got married. I flicked through it but couldn’t find any business ethics in it and didn’t understand a word I read.

Then I read the book that the sales representative had given me – M. Rush: “Management on Biblical Principles”. This book awakened my interest for God and I began to pray.

In a booklet from IVCG (International Association of Christian Businessmen) I read an article about Christian businessmen who had ‘given their lives to Jesus’ and on the last page there was an notice about a talk which was to take place in the Dorinth Hotel just 10km from my home in Krefeld.

I went along to the talk given by K. H. Binder, former sales manager in the large German publishing house, Burda.

I was gripped by this clear and convincing talk. He said that a person who is not prepared to accept an authority which decides on what is good and what is evil, loses their humanity and will eventually degenerate into a sort of a monster. He talked about the God of the Bible as being the highest authority,unlimited by

human authority. His values and standards will last for ever.

I was really impressed by what was said. At the end of the talk, we were invited to a basic Bible course on "What is Christianity according to the Bible?" and I was keen to go along.

Only three people attended the course but the leader wasn't discouraged. On the first evening he gave out Bibles and began, "Before we can start, we are going to have to accept that there is a God and that the Bible is God's word through which he speaks to us."

The first thing I said in reply was, "What about the starving children in Africa?"

'Today we are not talking about Africa, but about your life."

I had to admit that he was right. Up until now I hadn't given the starving children in Africa a thought, so I decided that I would listen and see what he had to say.

We read the letter to the Romans where it says that no-one is righteous in God's eyes. Every single person is a sinner. And the next point was that ***'the wages of sin is death'***.

We read the Ten Commandments and I knew, I'd broken every single one of them and if the Bible was right, then God would have to destroy me. All of a sudden I was terrified of being judged by God.

Then the leader said, "There is a way out of this. In John 3, it says, ***'Whoever believes in the Son (Jesus) has eternal life!'***

But first of all we'll have a break and then we'll continue."

I couldn't wait until after the break and I blurted my question out, "What do I have to do to become a Christian?"

Immediately, I realised that if I became a Christian, I would have to change my life to the way that God wanted. And I didn't really want to do that. I liked the way I was living. Money, freedom ... oh no, I couldn't give it all up!"

There was another problem, too. I could cope with the God of the Old Testament. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – that was my philosophy. But I had a problem with Jesus. This name was linked to a whole load of bad experiences, it reminded me of 'Jesus-sandals' and weakness.

But then I heard that the only way to God was through Jesus. In Jesus' own words: '***I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me***' (John 14 v 6)

If I wanted to become a Christian and have my sins forgiven – and that was something I desperately wanted – then I had no other choice. I had to accept Jesus as my Saviour and Lord.

I asked Jesus to forgive the life I had lived without God and thanked him for dying on the cross to take away my sin. I also asked him to forgive all the sins I would commit in the future, because I knew I would never be a model Christian.

After I had prayed this prayer it felt like a huge burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I felt like I had been freed from jail and I knew: this is it!

From that moment on I began reading the Bible and talking to God in prayer.

Under Observation

At work I couldn't hide the change in my life. My colleagues had known me for 12 years and I was quite famous for my crazy ideas. "Now he's really gone mad!" was the first reaction to my conversion.

I realised that I was constantly under observation. My colleagues wouldn't be impressed by clever words. They wanted to see whether my new ideas would have an effect on my life.

I wasn't perfect but my life had been turned upside down by God and that was what they noticed. I didn't need to lie to my bosses any more and when I talked to the people at work, our conversations took on a whole new meaning.

A lot of my colleagues were divorced and it wasn't difficult for them to come and talk to me about honest and difficult questions. When my colleagues understood that I wasn't interested in getting them into any particular church or club, they gradually became more open and many of them talked about God seriously for the first time.

The Future

After my accident, our team was at a standstill for a week. Everyone was shocked but they all came to the conclusion that God exists.

After more than 15 months in hospital and time in rehabilitation clinics, I attended a farewell party organised for me by my colleagues. I was in a wheelchair. We shared lots of memories and experiences. When it

came to the part of the evening where I was to give a speech, I just said, "I don't want to give a speech today. But I would like to pray with you and thank God for the time that we had together."

I thanked God with tears in my eyes and noticed that I was surrounded by men who were all pulling handkerchiefs out. One of them even left the room because he couldn't control himself.

I'm telling this story from my wheelchair in my house in Oberdachshausen, a small town between Würzburg and Ansbach, where my wife comes from.

We were fortunate to be able to build a house suitable for a handicapped person at relatively low cost. With the help of my wife and some other helpers I still run my business for police equipment and so still have something to do with my old job.

Even now, I have such awful nerve spasms that even the strongest painkillers like morphine can't still the pain.

In the evenings I'm often so worn out that I can't even pray. I just cry out to God that He will take me to Himself. But then my dear wife prays to God with me and for me.

I'm looking forward to the day when I will wake up in eternity without any pain. Where there are no more questions left unanswered and every tormenting thought will have come to an end!

Then I will be able to thank God from the bottom of my heart because I will understand why, on Thursday 9th July 1998, a friend and colleague shot me, and not the target 'by mistake'.

Eva Reiter

My Life was sickening

Daylight is streaming into my room. I should get up but all I want to do is hide. I just want to pull the bed clothes up over me and forget it all. Yesterday evening it happened again. I had decided to eat two sandwiches but then everything got out of control. One piece of cake, another piece, followed by chocolate .... and then, as usual, off to the toilet.

This morning I have to carry the consequences. Of course, the scales don't show I've put on a single pound but my body is rebelling. My stomach feels like it's trying to digest itself and the rest of my organs are tired from what happened in the night. Will I ever be

able to eat normally again? While I slowly get dressed, my thoughts go back in time.

I grew up in Vienna as the third of three sisters. My mother already had one daughter when she married my father. Andrea was born shortly after the wedding and two years later I came along.

We lived on the outskirts of Vienna where my father owned a flat. Sadly, I can't remember much about my early childhood. One thing I will never forget though: if we were ill or had had a bad dream, my father came to our bedside and comforted us. I think I've suppressed any memory of my mother. When I was eight my parents split up.

Up until then my life was completely normal. I was a happy little girl, I was active and open-minded. I ate anything I was offered and because my two sisters didn't eat well, my parents were glad that at least I had a good appetite and encouraged me to eat. As a result, I wasn't as thin as my sisters. But that didn't bother me, except once when I wanted to wear a mini skirt like my sisters. My father wouldn't let me. He said my legs were too 'solid'.

That made me sad. Perhaps my parents unconsciously treated me like a boy. After two girls they really wanted a boy. My intrepid, wild nature may have given that impression, too.

The fact that I was plump didn't bother me and I carried on eating normally.

Hunger for a sense of security

When my parents split up, my sisters and I went to a boarding school – a private convent run school in

Vienna. My parents agreed to pick us girls up from school alternately each weekend.

I quite liked life in boarding school. We had regular mealtimes, lessons, sport and free time. The nuns were friendly and mothered me a little, which I enjoyed. There was only one thing which made me sad: every time my mother was supposed to come and pick us up, we ended up waiting for hours at the school gates. The nuns used to feel sorry for us and eventually they would phone my father and he would come and pick us up.

Some time later my mother was stopped from seeing us and every time she wanted to see us she had to ask my father. But that didn't happen very often. Twice a year at most.

At the time, I couldn't understand why my mother wasn't interested in us and didn't seem to love us. Perhaps I thought it must be my fault.

I remember one weekend with my mother quite distinctly though. She came to pick us up and we were really excited. Then she introduced us to her new boyfriend who was her tennis trainer and ten years younger than her. We stayed in her new flat, ate cornflakes and spaghetti and realised that my mother would be glad when the weekend was over. She had more interesting things to do than bring up children, do the washing and clean children's rooms. She was working as a photo model and presenter. She organised fashion shows and promotions in department stores. She could finally do what she had always wanted to. A while later she got married and they moved to Voralberg where her husband worked in a casino.

As a child, I didn't understand all this and was deeply hurt.

