This little diversion of a thread was going to be a simply one-post on the talk I’ll be giving today to my undergraduate Introduction to the New Testament class, where I spill the beans about what I personally believe and why. But it’s turned into a four-post mini-thread on my views of the separation of church and state. So far it’s been all background – how my twelve years of higher education were all done in Christian confessional contexts, not in secular schools, even though all of my teaching has been in research universities. Go figure.

As I indicated in my previous post, as a PhD student I tried to broaden my range significantly so it would not look like I could do nothing except for textual criticism, the study of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament with the ultimate goal of figuring out what the biblical authors actually wrote. My intention all along was to find a teaching position either in a divinity school/seminary (for the training of pastors) or in a Christian liberal arts college. I was not particularly interested, at the time, in teaching in a secular setting, mainly because I knew nothing about secular universities, never having set foot in one my entire life.

But I was having trouble finding any kind of teaching position at all. In part that was because I was not finished with my dissertation, and most schools are reluctant to hire someone who isn’t finished yet, both because there is no telling if a person ever will finish and because with a finished dissertation you can evaluate the full quality of a person’s work and potential. With so many certified PhD’s available for teaching posts, there is little reason to take a chance on someone who is ABD (jargon for “All But Dissertation” – that is, someone who has fulfilled all the requirements of a PhD except for the completion of the dissertation).

I had been in the job market for two years, and was coming up with absolutely nothing. I had not had a serious interview for a position, let alone an offer of one. I was getting extremely frustrated. I used to go into the office of the Dean of Graduate Studies at Princeton Seminary to nose around, thinking that maybe somehow that would help me get a job (it was the office that handled placement). It was a waste of time.

One day in the middle of a spring semester I was in there grousing to the secretary about how there didn’t seem to be very many positions in my field around the country, and her phone rang. She answered, said to the caller “Just a minute,” and then handed me the phone and “It’s for you.” What?? It was the chair of the Department of Religion at Rutgers University (just about 15 miles away). They were in desperate need of a New Testament specialist right away. The woman there who taught New Testament had to take an emergency leave of absence, starting in two weeks, right after spring break. Her husband had been diagnosed with cancer and she could not finish out the semester. Would I be interested in picking up her two courses at the half-way point?

Would I be interested?!? Yikes. It turns out they interviewed three people for the job, but they ended up giving it to me. I showed up to teach there by a complete fluke. Who would-a thought?

My first day of class, picking up her syllabi where she left off, was the first time in my entire life I had ever been in a secular university. I could only guess what it would be like, since I had zero experience in that world. In my own world (this seems very strange indeed) it was common to begin class with prayer. Really. I knew *that* much was going to be different. But what else?

Looking back I think that in some ways having such a radical departure from the kind of
educational experience I had had as a student to the kind I had as a teacher actually helped me, significantly, to understand the real difference between teaching religion in a confessional setting (a Christian college; a seminary) and in a secular one. I have a very finely honed sense of the difference, precisely because I was trained entirely in one setting and have taught entirely in the other.

In the secular setting there needs to be a radical disjuncture between what a professor (like me) personally believes and what he tries to teach to his students. In a secular setting the teaching of religion is not at all about what the students ought to believe religiously, about how they should tend to their faith commitments, about how religion should affect their lives. The teaching of religion is the teaching *about* religion. You don’t have to embrace a religion to teach about it, any more than you have to be a communist to teach about Marxism or a Nazi to teach about the Third Reich. These are topics of academic study, and a professor’s personal relationship to the matter is, or at least should be, irrelevant to their teaching of it.

And so, now, in my Department of Religious Studies here at Chapel Hill, we have professors who teach various aspects of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Religions in America, and .... other things. Are my colleagues adherents of these various religious traditions? In most cases, I have no idea. Here’s a strange factoid: I have been teaching religious studies here at Chapel Hill for 28 years now. To my recollection, I have never, ever had a conversation with a colleague in my department about personal religious beliefs, mine or theirs. Ever. It’s just not a topic of conversation. We are scholars who are experts in different aspects of religion. What we personally believe or practice has no relevance to the matter.

And in my view that’s the way it should be in a state research university. In this country we have a constitutional separation of church and state. The state cannot tell a church how to conduct its affairs (within parameters, of course; churches cannot sponsor illegal activities); and the church cannot dictate how the state conducts its own. Someone who is paid by taxpayer money cannot (as part of their job) promote his or her personal religious agenda, an agenda that will almost certainly run contrary to the views of many of the taxpayers providing (part of) the salary. If I were to advocate my personal beliefs in class and try to influence students to accept them, in my view, I would be in violation of the principles set forth in the constitution. So I never do so. That’s very different from teaching in a religious environment. And now that I’ve done it for over 32 years (first at Rutgers then at UNC), I *so* much prefer it this way.

And now I am ready to explain what I am planning to do in my New Testament class this afternoon where I do divulge my personal beliefs, on the last day of the semester. I’ll explain all about that in the next post.

If you don’t belong to the blog yet, JOIN!!! You’ll get meaty posts 5-6 times a week for pennies a post, and every penny goes to fight hunger and homelessness. So do yourself some good, do the world some good, to the universe some good. JOIN!
How We Got Our 27-Book New Testament: The Case of Didymus