

This will be a very personal post, about being an enemy of the Christian faith.

I've long been amazed, surprised, and perplexed about how, when it comes to religion, comments made in one context are completely non-problematic but when the (exact) same comments are made in another context, they are heinous and threatening. Some of it almost certainly has to do with tone and general attitude. But I wonder if it isn't actually much broader than that.

One of the ways I've seen this over the years is in the use of humor. When I was a conservative evangelical Christian at Moody Bible Institute there were all sorts of jokes we would tell about the faith or about our commitments or communities: just about Moody, we would call it Moody Instant Bible Institute; or say we went to Moody, where Bible is our middle name. Or someone would say (with respect to the view that the "rapture" would occur prior to, not after, the millennium - something we were very big on indeed!) that he was so pre-millennial that he wouldn't eat Post Toasties.

We all thought that kind of corny humor was funny. But when later in life I would say the exact same things, evangelicals found them highly offensive.

OK, maybe I'm not so amazed, surprised, and perplexed about it. Context changes everything. What is self-deprecating humor on the lips of one person can be a malicious attack on the lips of another. Same words, different speaker.

The issue keeps coming to mind these days, in a variety of ways. Recently, as you know, I've been posting on the issue of whether the book of James could be a forgery. "Forgery" is a word that most New Testament scholars really don't like. They think it is crass and in your face and hopelessly negative, and so, typically, they completely avoid it, either preferring a term they consider to be more neutral (e.g., "pseudepigraphon." Who would take offense at *that*, when no one knows that it means?) or claiming that in fact in the ancient world people didn't think the phenomenon (an author falsely claiming to be a famous person) was deceitful - or in fact that no one in the ancient world was in fact deceived.

I think that's completely wrong. Ancient authors talked about the phenomenon and they consistently disapproved of it, and often said nasty things about it. For me, if someone today were to publish a novel claiming to be Stephen King, when in fact he was Herman Schmidt, we would call it a forgery. Why not when someone named Samuel from Antioch claimed to be James of Jerusalem? It's true, writing conventions were different then, and there was no such thing as copyright or legal proscriptions etc etc. I go into all that in my books. But the phenomenon was seen in a very similar light in antiquity. It was wrong to call yourself by someone else's name in order to promote your writing for one reason or another.

The other interesting thing is that when modern people hear about such ancient forgeries, they have different reactions to it. My sense is that most readers of the blog would say that if a book is forged then Christians are flippin' *crazy* to think it could be inspired by God.

This will strike many of you as weird, but I myself don't agree. As you know, I don't believe in God, so it's not that I think such a book actually *is* or *could be* inspired by God (God can't inspire a book if he doesn't exist...). But I used to believe in God, and as a scholar I certainly believed, even back then, that a number of the books in the New Testament were not actually written by their alleged authors, that the person who wrote 1 Timothy claiming to be Paul was not really Paul, or the author claiming to be Peter in 2 Peter was not really

Peter, e.g. But I still thought that they were the inspired word of God.

How could that be? I remember what my great teacher, one of the great biblical scholars of the twentieth century, Bruce Metzger used to say. He was himself very conservative in many ways, and a highly committed and pious believer. But he was also a learned scholar. He didn't accept all the findings of "liberal" biblical scholars, at all. But there were times where he too had to admit that there were problems with the Bible. He agreed that there was almost no way Peter actually wrote 2 Peter. And he thought that the creation stories of Genesis 1-3 were "myths." He would use the word. But he still thought they were Scripture, revelations from God.

And when his conservative students would object to him calling the creation story a "myth," since it was in the Bible, Metzger's reply was always: "Who says God can't inspire a myth"?

I still rather like that. Why *can't* God inspire a forgery? I certainly don't think he does, since I don't think he exists; but when I did think he existed I thought he had inspired forgeries. So it's certainly possible to believe he did. (I mean empirically, it's *proven* that it's possible to believe it, because some people do!)

And so I'm back to why a view is acceptable in one context and not in another: the view that there are pseudepigrapha in the New Testament was completely acceptable to those of us being trained as biblical theologians and ministers at Princeton Theological Seminary, but completely *Verbotten* at Moody Bible Institute.

And so the personal question that I struggle with a good deal. OK, this is really highly personal, it's just me. But I often feel sad about being seen as an "enemy" of the Christian faith. People tell me I am all the time - both people who despise me and people who are rooting me on. Yet the views I put out there for public scrutiny are almost NEVER things that I've come up with myself, that I've dreamt up, that I'm trying to push on others with no evidence or argument - just crazy liberal ideas I've come up with to lead people away from the faith.

So why am I an enemy?

Of course I know why, and my views were given additional support last week, at the international meeting of New Testament scholars I attended in Marburg. I was talking with a German scholar about advanced training in biblical studies in Germany these days, and he told me that in German theological schools (in his experience), students simply are not as a rule very interested in the historical study of the New Testament *per se*. The kinds of historical issues we deal with on the blog are simply not pressing matters for them. These are not why they are in theological training, either to teach or to minister in churches.

Instead, he indicated, the ONE question / issue that most of these students have is: "How can I be Christian in this increasingly secular world?"

Of course they are interested in historical knowledge - but it's not what's driving them. Instead it is an existential question about faith. That makes so much sense. It is what was driving me at that stage too. But when this fellow scholar told me that, I realized even more clearly why I get so much opposition, even in some learned circles.

Most of the people who are in the business of studying the Bible are committed to faith. That's what generates their interest. And these days it is very hard. Christians are under

attack. From science, from philosophy, from the neo-atheists, from a society/culture that increasingly doesn't care. And the problem with someone like me is that I'm not helping the cause. On the contrary, I'm not just someone from the outside taking potshots at this faith. I'm someone who came from within it, and left it, with good reasons, and who argues views that are taken by people in the wider culture to be "evidence" that the faith has no good rational basis. Even though I disagree with that assessment (since I know full well that people can be devout believers but still agree with everything I say) (not that anyone agrees with everything I say) (sometimes *I* don't agree with everything I say...) - even though I disagree with that assessment, I get it.

Christians - even Christian scholars - want to cling on to their faith, to cherish it, and promote it, and what they see as negative assaults on the basis of their faith is threatening, especially - this is the key point - if it comes from someone who is *outside* the community of faith but who used to be inside it and understands the views of those who are still inside it extremely well, but who now rejects these views. And says things that can lead others to reject them as well.

So no wonder I'm the enemy. As we all say these days: duh.



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