After four years at boarding school, Andrea and I went to a normal school again. By then my father was living in the centre of Vienna and he did all he could to look after us. He often got up at 5 a.m. to make our lunch for us. As a sales representative, he had to travel around a lot and he often didn't get home until late in the evening. I can remember standing at the window, watching the street and hoping to see his face. While I was waiting for him, lots of different things went through my head. I thought about God, for example, about death and what would happen if dad didn't come home one night.

I didn't have much trouble at school. One day a new girl joined our class and she became a good friend of mine. Every time I went home with Barbara, her mother and grandmother would be waiting for her. They looked after her and prepared a delicious meal for us. I enjoyed visiting Barbara although it really brought home what I missed.

Up until then my eating habits were still relatively normal although I still ate a little bit too much to compensate for my problems, my frustration and loneliness.

There was a girl in my class who had had to re-sit a year, so she was a little older than I was. While we were having gym lessons one day, she told me what you had to do if you felt you'd eaten too much. It was really easy. All you had to do was stick your fingers down your throat and bring it back up again. If you did this you wouldn't get fat and no-one would know that

you'd eaten too much. So now I knew how to 'undo' what I had done.

I was at the age in which I wanted to go out with my friends in the evenings. We usually met in the pub the 'Donnerbrunnen' or at an ice cream parlour in Grinzig in Vienna. Mods, poppers and would-be mods and poppers met there. It was important to have the right clothes and it was great if you had a moped, or even better a Vespa or a friend who had one or the other.

High on an Empty Stomach

Once, when my father was away on business abroad, we made the most of our freedom and went to the disco for the first time. I had a guilty conscience as I was only 14 at the time, but we wanted to be part of the gang. A year later we were allowed to go out regularly but had to be back at a certain time.

Just before my16th birthday I fell in love for the umpteenth time. But this time it was to have serious consequences. Martin told me he thought I'd look better if I lost some weight. From then on, food was my enemy. For days, weeks, months I drank and ate an absolute minimum. I hardly touched the food my dad made for me. I usually flushed it down the toilet instead. If I did eat some of it, I made myself sick because I was afraid of putting on weight. I began to despise fat people. I loved to have an empty stomach and I was really high if I hadn't eaten anything. At first noone noticed anything except that I lost a lot of weight within six months. But then my periods stopped, I was

hardly sweating anymore and I had problems with my digestive system which I tried to combat by taking steadily stronger laxatives.

My relationship with Martin, which wasn't really a relationship at all, dragged me further into a viscous circle. Martin was a trouble maker and I was too naive to see it. In addition to that, my sister was much more feminine and attractive than I was and that really sickened me. Wherever we went she was immediately surrounded. It didn't help our relationship very much.

Fashion, Models and Meditation

I was 17 when my mother moved back to Vienna. She was working in the fashion business and set up a business, organising and presenting fashion shows. My father had always warned us about this milieu but I couldn't resist it and I moved in with my mother.

It was probably the biggest mistake I have ever made. First of all, because my father loved me so much and I broke my his heart. Secondly, I left school without doing my final exams. And thirdly, it made my anorexia much worse because now I was determined to become a model.

It all started when my mother sent a photo of me to a competition for 'The Face of the Year'. They wrote back to me and I was invited along with 59 other girls to John Casablanca, the boss of an American agency. We were judged and some of us were invited to a presentation in the 'Hilton'. I didn't win 'Face of the Year' but I did get my first job in a commercial.

That was the start of my career as a model. I was a touch too small for fashion shows, even though I fudged my height a little on my set card. I was never a top model. I didn't have a dominant enough personality and couldn't attract as much attention as some of the other models. Actually perfection wasn't what was called for. Presentation and the way you used your body and expressed yourself were much more important.

Of course, I felt very important. At last, I was someone and my friends would say they'd seen me on television in some advert or another.

My mother was interested in astrology, esoteric things, moving tables, etc. We read books about life after death, angels, spiritual beings, meditation and we visited a "Spiritual Lodge" in Vienna. My mother was extremely medial and she was increasingly following impulses from the spiritual world.

Wolfgang was also a member of my mother's group of models. He was blond, well tanned, sporting and the women loved him. I don't know why, but he liked me and we were together for a while. Through a friend, we came into contact with a group called 'Sahaja-Yogis'. Wolfgang thought it was great and started to go to their meetings regularly. At first, I went along, too. We spent hours watching videos of an Indian woman held to be a Guru talking broken English. On a seminar one weekend, I realised that as a Catholic I couldn't worship this woman and bring her sacrifices, so I left the group and broke off the relationship with Wolfgang.

Then my mother started on one of her modelling

trips again. We went to a different hotel every day. In the summer we were usually in spa towns and in the winter in the skiing resorts. We were a team of 2 to 4 models and we had great fun. Every evening we presented our show and my mother acted as compère. The arrangement with the hotels was that we did our show and the hotel made a profit, so we then had free board and lodging. Usually I couldn't resist the wonderful buffets. But no-one knew about my way of dealing with the 'problem' afterwards.

Later, when the business wasn't running so well, we decided to base ourselves in Bad Hofgastein. As I was interested in healthy eating, I did some training under the apostle of healthy eating Dr. Brucker and got a diploma as a health consultant. A job arose in a health food shop in Bad Hofgastein. You would have thought that after years of eating enormous amounts of food and then vomiting it back again, I had now finally learnt to eat normally again. But that was not the case. I forced myself to eat healthy food although I didn't like it at all. No-one really knew what was going on. I was sporty, friendly and happy. Everything seemed to be okay. But deep inside I felt aimless, I hated myself for these uncontrollable eating attacks and was desperately looking for stability.

Esoteric or Christ?

My next crazy idea was to start training as a non-medical practitioner. I moved to Munich, looked for a place to live and got a job in a health food shop. This was the beginning of the most miserable period in my life. I felt

lonely and deserted. My bulimia got so bad that I contemplated putting an end to my life. I thought about God a lot and prayed but my concept of God was so confused by the esoteric books I had read.

Then my sister Andrea came to visit me from Vienna. I was really surprised to see that she had changed so much – she was so loving, normal and balanced. I just knew: the peace that she has, I need too. She told me about Jesus and read to me from the Bible. I cried out to God in my need and begged him to change my life and make me new. It was a simple plea to God, my creator, without me having understood who Jesus was and what he had done for me.

God began to clean my life up. But my state of mind deteriorated so badly that I broke off my training and went back to Bad Hofgastein. In the meantime, my mother had married yet again and I felt very out of place in her flat. But God had a plan for my life even though I couldn't see it at the time. Sitting in my little room in the attic, I spent a lot of time thinking about my life and when I flick through the pages of my diaries from then, I realise how lovingly God has changed me.

I soon got to know Sabine who told me about a Bible Study group in St. Johann's. I went along and the very first time I attended I knew: this was the right place for me. Peter used a Bible Study Course to explain how to come to Jesus. He talked about who God is and what he is like and about how we can come to him and have all our sins forgiven. I realised that the only way to God was through the cross of Calvary where Jesus, the Son of God, paid the price for our sins and made it possible for us to come to God.

I was finally ready to give my life to the one who had waited so long for me. I gave up the concept of God that I had made for myself. I gave him the pride I felt when I saw fatter people and I confessed my sins.

When I went back to Munich a year later to carry on with my training, I got the address of a Christian Church which I began to attend on the very first Sunday that I was back.

Unconditional Love

I remember my first Sunday in church well. It was so friendly, open and warm that I felt, "They love me just the way I am. I don't have to be slim, beautiful, or amusing to be loved."

Rainer – whom I was later to marry – saw me that first Sunday and knew that I was the woman God had chosen to be his wife. Rainer's patience and faith underwent a great trial as I still had so many problems. Only six months later was I able to return his affection.

Soon I got to know a woman in the church who had also suffered from bulimia for a number of years. I was so glad that I had found someone who could understand all my needs, my fears and my problems. The many conversations we had did not only help me to overcome my eating problems. She was a wonderful example of how God can heal a broken life. That gave me courage when I was feeling down and I didn't seem to be making any progress. In 1990 I married Rainer and a few months later I became pregnant.

