

I just got home from spending a week in Lawrence Kansas, my home town. As I've done now for years, I took my mom fishing in the Ozarks for a few days. She's 87, and on a walker, but still able to reel them in!

I go back to Lawrence probably three or four times a year, and each time it is like going down memory lane. I left there to go to Moody Bible Institute in 1973, when I was all of 17 years old; I still called it home for years, but never lived there full time, not even in the summers usually. I was married and very much on my own only four years later. So my memories of the place are entirely of childhood through high school. I can't help reflecting on this, that, and the other thing in my past as I drive around town, remembering doing this thing here, that thing there, and so on.

This time, for some reason, there was an unusually high concentration of "religious" recollections, of my different religious experiences in one place or another. As I've said a number of times, I had a born-again experience in high school, when I "asked Jesus into my heart." I must have been 15 at the time. The odd thing was that I was already a committed church person before that - for my entire life, in fact. I was an acolyte in the Episcopal church from junior high onwards, every week praying to God, confessing my sins, thinking about the salvation brought by Christ, and so on. So looking back, it's hard to know what really I was thinking when I finally "became a Christian." What exactly was I before?

But what really struck me this time around, in particular, was this. Most of my family and friends who also became evangelical Christians - at least the ones who have stayed that way - are, naturally, upset and confused about why I left the faith. In their view, the faith I had when I was 16 was the "truth," and now I have gone over to the way of "error." I should stress that my mom and I never talk about such things - we both know it would do no good and that we would just both get upset. So instead we talk about basketball, and family, and fishing, and lots of other things - but not religion. Still, I know that she, like the others I knew way back then, think that I used to be right; that I made a terrible mistake when I became a "liberal" Christian in my late-20s; and that I really went off the deep end when I became an agnostic.

But here is what struck me. About what other form of knowledge or belief would we say that it is better that we should think the way we did when we were 16 than the way we think now?

Would we say that our understanding of science was better then? Our understanding of biology or physics or astronomy? Were our views in 1972 better than our views now? Or how about politics? Or philosophy? Would we be better off thinking what we did when we were 16? Or what about our views of sexual relations? Or literature? Or economic investments? Or ... Or anything else?

Isn't it very strange indeed that so many people of faith - not all of them, of course; and arguably not even most of them; but certainly some of them; in fact a *lot* of them in evangelical circles - think that even though they are supposed to grow, and mature, and develop new ideas, and chart new territories, and acquire new knowledge, and change their understandings as they get older in every *other* aspect of their lives, they are supposed to hold on to pretty much the SAME religious views that were satisfying to them as a sixteen year old?

That is one of the things that I find most puzzling and dissatisfying and frustrating about many of the good, concerned, committed evangelical Christians who contact me via email or

in person (say, at one of my talks): the views they put forth, in trying to “win me over,” are views that are at the intellectual and spiritual level of sophistication of a 16 year old. They may be successful businessmen, or teachers, or investors, or ... name your profession. And in other parts of their lives they may have considerable maturity and sophistication. But when it comes to religious belief, they are still back where they were in 1972. There’s something wrong about that....

I should emphasize that there are lots (and lots) of theologians who are serious scholars, some of them quite brilliant. They obviously do not work with a 16-year-old’s view of religion. they are philosophically astute and intellectually impressive, people like Rowan Williams, Herbert McCabe, Fergus Kerr, and Stanley Hauerwas (they are not all like each other, either). I have no argument with them. My argument is with the intelligent Christian people who check their intelligence at the door when they enter the church, who think that it makes sense to have a sophisticated view of the world when it comes to their investments, their business practices, their politics, their medical preferences - but not when it comes to their religion.



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