I know I have talked about how I lost my faith before. But I’ve never talked about it in the terms I’m going to be describing it in this post and the next. It has to do with what happened with my notion of “truth” when I went to Princeton Theological Seminary.

Princeton Theological Seminary is not administratively connected to Princeton University - it simply is in the same town, across the street, and has a shared ancient history. What is now Princeton University started off in the mid-18th century as a place to train Christian ministers. Eventually the school split, with the Seminary, under a different administration, becoming its own entity. By the time I went there as a 22-year-old in 1978, Princeton was a leading a Presbyterian seminary whose mission is to train ministers for the Presbyterian Church. I had never even stepped foot in a Presbyterian church and really knew almost nothing about it, or about Princeton Seminary. But I suspected that many of the students and faculty there were not really Christian. They certainly weren’t my kind of Christian.

But, as I say, I literally knew nothing about the place. When I first decided I wanted to go there I didn’t even know Princeton Seminary was Presbyterian or that it was in New Jersey. I wanted to go there for one reason only. In college, as I pointed out, I became obsessed with studying Greek and decided I wanted to do a PhD working on Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, to gain qualifications to teach in a secular college or university as a (lone) evangelical Christian. The leading expert in Greek manuscripts of the New Testament was a scholar named Bruce Metzger. He taught at Princeton Seminary. So I decided I wanted to go there to study with him.

By the time I arrived in Princeton, of course, I knew much more about what to expect – that the seminary was Presbyterian, that it was, by my standards, crazily liberal, that it emphasized academics as much as ministerial training, and that it had a large faculty of scholars of whom I had never heard, except Metzger. Some of that was good news for me (I wanted the most academically rigorous training I could get) and some not so good (I wasn’t thrilled about having to study theology under professors I wasn’t sure were even Christian).

My view of Princeton now is that it is not at all crazily liberal. At the time I saw it as way left of center, but not to the extreme left (that was places like Harvard and San Francisco Theological Seminary where, we thought, it was a huge disadvantage to be a Christian in any sense at all). Now I think that it was firmly mainline, and in my view today it is an extremely conservative place. Not crazy conservative like fundamentalist Moody Bible Institute, but still, in the overall scheme of thing, very conservative indeed.

In any event, I went their armed to the teeth to fight for the faith. Turns out I didn’t really need to. I was certainly one of the most conservative students there, but I found others like me who had come from evangelical backgrounds who were a bit suspicious of what they would be getting at a place like Princeton.

I would not say that I approached my studies there with an open mind. I was bound and determined to stand for The Truth, in the face of liberal heresy. But eventually education has a way of getting at you. Or at least it should.

Here is an aspect about conservative evangelical Christianity that most people have never thought about. Conservative evangelical Christian thinkers are almost entirely committed heart and soul to the idea that there is objectivity, and the goal of thinking is to be as objective as possible. They are sworn enemies of relativism, of subjectivity. They think Truth is objective and can be proven. The entire enterprise of apologetics – the “proof” of the faith – is rooted in the sense that there is objective truth out there and the goal of
inquiry is to uncover that objective truth through objective modes of investigation.

This creates one of the strangest paradoxes in modern culture that I’ve never ever heard anyone ever talk about (scholar or otherwise). The very notion of objectivity came into being in the European Enlightenment. It was during the Enlightenment that thinkers came to believe that through science, experimentation, and the unrestricted use of human rationality (instead of appeal to church authority and tradition) it was possible to establish truth in such a way that anyone would be forced to agree to a proposition: Yes, THIS (and not some other thing) is *demonstrably* true. It can be proven.

This Enlightenment thinking is what led thinkers away from church dogma and teaching – for example about the nature of the universe (you mean the earth is *not* the center of all things?), about human beings (think, evolution), about the etiologies of disease (am I sick because God is angry with me or because I caught a virus), about morality (is it really right to torture heretics? Is slavery justified?), about the grounds of authority (is something true if the church has always said it is true?) about the nature of religion (is it invented rather than handed down from above?), about the possibilities of belief (is it sensible to believe in a greater being or, in fact, did we get here by a combination of matter, time, and chance?), and on and on and on. The Enlightenment changed everything. It made possible the modern world, whether in terms of science (the very concept of “natural law”), technology, academic disciplines (from chemistry to anthropology to history to psychology to... well, it’s a long list), and religion (agnosticism and atheism became genuine options).

We are all, of course, heirs of the Enlightenment. Thank God, so to say.

But the irony is this. Fundamentalist Christians, who take a very hard line precisely against the (horrible!) findings of the Enlightenment — with its Big Bang, evolution, multiculturalism, and so on - are in one respect as much or even more the Children of the Enlightenment than anyone else on the planet. They continue to think that Truth is completely Objective and that can be established by objective modes of inquiry. Conservative apologists continue to think you can PROVE the truths of Christianity: There is One God, the Creator of all things; the Bible is the literally inspired Word of God; Jesus was physically raised from the dead; and so forth and so on.

The problem is that if you think truth is completely objective and that you can prove something to be true, this means you can also, in theory, objectively prove that it is false. If you admit the possibility of objective truth you admit the possibility of objective error. This possibility is what in the long run has proved so disastrous for evangelical Christianity. It certainly was what proved to be disastrous for my own evangelical Christianity. Since I was open to both proof and disproof, I eventually came to see that my views did not rest on a solid foundation. My Enlightenment approach to truth as an evangelical ended up undercutting my anti-Enlightenment views of the truth. That led to a crisis of faith. And it was because I was a child of the Enlightenment when it came to my way of establishing truth, when I didn’t accept the results of the Enlightenment when it came to what I believed about the truth.

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