Being pregnant was an awful strain on me because

it meant having to accept a round stomach. Of course, I was thrilled about having a baby from the man I loved but I was afraid that Rainer would not love me with a round stomach. I tried to hide my stomach right up to the birth.

I am very grateful to my husband Rainer. He encouraged me and through him I have developed a love for the Word of God. Praying with him has helped me rid myself of my destructive thinking.

Three years later I became pregnant again and we had another little boy called Matthias, as well our first son, Philipp. The daily routine set by the demands of small children turned out to be ideal for me. Having regular mealtimes was a great help. At the beginning I had to force myself to eat three meals a day. But even if I wasn't hungry I would always have breakfast. That way I managed to stop myself having hunger attacks in the evenings.

In 1995 our daughter Hanna was born and four weeks after her birth we moved to the area around Berchtesgaden, where my husband grew up. We still live there now.

And now, a good few years later, I ask myself whether my wish has been fulfilled – can I eat normally again? It's difficult for me to say whether the amount I eat is normal or not, but at least I know what it's like to feel hungry and full.

I'm no longer dependent on what the weighing scale tells me. I used to weigh myself almost every hour before. Our weighing scales are in the cellar and are almost certainly covered in dust. How much or how little I have eaten has almost no effect on how I feel. I keep

to a healthy diet but I've learnt to allow myself sweet things, too, without feeling guilty about it.

I don't want to pretend that it was easy. The way to freedom was a long one and I needed God's grace and help along the way. I am still likely to react to problems, fears, failings and worries with a change to my eating habits. But I know that God has a plan for my life and that I am getting closer and closer to being free of wrong thinking and bad habits.

I am so thankful to God for giving me the chance to enjoy this freedom. Sometimes I ask myself what would have happened to me if I had not grasped the hand God stretched out to save me and had not got to know his unconditional love.

Alois Wagner

To the End of the Rainbow

0: Talking New York (1982)

I swung on to my old guitar,
Grabbed hold of a subway car,
And after a rocking, reeling, rolling ride,
I landed up on the downtown side;
Greenwich Village.[1]

We were strolling down the Fifth Avenue to Greenwich Village. It was already late in the afternoon. We wanted to catch the Staten Island ferry from the south point of Manhattan to Staten Island and get back again

before it got dark. It didn't take long to get to Washington Square, the centre of Greenwich Village, New York's artist and bohemian district.

I felt somewhat strange. Years before, I met someone here on Washington Square – I could say exactly where I'd been sitting on the wall when it happened. It was a meeting which was to change my life. It turned everything on its head – my way of thinking, my behaviour, my feelings, my desires, my present, my future and even my past.

I only met an old lady and we didn't really talk at all. I had actually forgotten all about it – for a while at least ...

„Come on, it's getting dark!" My sister and brother-in-law didn't understand what this place meant for me. They just wanted to get to the ferry. So we left Washington Square with its surging masses. The sun was low in the sky and we still had quite a long way to walk.

1: I'm so restless (1960-1970)

Hey Mr. D(ylan) do you want me to be
a farmer, a cowhand, an old country boy
to get up in the a. m .and tend to my chores
and leave all my troubles behind a locked door
Layin´ with my lady and strummin´ on my toy
Oh I know what you mean and it sounds good to me
but oh Mr. D., I'm so restless.

Hey Mr. L(ennon) so you want me to yell
to howl at the moon when I'm losing my grip

without no possessions and finding myself
the picture of mental and physical health
But I'm still paying dues for that Indian trip
And I know what you mean and it sure rings a bell
but oh Mr. L., I'm so restless.[2]

Mönstetten is a small farming village in the south-west of Germany. It hasn't changed much over the past few years. I was born there in 1953 as the oldest of six children. I grew up on my parents' farm and spent the first ten years of my life there.

I can remember when I was four years old. There were three things that absolutely terrified me: a clockwork tin cat, my uncle Leopold in his green, uniform-like hunting suit, and a wooden figure of 'Christ at the stake'. It was larger than life and stood in the entrance hall of the baroque vicarage where my great uncle Alois Mendle lived as a Catholic priest in Zaisertshofen.

The clockwork cat is long gone, rusted away on a rubbish tip somewhere. My uncle Leopold is still an enthusiastic hunter but doesn't wear his green hunting uniform anymore. And my great uncle Alois Mendle is no longer priest in Zaiserthofen. He's retired and often prays for my deliverance from evil.

I can't really say that these three so vivid memories from my childhood formed the basis for any fearful or pessimistic personality structure later in life. On the country I always felt I was happier and more optimistic than my friends and the others in my school, although I realise that my feelings aren't particularly objective. But I could never really quite understand the fears that

gave some of my class-mates a rather bleak and negativ outlook on life.
I, on the other hand, felt driven by an almost feverish restlessness from early on in my life. I was never content with the way things were. I always wanted more, although I never quite knew what it was I wanted more of. I longed for something different, a sort of deep contentment and yet I can't remember ever being content. I wanted to be happy, but I never was happy. I was driven by a pressing, pulsating restlessness. It moulded me and made me ill. I was continually looking for the end of the rainbow.

In saying that, I'm referring to the many stories about the pot of gold where the rainbow touches the earth. All you need is enough perseverance not to give up until you find it. You sometimes think you've made it, only to discover that the rainbow has moved and its end is now somewhere behind the next mountain.

The same thing keeps happening again and again until you start to realise that there's no such thing as a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It takes some people a lifetime before they realise that truth.

"What does a man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun? Generations come and go, but the earth remains for ever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. All things are weari, some, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labour. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labours under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless."

Solomon[3]

"For you we are made and our heart is restless until it finds rest in you, O God."

Aurelius Augustine[4]

I felt this restlessness as early as the age of nine or ten. At the age of seven or eight I had developed a passion for reading. The first book I read after the school books in the first two years at school was Jeremias Gotthelf's book 'The Black Spider'. Not exactly what you would call an edifying read for an eight-year-old. My parents didn't have the sort of books I was looking for to still my appetite for reading and I began to lose all interest in village life in general. I was full of unrest and boredom and I was longing to find something new.

So I was delighted when my parents (encouraged by my teachers, by the village priest and by my great uncle, the priest) decided to send me to secondary school in Dillingen, 20km away. Off I went to the Episcopal Boys' School, an ecclesiastical boarding school.

Finally, I had the chance to broaden my horizons. I dreamed of swapping boring village life for life in the town. I couldn't be made to work in the fields in the afternoons and, most importantly, I'd be able to borrow lots of books from the school, boarding school and town libraries and even buy some of the ones which I thought were particularly good. I couldn't have been happier. My life would be dominated by rest, contentment and tranquil pleasure – or so I thought.

How could I have known that I would dream the same dream so often and be disappointed every time? How could I have known that out of the splinters of shattered dreams new longings would be born which were even more urgent, even more insatiable?

I found school easy. Latin was fun and so was history and I hardly missed home, except for my father's workshop.

When I was twelve I had a dream about a girl for the first time. It was unlike any dream I'd had before and when I woke up I had awakened emotions that I had never felt before. From one day to the next I suddenly had an idea about what love must be like, although that idea was quite vague and blurred. Love – that motivating force for so many of our actions. A thing I had only read or heard about up until that point. I was in love. The end of the rainbow which seemed so near had moved further away again, like so many times before. It was obvious that this dream would remain a dream. What fifteen-year-old girl would be interested in a chubby-cheeked twelve-year-old?

The years went by, filled with many awakenings and disappointments, followed by further awaken-

ings and bitter-sweet emotions. Although I tried to cultivate my desires by reading different books on the subject, my longing became even stronger until finally, the chubby-cheeked twelve-year-old had turned into a clumsy sixteen-year-old who had enough pocket money and long enough hair to be able to walk down the main street with one of theses enchanting creations in my arm ...

it should have felt like heaven, but suddenly my thoughts were somewhere else. I was thinking about the next exam I hadn't studied for and, I took my arm off my girl-friend's shoulder. The end of the rainbow had moved again and I didn't even realise it.

2: Let me die in my footsteps (1970-1972)

I will not go down under the ground
'Cause somebody tells me that death's comin' 'round
An' I will not carry myself down to die
When I go to my grave my head will be high.
Let me die in my footsteps
Before I go down under the ground.

