

MICHELLE SHOCKED

Anointed And Possibly Disappointed

I was badly-hungover when I answered Michelle Shocked's call, and I explained to her that I was a little woozy and as such I would be speaking in a fairly quiet voice in order to minimise the pounding in my head. She chuckled good-naturally.

"I'm a little woozy myself," she said, "but it's because I've been reading some really heavy stuff, not even worth talking about really. It's got my mind wrapped around it and it's kind of confusing. I don't even know why I took the book on tour with me."

I asked her what the book was.

"It's this huge, very scholarly tome on some very ancient history, my husband bought it for me because he knew I was interested in a related subject. I'm one-eight through it, and I'm not a very good reader."

Realising that she had already said that she didn't want to talk about the book, but fascinated anyway, I pressed ahead and asked her what the book was about.

"It's called *James The Brother Of Jesus*. Do you know about the Dead Sea Scrolls? For the past thirty years no-one's been able to get their hands on them. There's this very select group that has been willing to give people their interpretation of them, but they won't let people actually see them. The guy who wrote this book has been in contact with those people for the last thirty years, trying to get them to hand it over, and now that he's had a look at them he's drawn all these conclusions. Basically, it makes the New Testament look like mythology. It's making the New Testament look like a work of fiction in a more concrete way.

What's heavy with this thing is that Saint Paul is the main trouble-maker. He was a Roman establishment figure, and he's taken all the love-dovey stuff that Jesus was

supposed to say, and he's not so lenient and liberal. It was actually Paul who was twisting a lot of it around."

I told her that she should check out *The Last Temptation Of Christ* for Harry Dean Stanton's portrayal of Saint Paul. In the scene where Jesus meets Paul, he says that he never said what Paul says he did, and Paul turns around and says that it doesn't matter what he said, what matters is that the words are effective rather than historically accurate.

"Yeah. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, they call him 'the liar', she told me.

I asked her how long she had been interested in biblical history.

"I'm not even that interested," she laughed. "It's all way over my head. But I spent last year on sabbatical, trying to buy into as much as I could about fundamentalist argument."

I asked why and she explained to me that she had been raised as a fundamentalist, and that when she ran away from home at sixteen, she had rejected everything about organised religion. "Only now," she said, "I'm a little older and wiser and I'm going back to see what I can salvage from it all. Five years after I ran away, I had a really bad acid trip, and I realised that all that stuff was still in there. They get to you young, they warp your mind young."

I asked how free she was of it all now.

"Well," she asked, "were you raised with any kind of indoctrination? Are any of your family ex-Catholic or anything?"

I admitted that I didn't have any religion in my upbringing.

"Well, did you grow up watching a lot of TV?"

I had to answer yes to that one.

"Can you imagine having a conversation without referring to some kind of TV-related thing?"

I was starting to see her point.

"I guess that's what it's like. It's a part of you."

I asked how much she had found amongst her fundamentalist readings that was salvageable.

"Well, if you can take the on faith," she said, "it opens up a lot of doors that you wouldn't have been able to find even the doorknob, let alone the key, with rational thinking. There are certain experiences that require faith. Nice ones, like peace of mind, acceptance, trust... Very rarely can you achieve that through rational thinking."

I went for the big one and asked her if she had maintained her belief in God throughout her life.

"You know," she mused, "I think God maintained his belief in me. Once you come to a point where you try to give credit where it's due, you can look back and say I was obviously clueless. I put myself in a lot of very threatening situations, yet when you look back at it and see that it's a beautiful thing."

I asked her if she felt that she had had a lucky life.

"Well there you go," she pointed out. "The fundamentalists take on the issue of luck. They say luck has nothing to do with it. They call it grace. I always thought of myself as a very unlucky person, and then I guess once I met my husband and fell in love, it transformed my understanding. You know how they say a relationship is a lot of hard work? Well, you could say that you're lucky when you fall in love and meet somebody, but we fall in love all the time? What is it that keeps it together and keeps you working? What about the people who work at it and it still falls apart? I don't know whether to call it luck or not."

I suggested that rather than considering it lucky or unlucky, you could say that you had been blessed in some way.

"Blessed. That's exactly it," she agreed. "Sometimes I don't deserve this relationship, I've been a real slitherhead."

I told her how I thought that the arguments in a relationship

are as much a sign of the love between two people as the good times. That you can fight and still love each other is a beautiful thing.

"I know what you mean," she said. "That's a true test."

- By Adam Ford

Michelle Shocked & The Anointed Earls play tonight (Wednesday 22nd), this Thursday 23rd and Friday 24th at the Prince Of Wales.

