

ACADEMIC QUESTIONS

Little Story About Big Story

Dear Professor Theophilus:

I really appreciated the discussion of postmodernism in "The Big Story." I am a second year graduate student in a liberal English department. Postmodernism is my teachers' favorite intellectual child. It has been a struggle to reconcile my academic work with my faith. "Office Hours" has given me a heartfelt look at the role Christians ought to be playing in the intellectual and university community.

Reply

Thanks be to God, you're doing much better than I did in graduate school; I had already abandoned my faith and didn't return to it until I was already out and teaching. So many things have changed since then; Christians are discovering each other in academia and reintegrating their faith with their scholarship. An ancient Christian saying is *Unus Christianus, nullus Christianus* -- "a sole Christian is no Christian." That's no less true in academia than in any other walk of life.

If it would give you a lift to read the stories of other Christian scholars, you might consider Kelly Monroe's *Finding God at Harvard*, or Paul M. Anderson's *Professors Who Believe*. Protestant and Catholic scholarly associations now exist in many of the disciplines and are easy to find online. Christians are also beginning to turn several academic disciplines upside-down. This is well-advanced in philosophy, and well-begun in biology; maybe you will be one of the pioneers in English! May the Father of Lights illuminate your intellect and set lamps on the path for your feet.

Grace and peace,
PROFESSOR THEOPHILUS

Same Story, Different Discipline

Dear Professor Theophilus:

I am a second year psychology major at Iowa State University. Sometimes I get frustrated with the theories that are presented to me, especially the ones concerned with motivation. The existence of a moral law isn't included. Conscience and morality are basically discounted as learned behavior or attributed to social evolution.

So far I haven't been able to find evidence of a universal moral law (except personal knowledge and philosophical arguments). I've been thinking that if moral law is as real as I think it is, it would be odd for psychologists not to stumble upon cold hard facts that point to its existence. Can you help me out?

Reply:

I understand your frustration. Many contemporary psychologists take for granted that conscience is something pumped in from the outside. Their idea is that your parents told you things, your teachers told you things, the policeman told you things and somehow all those things got inside you and made a conscience. This story is half-true at best. Certainly there is something in conscience that comes in from outside, but there is something else in conscience that doesn't. The latter is far more important.

We see the same problem in sociology. In the 1970s, scholars of the family reported that kids are remarkably resilient, do just as well with one parent as with two, are better off if parents who have conflicts divorce -- all that jazz. But you know facts are hard things to ignore. In the 1990s, after larger and better studies, scholars of the family are discovering that everything your great-grandmother told you is true after all. As sociologists Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur now write, "If we were asked to design a system for making sure that children's basic needs were met, we would probably come up with something quite similar to the two-parent ideal."

The problem arises in cultural anthropology too. It was founded by people who wanted to prove that morality is different everywhere and they saw what they wanted to, whether it was there or not. But again, the data is on our side. For example, Colin Turnbull wrote that the Ik, in Africa, have no conscience, but later researchers found that actually they had a strong sense of moral obligation and social solidarity. Margaret Mead wrote that the Samoans had none of our rules about sex, but later researchers found that actually they valued chastity very highly. A better statement of the true state of affairs is this one, written by John M. Cooper in 1931:

[T]he peoples of the world, however much they differ as to details of morality, hold universally, or with practical universality, to at least the following basic precepts. Respect the Supreme Being or the benevolent being or beings who take his place. Do not "blaspheme." Care for your children. Malicious murder or maiming, stealing, deliberate slander or "black" lying, when committed against friend or unoffending fellow clansman or tribesman, are reprehensible. Adultery proper is wrong, even though there be exceptional circumstances that permit or enjoin it and even though sexual relations among the unmarried may be viewed leniently. Incest is a heinous offense. This universal moral code agrees rather closely with our own Decalogue taken in a strictly literal sense.