There's been rumors of war and wars that have been
The meaning of life has been lost in the wind
And some people thinkin' that the end is close by
'Stead of learnin' to live they are learning to die.
Let me die in my footsteps
Before I go down under the ground.[5]

June 1970. I was seventeen by that time, was no longer living at the boarding school, I had lots of friends

and was out almost every night. I looked out of the window one beautiful morning and looked at the trees outside: they were alive, much more alive than my biology teacher who was droning on at the time.

I asked myself why I was still at school. I wasn't in the right place. I wanted to be out in the world, loving, suffering, fighting, living my life, and not in here, just talking about it, discussing the problems, where it was all theoretical and analytical. I didn't want to be the director of the movie of my life. I wanted to be the actor. Not the author, but the hero of the drama. I'd spent enough time thinking about life. Now I wanted to live it. "All theory is grey, But life's golden tree is green." I didn't find out that these words came from the mouth of Mephisto in Goethe's Faust until much later. By that time it was almost too late.

So, just before the end of the school year, I packed my backpack and set off, hitchhiking westward. I decided to live as a hippie, a drop-out, an adventurer, a parasite, a tramp or whatever you want to call it.

The weather was nice and so were the drivers who picked me up. I spent some time in the south of France and in Spain and after five weeks I planned to hitchhike up the German Autobahn and on to Holland to earn some money. However, that turned out to be a mistake. The police were looking for me. On the border near Basel, I was arrested and sent back to my parents. A somewhat depressing start to 'real life' – but I was quite inexperienced at the time and there was no danger of me making the same mistake again.

I went back to school and in the daily ups and downs, I lost sight of the end of the rainbow. However,

all of a sudden, it started to shine again, brighter than ever before.

In our French lessons we were reading André Gides' story about the prodigal son. In that story the elder brother is completely disillusioned when he comes home from his adventures and becomes his father's servant. The longing that led him away from his father's house slowly dies. One night his younger son wants to leave home and says goodbye to his elder brother. In a very moving dialogue, the elder brother tells the younger that his greatest mistake was to come back to the monotonous life he had once broken free of. He makes his younger brother swear that he won't be so soft and cowardly and that he will continue bravely in his rebellion against the norm and so find fulfilment. It's understandable that I saw myself in the character of the elder son and wondered whether I still possessed the energy of the younger son to try and escape again.

The second thing that happened was that I saw a very impressive feature about Arthur Rimbaud on television. At the time (autumn 1971) I was very interested in the French symbolists Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé and Rimbaud. But it wasn't so much his poetry as his life that impressed me. At the age of fifteen he was already writing world literature, "Le bâteau ivre", for example, and other poems. At nineteen, when asked why he wasn't writing poems any more, he replied, "Je ne pense plus à ça!"[6]. He left France and went to North Africa, smuggled weapons, and died there at the age of 38.

I was in the final year of Grammar School and the

coming spring I was to do my 'A' levels but I was possessed by the idea of making no compromises and not staying in school for as much as one more week. It wasn't that I found school difficult, it just seemed like such a waste of time.

While we were sitting there in our lessons, debating and theorising about life, real life was happening somewhere else. I was quite certain that I would die quite young, as the motto of Rock and Roll was and still is: 'Live fast, love hard, and die young', and I was afraid that I was wasting the little time I had. As Menander, the author of the comedy 'Thaïs' says, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die". Paul quotes him in 1 Corinthians 15 v 33.

Let me drink from the water where the mountain streams flood.
Let the smell of wild flowers flow free through my blood.
Let me sleep in your meadows with the grassy green leaves.
Let me walk down the highway, with my brother in peace.
Let me die in my footsteps
Before I go down under the ground.[5]

But perhaps I was a little cowardly. I finished school and took my 'A' Levels, although I can't say whether it was out of consideration for my parents and relations or perhaps because, deep down, I did still feel the need for some sort of security.

I had questions, though. Everyone was talking

about their vocational goals and what they intended to do and I wasn't spared. Every time I was expected to give answer to these questions, it was very embarrassing. How could I tell even my closest friends that I intended to be a drop-out, a vagabond, an adventurer, or an 'educated penniless rake', as Jack Kerouac wrote?

On top of all that, I was due to be called up for military service. I would have had to refuse to do military service (I'd already made up my mind about that) but all the paperwork and organisation involved seemed like too much like hard work.

Then I had a brilliant idea: I would tell everyone that I wanted to be a Catholic priest. That would solve all my problems. If anyone asked me what I was going to do after school I could answer with ease and if I registered at the Seminary, then the Bishop would send a letter to the district recruiting office, saying that I was planning to prepare for religious office and then I would be exempt from military service.

And that's exactly what happened. Of course, I thought that by the end of the long holidays I'd be long gone, enjoying "the water of the mountain springs" and "the scent of wild flowers flowing through my veins". I would never ever start training as a priest. Yet that's exactly what didn't happen.

First, I enjoyed a few care-free months until school broke up. The only commitment I had in that period was working on the school 'A' level newspaper which I enjoyed doing. The months that followed I spent on my parents farm and working for a company which built rail tracks. My memories of that time are pleasant.

But then it was time to act. I hitchhiked to Hamburg with a friend of mine and got a certificate to say I was suitable for the merchant navy. We wanted to join and leave when we got to America. But after talking to the mariners who were sitting around the shipping board, we learned that anyone who left the ship in a foreign harbour would be put on a 'Black List' and had no hope of ever getting a proper job again. We didn't want to risk that.

When I got home I tried to get a cheap charter flight to the United States without success. Then one day, I received a letter from the Bishop's palace in Augsburg, saying that the semester would be starting soon and how much they were looking forward to me coming, etc.

So there I was. I felt like an albatross, walking around on board a ship, unable to fly because my wings had grown too long. I had no alternative but to give in and do what was expected of me if I wasn't prepared to have my plans clipped like wings that had grown too long.

Somehow I got through the first semester. My relatives, especially my great uncle, were thrilled about the profession I had chosen, that is, the profession they thought I had chosen. But in the holidays after the first semester, I finally managed to get a flight to America. I actually didn't intend coming back. I had a wonderful time there, made lots of friends and had my fill of the expanse of the country and the feeling of boundless freedom and independence. I basically felt that all the longings and desires I'd had in my heart for so long had been fulfilled. But then I went to San Francisco,

the most beautiful city in the world, the Beatniks' centre in the fifties, hippie capital in the sixties – and something inside me broke.

3: Sign on the Cross (1973)

Now, I try, oh for so awf'ly long
And I just try to be.
And now, oh it's a gold mine
But it's so fine.
Yes, but I know in my head
That we're all so misled,
And it's that ol' sign on the cross
That worries me.
Now, when I was just a bawlin' child,
I saw what I wanted to be,
And it's all for the sake
Of that picture I should see.
But I was lost on the moon
As I heard that front door slam,
And that old sign on the cross
Still worries me.
Well, it's that old sign on the cross,
Well, it's that old key to the kingdom,
Well, it's that old sign on the cross
Like you used to be.
But, when I hold my head so high
As I see my ol' friends go by,
And it's still that sign on the cross
That worries me.
Well, it seems to be the sign on the cross.
Ev'ry day, ev'ry night, see the sign on the cross just

layin' up on top of the hill.
Yes, we thought it might have disappeared long ago,
But I'm here to tell you, friends,
that I'm afraid it's lyin' there still.
Yes, just a little time is all you need,
You might say, but I don't know 'bout that any more,
Because the bird is here
and you might want to enter it, but, of course, the door might be closed.
But I just would like to tell you one time,
If I don't see you again, that the thing is, that
The sign on the cross is the thing you might need the most.
Yes, the sign on the cross
Is just a sign on the cross.
Well, there is some on every chisel
And there is some in the championship, too.
Oh, when your, when your days are numbered
And your nights are long,
You might think you're weak
But I mean to say you're strong.
Yes you are, if that sign on the cross,
If it begins to worry you.
Well, that's all right because sing a song
And all your troubles will pass right on through.[7]

For me, going to San Francisco was like a pilgrimage to Mecca. At last I would get to see the city which was home to Jack London, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac. The city where they played the best music in the world.

