

In this week's readers' mailbag I deal with a personal question about my background and whether it gave me and advantages or disadvantages in my rather unusual line of work as a secular scholar of the Bible.

QUESTION:

Just as a matter of empirical fact, do you think that your religious background gave you any (intellectual) advantages, or disadvantages, in your work over someone who lacked that background?

RESPONSE:

Every now and then I look back on my life and think: Wow, now that was weird. Even though I'm a pretty normal American guy in lots of ways - at least normal as an American guy who is a professional scholar (OK, that's already weird, but it's weird in a socially normal way) (my normalcies: I have passions for football, basketball, working out, reading novels and nonfiction, traveling, the outdoors, hiking, family, kids, grandkids; I love martinis and cigars [both of which I enjoy much more rarely than I would like, since I'd like to enjoy them for many more years....]; I'm politically intensely interested, I'm concerned with social issues, etc. etc.) - my life is very strange indeed in others. I'm a professional scholar of the Bible and an expert on such things as the historical Jesus and the Gospels and the history of early Christianity who is not, himself, a Christian. How many people like *that* do you see on the street?

So my present life is normal in a lot of ways but also pretty weird from an outside perspective. Still, my personal history is even more weird. After high school, instead of going off to Kansas University like most of my friends, to major in English or Business (the two leading options at the time for me) and to be on the debate team (my high school passion) (my high school debate colleague was the national college champion as a sophomore at KU), I went to Moody Bible Institute to be trained in the Bible and theology. I was all of 17.

Instead of learning about literature, history, philosophy, chemistry, biology, classics, psychology - or anything else, I learned about the Bible. Massively. Intensely. Day in and day out. My courses were not on, say, Shakespeare, Sociology 101, Physics or whatever. They were on The Gospel of John, The book of Daniel, Evangelism, and Systematic Theology. At the time it was amazingly stimulating and exciting, and I was unusually passionate about it. I went from being a smart kid who did well in his classes, but didn't do a whole lot to excel (in high school) to being a driven and intense guy who couldn't get enough of studies. I studied in almost all my free time. On average I pulled an all-nighter once every week or two, not partying (we didn't party), but studying.

In addition to doing everything I could to ace all my courses, I spent time memorizing books of the Bible on my own.

On top of our courses we had weekly practicums (I can't remember exactly what we called them at Moody), a kind of ministry obligation. One semester it was going door-to-door in a Chicago suburb one afternoon each week trying to convert people; one semester it was

working as a chaplain assistant at Cook County Hospital; one semester it was working as a radio counsellor at a Christian radio station; two semesters it was serving as a youth pastor in a church running Bible study groups, prayer meetings, and social events for the kids. This is what I did with my time, instead of going to frat parties, exploring the realms of sex and substances, watching lots of t.v., going to football and basketball games. (I did have girlfriends, of course; but a good bit of our relationships involve the spiritual life. [!])

So, all this is to say that it was a pretty weird way to spend your first three years out of high school. As you can imagine, it had a rather severe effect on my friendships back home. Most of the kids I had hung out with in high school as a normal American adolescent had very little in common with me once I headed off to Bible-Boot Camp.

And so, the question I'm being asked here is whether all that was an advantage or disadvantage to me intellectually in my chosen line of work, as a professor of early Christianity at a secular research university.

The answer is pretty obvious, at least to me from the inside. There were some massively serious advantages and (maybe even more) some massively serious disadvantages.

Most critical scholars of the Bible (that is, who do not think the Bible is infallible, but who approach it from a critical perspective) have a religious background of some kind. But very rarely is it the kind of hard-core fanatical fundamentalism that I was into. When these people - many friends of mine - went off to do their master's work at, say, a seminary, and/or a PhD, they didn't have to unlearn much of what they had learned in order to start learning what they had to learn. They had a critically informed faith at the outset of their studies, and they kept pretty much the faith they always had, though critically refined with the passing of time and their acquisition of new knowledge

Unlike them, I had to experience a massive paradigm shift in my thinking about the Bible in order to become a (real, critical) scholar of the Bible. My *advantage* was that I actually knew the content of the Bible better than most anyone. My *disadvantage* is that the way I understood the Bible had to be completely changed/overtaken/revamped to make sense of what I was reading and learning. That was very hard to do. Very hard indeed.

I'm trying to think of an analogy. It would be kind of like growing up in American capitalist, free enterprise society, and studying economics passionately with a capitalist understanding both of how things do were and how they should work, and then converting to become a Marxist. When you converted you would have factual data at your disposal already. But the way you understood each and every datum - the principles of the economy, the history of economic relations, the effect of economy on society, and every other related thing - would now be radically different. Your views, your ideas, your assumptions about everything would have to be reworked from scratch. It would be very discombobulating.

But that's not probably a great analogy, since my spiritual formation affected not just my intellectual understanding of the Bible, but my entire life - it dictated everything from my views of religion (obviously) to my understanding of the world itself to all my social relationships to my ethics to my views of politics to gender relations (my views of women as a fundamentalist are not something I'm proud of) to personal life decisions to... everything.

All of that flopped when I moved from a fundamentalist to a critical approach to the Bible.

So was my background a help or a hindrance in becoming a secular scholar of the Bible? I'll say some more words about that in my next post.



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