As C.S. Lewis wrote, the peoples of the world may disagree about whether you may have one wife or four, but they all recognize that there is something special about the marital union of a man and a woman; they may disagree about which virtues are most important, but they all agree that gratitude is something good and cowardice is something bad.

Here's what you need to do: Begin reading the literature of Natural Law. "Natural Law" is the philosophical term for what St. Paul in Romans 2:14-15 called "the law written on the heart." It refers to those basic moral principles that we literally can't not know, along with their first few rings of implications. I can start you off with a couple articles of my own, "The Revenge of Conscience" and "The Second Tablet Project". You might also be interested in my book *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide*. It was written largely for people just like you.

Love God with all your heart, and He will guide your studies.

Grace and peace,
PROFESSOR THEOPHILUS

Theophilus Provokes Disturbance in Classroom

Dear Professor Theophilus:

We had a heated discussion in the government class I teach after I assigned an online article of yours entitled "Mix & Match Morality". You claim in the article that it's impossible to be a bad man and a great statesman. Here's what one of my students wrote:

I've been thinking a lot about whether a bad man can be a great statesman. I know that this is possible from history. David lusted after women, killed the innocent and lied. I'm not saying I judge him for that -- I respect his choice by God -- but he did commit all these evils, and he was corrupt. The same with Peter and Paul, even after their conversion. Or look at Jefferson. I would say he was a good statesman, but we now know that he had illegitimate children with his slaves. FDR was morally flawed -- he cheated on his wife. I'm not defending sin. I just have a difficult time hearing Christians criticize anyone for his actions. Do any of these critics respond with forgiveness, as they are commanded to do? Some, probably, but the vast majority sit on their high horses. Their righteousness is like filthy rags. That's why I can't agree to the author's otherwise persuasive argument.

What do you think?

Reply

Your student seems to assume that because (a) all of us sin, and (b) anyone can be forgiven, therefore (c) we are not entitled to judge the character of those who ask to rule us.

On the contrary, (a) rather than repenting and seeking forgiveness, some people obstinately persist in their sins, (b) some obstinate sins are even more reckless and dangerous to the public than others, therefore (c) Scripture explicitly commands us to "judge with right judgment" (John 7:24).

Furthermore, because the sins of those in high places are even more dangerous to the nation than the sins of those in low places, Scripture repeatedly emphasizes the need for rulers -- government officials -- to have wisdom and virtue. This theme runs throughout the book of Proverbs, not to mention the historical books of the Old Testament, which link every national calamity to the sins of the rulers and people.

King David was able to do great things not *because* of his sin, but because of his willingness to *repent* of his sin. Would he have been such a great ruler if he had not listened to the prophet Nathan, who called him to judgment? A certain recent president made a mockery of the very idea of repentance. The connection of his marital and political vices was illustrated by the fact that he lied over and over to the country, just as he lied over and over to his wife.

It's true, of course, that a bad man may sometimes do good. When he does, however, he does it either because of some spark of virtue left in him, or else for

some bad motive like admiration or glory -- in other words, by coincidence. Though such things happen sometimes (rocks sometimes fall from the sky), you can't count on them. If you want someone you can trust, you should seek a man who is wise and good. Who could deny that? We shouldn't judge character hypocritically or self-righteously, but we must judge character.

Only a fool would hire a thug to babysit his children, and only a crook would hire a crook to balance his books. What is it that makes this common sense inapplicable when we hire men to run the country?

Grace and peace,
PROFESSOR THEOPHILUS

Fall of a Freshman

Dear Professor Theophilus:

Our son, who tests at genius level, has just completed his first year of college. Recently he nervously approached my wife and me to tell us that he no longer thinks Christianity is true. He doesn't believe in God, says that we can know nothing except through science and claims that each person has to define the meaning and significance of life for himself. Religion, he thinks, is a crutch.