I stayed with some hippies in Ashbury Street, about 100 m from Haight Street. But there was no sign of the magic for which Haight-Ashbury (or 'Hashbury' as it had become known because of its drug culture) had become famous a few years before. I had wanted to live the life of a hippie. I knew it wasn't the best lifestyle to choose, but it did seem to be the least pointless or miserable existence. But now I was confronted with these young people. They'd dropped out of school and society and I'd always thought that were to be the nucleus of a new, happier humanity. But here they were, living pointless, aimless lives. The vanguard of the new society were vegetating away, living like parasites on the back of the 'old' society – or, to use a biblical image, they were like sheep without a shepherd, without guidance, without food, left to slowly starve to death. I was extremely disappointed. My philosophy of life was shattered.

I was filled with compassion for these people. And, for the first time in my life, I thought that maybe it would be good and maybe even rewarding to spend my life serving others. So I decided I would make use of the return half of my plane ticket after all and continue studying. Perhaps I could be a teacher, or social worker, maybe even a priest and try to help stranded people. After all, I'd almost become one myself. Something deep inside me had broken, but something else had begun to grow.

Before flying back, I stayed in New York for a few days. And there, on Washington Square was where the meeting I mentioned at the beginning took place.

On a warm day, there are always lots of musicians

sitting around on Washington Square and the blues, folk and bluegrass musicians often have a jam session. I was sitting there one afternoon with a small group of people and we were singing different folk and workers songs. All of a sudden, while we were taking a break, an elderly woman came up to us and asked us why we were sitting around all day, just wasting our time, without any thought for the future. Didn't we know that Jesus was coming back and we would be responsible for what we'd done with our lives?

She was holding some tracts in her hand which she wanted to give us. I thought she was a 'sectarian' though and, before she could say any more, I said to my friends, "How about singing a song for the old lady, like 'Pie in the Sky'?"

'Pie in the Sky' is a very cutting satirical song about street preachers, especially from the Salvation Army. It was written by Joseph Hillström, a Swedish immigrant and founder of one of the trade unions. He adopted a number of Christian songs, kept the melody and part of the text (usually the rhymes) and then wrote new words. He took the original "There's a land that is fairer than day", and turned it into a scathing attack on the Christians who, he says, don't care about the earthly needs of the workers and offer them cheap comfort by talking about the life hereafter.

My friends agreed and we sang the song and made fun of the elderly lady. She listened to nearly all of it and didn't take her eyes off me. She wasn't hostile or bitter, though, only sad. Just before we finished she walked away.

I forgot all about what had happened for a year and

a half. But then I had become a Christian myself and I was the one standing in the streets with tracts in my hand. Then people mocked me in the same way as I had done before. I am convinced (although I can't prove it for sure) that this woman had prayed for me, a rebel and mocker, and prayed that God would bring me to repentance. I never saw the elderly lady again. But I know I'll see her in the 'land that is fairer than day', which will be my home soon – then I'll be able to thank her.

Anyway, I went back to Augsburg where, for the first time in years, I enjoyed studying again. Even more so, after spiritual retreat, led by an old Jesuit from Munich. He knew somehow to describe life as a Christian in such a fresh and challenging way , that I began to realise that, behind the literary, historical and ritual facade which I was familiar with, there might actually be a true and living God. I remember the priest talking about Luke 22 v 25-27:

"Jesus said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord is over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." These words came alive to me that night. They made such an impression on my heart that it was as if Jesus had spoken them to me himself.

The words "But you are not to be like that" kept going around in my head. I started to have a notion

of what I know today to be a fact: Trying to live in the light of these words have proven to me that to be a disciple of Jesus Christ may be looked down on by the great ones in this world, the 'kings of the nations', and they may despise it as a career of shame, disgrace and self denial. But in fact, it brings with it the greatest blessing in both time and eternity.

Anyway, with these words still going round in my head, I went down to the chapel of the seminary at midnight, and lay face down on the stone floor. Sure, it was a rather pathetic act. But I honestly prayed to God, although I wasn't very sure whether he existed, and said that, from this moment on, my life was at his disposal. I prayed that I wanted to be able to serve him with my life, no matter what that would cost me.

As far as I can remember, I really meant that prayer. It certainly was superficial, especially because I hadn't even started to think much about the consequences I had promised to take upon myself.

In my thinking, it was obvious that the best way for me to serve God would be as a Catholic priest. So I devoted myself to spiritual activities and to my theological degree, which had only been a pretext up until then.

The relationships between my professors and supervisors and myself improved, as did my relationships to my fellow students. I was full of energy and very happy because I thought I had found something worth giving my life for. I thought I could see the way ahead. I was holding the pot of gold from the end of the rainbow in my hands. That, at least, should have made me suspicious ...

4: Just a season (1973-73)

If all my days was hills to climb, and circles without reason
If all I was was passing time my life was just a season
Dares and dreams and silly schemes and fillies running freely
I was young and no song was sung that didn't sound appealing
I'd have my fun with a shy girl, and maybe hop a train
and I look back ai her standing in the rain
Dirty hands and root beer stands and money like a river
Making deals to see how it feels to get more than you're givin'
I'd have my fun with a gambling man and bluff him with my face
and it's drinks for everybody in the place
If all my days was hills to climb, and circles without reason
If all I was was passing time my life was just a season
Shouting crowds and mummers' shrouds and people goin' crazy
Allways said what was in their hands it surely was amazing
I had my fun in the bullring, and never got a scar
It really wasn't hard to be a star
If all my days was hills to climb, and circles without reason,
If all I was, was passing time, my life was just a season.[iiii]

The energy and joy I had drawn out of spiritual activities in the spring of 1973 didn't last for long. After a few weeks, three months at the most, it was gone. The depressing experience in San Francisco and the decision I'd made there had disappeared into thin air, too. I had the same crazy ideas as before, I was driven by the same untiring restlessness, the same undefinable desires as before.

Out of boredom, I started hiding as a stowaway on freight trains in the nights like I'd read in books by Jack London and Jack Kerouac. I got so restless that, in the winter of 1973/4, I staked everything on one card, once again. I hitchhiked to Amsterdam, earned some money playing and singing on the streets and working as a manual worker until I had enough money for a one way ticket to New York. I arrived at the beginning of February.

New York is never a pleasant city, but in the winter it's particularly unpleasant because it's so terribly cold. Apart from that, the last little bit of money I had was stolen on the first day. The mother of an acquaintance of mine gave me $10. I bought a Greyhound bus ticket for $5 and left the streets of New York and got as far as Easton, Pennsylvania. Then I hitchhiked down to California where the sun was warm and the people were more friendly.

This was more like how I imagined life should be: I wanted to learn to be thankful for the simplest things in life like food and warmth. And I was to learn that through the experiences which I had more or less chosen to live through.

A number of times that meant sleeping in the open

field without a blanket or in barns without walls and sometimes going through trashcans in the night to find something eatible.

But at last I came back to California again where it was the exact opposite. I lived in Thousand Oaks, north of Los Angeles with a very friendly and generous family, the parents of a girl I'd met.

It was early summer 1974 and I can honestly say that I had everything that anyone would wish for: in the mornings I lay in the sun by the swimming pool and read the books I'd borrowed from the library. After lunch my girl-friend and I often went for an afternoon out in the canyons near by. Sometimes I went alone. And then, after a nice dinner, we would go off to party. I took some work now and again but that was more like occupational therapy.

However desirable this lifestyle might appear, you can't live like that for long. After a while it makes you sick. As the time passed I felt like I was trapped in a golden cage and I became more and more restless.

I discovered a Catholic church in the area. It must have struck a religious vein in me and I started going to Mass every day in the hope of finding a point of reference in my life again. I became friendly with some of the churchgoers and with the priest and they started to invite me to their homes quite often. They paid me compliments about my supposed 'experience of life' and my 'insight in existential contexts", etc – but I was lying to these people about myself and I felt so miserable.

Yes, I could make up theories about this or that and I could even admit to my own failure compared

to these great ideals. This was interpreted as 'modesty' and 'healthy self-criticism'.

But in reality, I was proud and cynical – my pride grew out of fear and my cynicism out of despair. Contempt and cynicism were the two weapons I used in order to try and protect myself from the emptiness and senselessness which were spooking about in the back of my head.

The song "Just a Season" sums up what my life was like at the time. I hadn't really ever received a real scar in the bullring of life. I'd had everything handed to me on a plate. I harvested recognition and esteem with very little effort. All my life was just passing time. I took people for a ride and used them because I often knew 'what was in their hands'. I had fun with more than one girl and then left her standing in the rain. How often did I say 'I love you' – while what I meant was, 'I love me and I want to use you to that end.'

In that church I got to know Susan who was, as I realised later, a real Christian. Unfortunately we fell in love. First, she fell for me, then I fell in love with her. But she was the only one who saw through me and did what was right for me: she left me. That was very bitter at the time but today I'm very thankful for it.

5: Señor (Tales of Yankee Power) (1974)

Señor, señor, do you know where we're headin'?
Lincoln County Road or Armageddon?
Seems like I been down this way before.
Is there any truth in that, senor?
Señor, señor, do you know where she is hidin'?
How long are we gonna be ridin'?

How long must I keep my eyes glued to the door?
Will there be any comfort there, senor?
There's a wicked wind still blowin' on that upper deck,
There's an iron cross still hanging down from around her neck.
There's a marchin' band still playin' in that vacant lot
Where she held me in her arms one time and said, "Forget me not."
Señor, señor, I can see that painted wagon,
I can smell the tail of the dragon.
Can't stand the suspense anymore.
Can you tell me who to contact here, señor?
Well, the last thing I remember before I stripped and kneeled
Was that trainload of fools bogged down in a magnetic field.
A gypsy with a broken flag and a flashing ring
Said, "Son, this ain't a dream no more, it's the real thing."
Senor, senor, you know their hearts is as hard as leather.
Well, give me a minute, let me get it together.
I just gotta pick myself up off the floor.
I'm ready when you are, senor.
Señor, señor, let's disconnect these cables,
Overturn these tables.
This place don't make sense to me no more.
Can you tell me what we're waiting for, señor?[10]

This song alludes to Carlos Castañedas' books about the Yaqui shaman Don Juan as well as his peyote and mescalin experiences. The subtitle of one of these

books is 'Tales of Yaqui Power'. In this Mexican style song, the way a crisis approaches is described very astutely. It describes how everything pushes toward a decision in which life is completely turned on its head and old tormenting links are broken. The decisive crisis in my life also took place in Mexico and hallucinogenic mushrooms and an Indian shaman played a role in it all.

But first I set off southwards, travelling in freight trains. Once again I left everything behind. Before me was an interesting country with interesting people. I no longer felt restless. I felt really good, sitting in a freight train with Mexican migrant workers, travelling through the desert-like landscape of Sonora. The only problem we had was how to avoid suffocation from the fumes of the diesel engines in the long tunnels of the Sierras.

After two weeks, we eventually reached Mexico City. At first, I lived with a very poor family in very shoddy housing where the rain was dripping through the roof. I was working for a painting company, doing advertising signs. At the same time I tried hard to learn some Spanish.

When I could just about make myself understood, I had a look around the city and met some new people. A communist university lecturer introduced me in a very lively way to Mexico's social structures. I was also befriended by a doctor and his family and enjoyed spending time with them. The lady with whom I lived originally watched with mixed feelings. We had got on well, despite all our differences and she used to beg me, "Recuerda te de los pobres, Luis!" – "Don't forget the poor, Luis!"

Nevertheless, boredom and emptiness soon caught up with me again, even in this enormous city. The old restlessness, which had pursued me since I was nine years old, returned. Shortly before, a medicine student had invited me to come and live with her 900km north of Mexico City. I made up my mind: on Monday I would buy a ticket to Monterrey and my restlessness would be gone, at least for a while.

That Monday morning – I'd planned to go in the afternoon – I was sitting in the park, playing my harmonica. My long hair was hanging in my face so I was quite difficult to identify. That was the only way I could explain what happened next. Suddenly someone was standing in front of me and said merrily, "Dios te bendiga!" - "God bless you!" When I looked up I wasn't sure who was more surprised – the brunette sixteen-year-old girl who had mixed me up with a friend who obviously looked like me, or me, to be greeted in such an unusual way by a complete stranger on the day I planned to leave.

The misunderstanding was soon cleared up. Tammy invited me to drink a milkshake with her in the juice and milk shake bar nearby where she and her nineteen-year-old sister worked. The same day I met Don Lorenzo, alias Lawrence Kramer, a crazy American artist between fifty and sixty. He was more or less a Zen Buddhist, living in a small but extremely clean apartment nearby. He lived for his extensive collection of records of medieval and early classical music and lived off his brother who was an important official in Washington. Another reason for him living in Mexico was the high quality marijuana which you could buy inexpensivety on public markets there.

Laura, Tammy and Don Lorenzo seemed interesting enough for me to put off my trip to Monterrey for a while. I visited the two girls every day at the bar in the middle of an enormous market and soon realised that they were two quite extraordinary people. Although they had quite a humble background and didn't seem to be particularly well educated, they possessed a peace and inner harmony, evident in the way they served their customers. I couldn't remember ever having seen something like that before.

It's difficult to say what it was about these two girls that surprised me because they were quite ordinary. They were neither especially pretty nor particularly well-educated or intelligent. Now I know that the same thing happened to the clever councillors and officials in Jerusalem once when they questioned two of Jesus' disciples. In the New Testament it says, "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."[11]

At the time, I had no idea that the only explanation for a difference in character like that is 'having been with Jesus', having a deep, personal relationship with the Christ who was crucified and had risen from the dead. I remember saying at the time, "My definition of success is if, when I'm sixty and I've spent my life searching for the truth, I can then say that I'm half as happy as you are now, even though you're not even twenty yet!"

Of course, it wasn't long before I asked Laura and Tammy what made them so different. When they told

me that they were Christians, I was disappointed. I thought I was a Christian myself and, after all, I'd been to the seminary for long enough and I felt I knew a lot about Christianity. The Christianity I knew couldn't have made such a difference in a person's life though.

I'd soon find out their real philosophy, I thought. Perhaps they didn't realise what it was themselves, although it had to be a very vibrant and effective philosophy or religion for what I saw of it in their every day lives.

But no matter how often I asked, they always said the same thing: "We believe in Jesus Christ. We have confessed our sins to him and given him our lives. He paid for all our sin on the cross so that we can have peace with God." And this peace with God, they said, was reflected in their lives in the peace and joy they obviously had.

Well, that was all very well but it was a little too easy. Hadn't the greatest thinkers in the history of the world spent centuries looking for the answer as to how to live a life of true peace and happiness? Surely the answer couldn't be so easy, so primitive. And yet, the best argument in favour of their theory wasn't anything they said, but their lives. I'd never seen anything like this in any of the thoughts system, I'd tried so far. Most philosophies or religion, worked in theory, in the lecture hall or maybe even, in the seclusion of a monastery for a while. But they couldn't stand the test of daily life.

I finally started to read the New Testament. I must confess that despite thirteen years of religious education, Episcopal boarding school, seminary and studying theology at university I had never read the New

Testament all the way through, never mind the whole Bible!

Now I read it differently and with interest. Two things really surprised me: first of all, the reason and historical credibility with which the authors of the Bible wrote. There was nothing mythological about it, as my religious education teachers and theology professors had said. It was nothing like the ancient works we'd read at school, which were biased and obviously exaggerated. Luke begins his gospel with the words: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."[12] And Peter wrote: "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty."[13]

John reported: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."[14]

The second thing which stood out to me was what I read in the letter to the Romans: "There is no-one righteous, not even one; there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no-one who does good, not even one."[15]

I was always quick to point the finger at the injustice done by others. But now, for the first time, someone took my finger and pointed it back at me. Slowly, I began to realise that the evil in the world doesn't come from outside in some inexplicable way. It doesn't come from economic structures, or power mechanisms but from inside, from my own heart which contains the potential for all the atrocities and crimes ever committed by mankind.

That was a shattering experience for me and my attitude towards the Bible became mixed: On the one hand, I felt an aversion to the Bible because it condemned me ruthlessly, I found it extremely disturbing and it exposed my motivation. On the other hand, I was increasingly aware of the fact that someone of great authority was addressing me. He neither flattered me nor did he want to tear a strip off me. He just put his finger on the sore spots in my life, full of love but very firmly. He wanted to make it clear to me that:

"Your whole head is injured, your whole heart is afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness – only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil." "We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes. At midday we stumble as if it were

twilight; among the strong, we are like the dead. We all growl like bears; we moan mournfully like doves. We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away. For our offences are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offences are ever with us, and we acknowledge out iniquities.: rebellion and treachery against the LORD, turning our backs on our God, fomenting oppression and revolt, uttering lies our hearts have conceived."[16]

Laura and Tammy asked me if I would like to work at their kiosk and live with their family. They used to go to a small meeting of young Christians a few times a week and took me along. There I began to realise how alive and effective God's Word can be. I could see the great difference between approaching the Bible simply as a subject of intellectual study and on one hand interpreting and applying it in a dynamic way on the other. I realised the awful consequences of teachers, priests and professors who dare to talk about reconciliation when they are not reconciled themselves, to teach about being born again when they are not born again, to write about justification if they have not been justified and to preach about God if they haven't got a living, personal relationship with him.

In that fellowship of young Christians who took the Bible to be their one and only standard of living, I was confronted with the one truth which decides between life and death: that Christ died on the cross for all, so that anyone can come, so that I can come and confess all my sin and guilt to him. I can know that my sin was carried on the cross so that I may stand before God, pure and guiltless, as if I'd never sinned.

One verse I kept thinking about all the time was John 5 v 24: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." I could hardly believe that someone who has heard the word of Christ and believes in his God and Father can receive eternal life now and rejoice in the fellowship with God, because Jesus said 'has eternal life' and not 'will have'. I found that unbelievable, and to tell the truth, I still find unbelievable wonderful!.

Yet there is a huge difference between knowing something and acting accordingly. After I'd understood the basic things about repentance and belief in Jesus Christ, I was still not prepared to act. Actually, I hadn't really understood a thing and I was blind to the grace of God. Instinctively, I wanted to improve my behaviour myself, so that when I eventually turned to him, I'd have a sort of a 'head start'. I wanted to prove that I was worthy of being saved! How blind, how stupid and arrogant I was.

Once, in the Christian fellowship that I attended, a young man spoke about the man born blind (John 9) and said that there are two groups of people: those who are blind and lost and those who can see and are saved. When I heard that I knew that I still belonged to the first group and that I was "like a blind man feeling my way along the wall, feeling my way like one without eyes. We stumble at midday as if it were dusk. We are like the dead still living among the healthy."

One day Don Lorenzo asked me if I wanted to accompany him on a trip to Teotitlan in the Oaxaca

province in the south of Mexico. My Christian friends warned me because they knew that the main reason Lawrence wanted to go there wasn't to see the amazing plant life in Southern Mexico. He was interested in the 'magic mushrooms'. These mushrooms contain psilocybin, are hallucinogenic and have a similar effect as LSD. They only grow around the mountain village of Huautla although they are exported all over the world. According to an Indian legend, they were supposed to have grown from drops of blood which fell from the Lord's wound as he was walking over the earth. For the poverty stricken Indios of the region, plagued by famine and fear, the mushrooms are a supernatural gift which bring a little colour to their lives. They eat the mushrooms at special private ceremonies led by a shaman. Lawrence knew one of these medicine men quite well.

I completely ignored all the warnings about Lawrence and the magic mushrooms, told myself I was old enough to look after myself, and went to Oaxaca with Lawrence.

First we went to Teotitlan. Lawrence had lots of acquaintances there who all greeted him warmly, some even with great reverence. I later learned that he was doing a flourishing trade in Indian antiques which the people there got for him and which he then sold in the United States, making a profit of a thousand per cent. After a lovely few days there, Lawrence wanted to go to Huautla.

I had decided to stay in that beautiful valley with its wonderful flowers and their fagrances, but finally, Lawrence persuaded me to join him and we got into the bus which took us along the deadly serpentines, up

the mountain to Huautla. We had agreed that I'd only come along to watch, but he kept trying to persuade me to take part in the ceremony led by the shaman he knew, Don Domenico. I eventually gave in because Lawrence was getting on my nerves so much. He was by far the second most irritating person for me at the time (the first most irritating person being myself).

The night of the ceremony came – and went. I was glad to get out of the bus again in Teotitlan, more or less in one piece, and "let the smell of wild flowers flow free through my blood".

When I got back to Mexico City, I was afraid of being asked whether I had eaten the magic mushrooms, as I had more or less promised not to. When I told Laura and Tammy about the journey, I went into great detail on lots of things, just so that they wouldn't think I'd been to Huautla. I hoped that I could evade the dreaded question. I could lie, without actually lying ...

They never asked me. But two days later, I got back to the kiosk with a sack of oranges I'd just bought and felt something in the air. Laura and Tammy had their heads down and told me quietly that Don Lorenzo had called. He had brought a few mushrooms home with him and wanted to share them with me. I was thunderstruck.

6: Saved (1974)

I was blinded by the devil,
Born already ruined,
Stone-cold dead
As I stepped out of the womb.
By His grace I have been touched,

By His word I have been healed,
By His hand I've been delivered,
By His spirit I've been sealed.
I've been saved by the blood of the lamb,
Saved by the blood of the lamb,
Saved, saved,
And I'm so glad.
Yes, I'm so glad, I'm so glad, so glad,
I want to thank You, Lord,
I just want to thank You, Lord,
Thank You, Lord.
By His truth I can be upright,
By His strength I do endure,
By His power I've been lifted,
In His love I am secure.
He bought me with a price,
Freed me from the pit,
Full of emptiness and wrath
And the fire that burns in it.
I've been saved by the blood of the lamb,
Saved by the blood of the lamb,
Saved, saved,
And I'm so glad. Yes, I'm so glad,
I'm so glad, so glad,
I want to thank You, Lord,
I just want to thank You, Lord,
Thank You, Lord.
Nobody to rescue me,
Nobody would dare,
I was going down for the last time,
But by His mercy I've been spared.
Not by works,

But by faith in Him who called,
For so long I've been hindered,
For so long I've been stalled.
I've been saved by the blood of the lamb,
Saved by the blood of the lamb,
Saved, saved,
And I'm so glad.
Yes, I'm so glad, I'm so glad,
So glad, I want to thank You, Lord,
I just want to thank You, Lord,
Thank You, Lord.[17]

(Up until now, I've quoted the Bob Dylan songs because they described the different periods of my life, although I don't want to identify myself with the texts as a whole.)

I'm not sure if there is anything more unpleasant that could have happened to me at this time in my life. I had been revealed as a liar in front of the people who meant the most to me at the time. It was almost too much to bear! The date was 1st October 1974, and it was late morning, around 11 or 11.30. All three of us, Laura, Tammy and I went about our work, served the customers, pressed oranges, washed up glasses, but we didn't say a word to each other. We didn't even look at one another.

Inside, my mind, my will, my emotions were on overdrive.

What would I have normally done in situations like this? If I was on the move, then I would just move on to another city and try and run away from my guilty conscience.

If that wasn't an option, for example, in my time at school, then I'd always hidden behind a mask of lies, cynicism and boasting. Of course, I'd had quite a number of masks like that over the years and the stupid thing was that you could never get rid of them. New, embarrassing situations just sprang up from nowhere and I always had to get my old lies out, polish them up a bit and maybe add a little bit to them. So, as time went on, I'd acquired quite a collection of lies and other nasty things, from when I'd pretended to be something I wasn't, when I'd fooled people and used them to make myself look better. The sack full of these things was getting heavier and heavier, and sooner or later it was going to break my back. Especially as my moral backbone was already just broken splinters.

As I was thinking about these two alternatives – running away or hiding behind a new mask – I realised that there was a third alternative. What about taking all my guilt and going to the crucified one? Didn't he himself say: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."[18] Light fell on the indescribable chaos in my life.

I saw my life flash before me. I could see the pain and wounds that I had caused so clearly. I saw my failings, saw that the first twenty years of my life had been wasted and had left nothing but dirt. And in all that, I realised that that was all just a symptom of the fatal disease I was suffering from: I was separated from God, the source of all life. Despite appearing so full of life, in my heart was rotting death and, if I carried on like that, one day I would reap eternal death. That was one side of the coin.

The other side was that I could have my guilt forgiven. I could be freed from my burdens and my failings could be put in order. While I was standing there washing up the glasses and giving this customer a strawberry milk shake and the next a banana milk shake, a battle was taking place inside. I knew that I had to make a decision that day. Either I would surrender to Jesus unconditionally – and receive eternal life, or I could clench my fists in defiance and choose eternal night.

This battle went on for about two or three hours, I can't remember exactly. Nor can I remember how it happened, but the most important thing is that I gave in to the Living God.

I said to Laura and Tammy, "I lied to you! Please forgive me!" and then I just cried and cried.

I hadn't cried for years and now I completely lost control. I wanted to tell the Lord Jesus everything, bring him everything from my messed up life, but I couldn't find the words. I cried tears of pain over the past I had lost, my wasted youth, my life without God. But I also cried tears of joy – joy because I had found God my Saviour and because I knew that I was now safe in his hands for time and eternity.

At that moment, as I gave myself and my whole life to the Lord Jesus, without saying anything audible, and yet consciously and wilfully, I was filled with the certainty that nothing would ever be able to separate me from him again. He has promised: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who

has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."[19]

My story ends here. Or, to tell the truth, this is where it began. On that day, I was 'born again', as the Bible says. As a Christian I had to begin my life like a new born child, I had to grow, and learn to walk and trust my God and Father in every situation. And slowly, I got to know the wonderful thoughts and plans written in his word and worship him for them. For "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him – but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God."[20]

Since I've been living with my Lord, I've known ups and downs, but I have never had reason to doubt that I am safe in his love in Christ Jesus. In fact, I'm more convinced of it now than ever.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." [21]

Fußnoten

[1] Bob Dylan 1962
[2] Roger McGuinn 1973
[3] Ecclesiastes 1 v 2-8; 2 v 10-11, 22-23
[4] Augustine, Confessions.
[5] Bob Dylan 1963
[6] „I don't waste a thought on that stuff anymore!"
[7] Bob Dylan 1971
[8] Roger McGuinn 1970
[9] 1 Tim 6 v 8.
[10] Bob Dylan 1978
[11] Acts 4 v 21
[12] Luke 1 v 1-4
[13] 2 Peter 1 v 16
[14] 1 John 1 v 1-3
[15] Romans 3 v 10-12
[16] Isaiah 1 v 5-6; 59 v 9-13
[17] Bob Dylan 1980
[18] Matt 11 v 28
[19] John 10 v 27-29
[20] I Cor. 2 v 9-10
[21] Rom 8 v 35-39

Wolfgang Bühne:

How stupid do you have to be to believe?

You can always tell a Christian by the night cap on their heads, by the fact that they can't think straight and that they still hang on to an antiquated, naive acceptance of the Bible – at least, that's what a lot of people think.

If that's the case, it's amazing that after atheism and materialism have dominated our culture for decades, we are now seeing the start of a new era in which religion, the occult and esoteric are finding an increasing number of excited supporters. Educated people are suddenly willing to put away rational thinking, switch their brains off and open up to ideas and practises

which, just a few years ago, we would have assigned to the darkest Middle Ages. World-wide enthusiasm for the Harry Potter books is just one indication of this.

It seems that the idea that we humans are products of chance and that there is no life after death has left us with too many unanswered questions. More and more spiritual influences, movements and emotions have begun to affect us.

We might have thought that, at a time when we are particularly open-minded as concerns religious and spiritual things, more and more people would start believing in Jesus Christ. But that is not the case. Even though the Bible is still the most widespread book in the world, relatively few people read it or take it seriously.

Although the greatest percentage of religious people confess to be Christians, the number of those who really trust in Jesus and live their lives accordingly is small.

What is the reason for this?

Unlike all the other world religions, the Bible doesn't appeal to human pride. It tells us the truth about ourselves. We don't find anything about us being good 'deep down inside', meaning that all we need to do is work on improving ourselves. There's no mention of a 'divine light' which can be developed through special exercises or meditation.

God's judgement on humanity is clear and devastating: we are absolutely and hopelessly evil, depraved

and lost. The mask of sympathy and humanitarianism only serves to cover a proud, egotistical, ungodly face. Humanity would never dream of following the first and greatest commandment which God gave: Love God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your might.

The well-known Danish poet and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once summed it up quite succinctly:

> There is something which you do not know, but which you have to be told and which you must believe: you were conceived in sin and born in iniquity. From birth, you were a sinner in the power of the devil. If you remain in this state, you will surely go to hell. But God, in his endless love, did something to save you. He let his Son be born, suffer and die. If you believe that, then you will be for ever blessed. This is what is being preached to you, this good news!

So, in the first place, this „good news“ is a shocking, devastating condemnation of the code by which we live. The Bible shows us who God is and what God has done to pardon us and set us free. And if we are prepared to listen to this message, and to believe, then we will see an incredible change take place in our lives and in our thinking.

A classical example of this can be seen in a world ruler who lived 6 centuries before the birth of Christ. He resided in the great city of Babylon with its hanging gardens and the famous Medish Wall which made

the city more or less impregnable. His name was Nebuchadnezzar.

This mighty king was on the roof of his palace one day, proudly looking down over the wonderful things he had built. He was taken with his own greatness that he called out:

> Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?

He had barely finished speaking, when he suddenly lost his mind. As a result, the people drove him away and he lived like a wild animal. This state of mental confusion lasted seven years until, as Nebuchadnezzar himself said:

> At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honoured and glorified him who lives for ever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

At the very moment that this previously powerful ruler, now mad and living like an animal, lifted his eyes to heaven and realised that he had a creator, he humbled himself, gave God the glory and regained his sanity.

This incredible story shows that whenever a person makes themselves the measuring stick by which all else is judged, choosing to ignore their creator, then

they begin to lose their minds. They are degraded to the level of the animals and start to believe the most obscure theories to be true.

But when a person lifts their eyes to God and realises that they are dependant on him, it doesn't matter how helpless their situation is, they come to their senses and reason returns to their thinking and to the lives.

C. H. Spurgeon, one of the most famous preachers of the 19th century, once defined biblical faith as follows:

> Faith in God is sanctified common sense ... Faith means making God the greatest consideration in making a decision and acting according to the most healthy sense of logic.

Isn't it easier to believe that the complicated and carefully structured creation, in small things as well as a whole, was planned and created by an ingenious, unimaginable creator, rather than to believe in the 'gods' of evolution, chance and whatever we may call them?

Isn't it logical to conclude that if there is a creator, then human ideas about God are nonsense. We will never be able to comprehend God. We rely on him revealing himself to us by descending to our level.

God has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ, his Son, in whom he showed us his love, holiness and justice. Nowhere do we see this clearer than when the Son of God was put to death. When he was nailed to the cross by people full of hate, where God himself

spoke the death sentence over his Son and carried it out. This happened because, at the cross, Jesus did not only experience human hate. In love, he also took upon himself the just anger of God about our ungodliness and sin and paid the price for us.

In the Bible we find God's answers to the questions 'Why?', 'Where did we come from?', 'Where are we going?' There we find out that this short life on earth does not end with death but continues in the glory of the presence of God or in eternal condemnation. Our fate after death is dependant upon whether we accept Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives and put our lives under his control or not.

It's time to start thinking about life and death, about how transitory our lives are and about eternity. It's especially time to give some thought to God and the Bible, his 'Testament' which the creator gave the human race. God promised that whoever truly seeks him will find him and the dance on the edge of the precipice will turn into a safe path which leads to God.