He says he has come to these views on his own, through reading and chat room discussions. Although he tells us he is open to further discussion, his attitude communicates that he isn't really open. He refuses to believe that we could know God exists beyond a reasonable doubt, concluding that we may as well believe there is no God. We have responded by reaffirming our love for him, reviewing the evidence for the truth of the Christian faith and trying to unravel some errors in his logical reasoning. So far, though, it appears that we are making no progress whatsoever. He is well-read in Christian apologetics and tells us that he has "heard it all."

Please, if there is anything you can do or recommend to help us in this difficult time, we would very deeply appreciate it. We're encouraging him to talk with smart Christians. I've read about you and I know you once traveled a path somewhat similar to my son's.

Reply

I was grieved to hear of your son's fall from faith. As you guessed, this is a common story. Yes, I do have a few suggestions.

I've shortened your letter quite a bit for publication. What the long, original version tells me is that during your talks with your son, you are pouring almost all of your energy into discussing his intellectual objections to Christianity. It's important to realize that these intellectual objections are not necessarily the reason why he so abruptly lost his faith. It almost never happens that a bright young person who understands apologetics runs into an argument he can't answer, then -- wham! -- stops believing. What more often happens is that he develops a motive to lose his faith, then starts looking for arguments he can't answer.

The question, then, is what that motive may have been. Often, a young person has more than one such motive. One common motive is personal sin. If you are doing what God calls wrong, it's uncomfortable to believe in God. Another motive is intellectual pride and vanity. Smart people like to be recognized as smart by other smart people, but the intellectual culture of our day holds Christianity in contempt.

I don't suggest that you and your wife should interrogate your son about his motives. There are two good reasons not to. The first is that although young people think they understand their motives well, in fact they usually don't. The second reason is that even if you could prove that your son had a bad motive for losing his faith, that wouldn't prove that his present views are false. So it isn't important to convince *him* that he must have had some motive for abandoning faith. The important thing is to understand this fact about him *yourselves*. Intelligent though he may be, his problem is less cognitive (being unable to understand) than volitional (being unwilling to understand).

What else can I suggest? Pull back from lengthy discussions with him about the rational grounds for faith. As you point out, you can't argue a person into belief. Excessive indulgence in such discussions may even do more harm than good, by feeding your son's conviction that his motives are purely intellectual. Of course I don't mean that you shouldn't discuss the intellectual dimension of faith -- you certainly should. But let *him* bring it up.

You must also distinguish between objections to faith that represent real intellectual problems for him, and objections to faith that he is using merely as smokescreens. When you meet a real intellectual problem, offer a real intellectual solution. A

smokescreen, however, requires an entirely different response: What you have to do is blow it away and uncover the real issue hidden behind it. There is an art to this, and you must depend on the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

It won't work to say, "That's just a smokescreen." What you have to do is talk in such a way that your son recognizes for himself that he's only blowing smoke. Sometimes a simple question is enough -- something like "Suppose I gave you a completely convincing intellectual response to every one of your objections. Would you change your mind?" You'd be surprised how often people say "No." But in that case you can ask, "Then isn't your disbelief irrational?"

Yes, it's important for your son to get to know smart Christians, but not for the reason you think. Whether he talks with them about the faith isn't very important. What's important is making it impossible for him to tell himself that smart Christians don't exist. Nonbelievers with a lot of intellectual pride reassure themselves with the idea that faith is a defect of the intellect. They find smart Christians unsettling. As philosopher Thomas Nagel has written, "I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers."

In the meantime, pray for your son without ceasing. Pray for him whenever you think of him, morning, noon or night. This is the most important thing of all. Never despair. Prayer may feel like not doing anything, but it is doing the greatest thing. Implore God to do what is needed to bring your son to himself, like the prodigal son in the parable. An ancient Christian woman named Monica prayed daily for her pagan son. We know the man as he was afterward: St. Augustine.

Trust God. Intellectual pride is like a tower of adamant, with the door locked from the inside. Sometimes the only way available to the Divine Love to bring a soul back to Himself is to bring him low. If He brings your own son low, you must be ready, because your faith may be tested too.

Grace and peace,
PROFESSOR THEOPHILUS

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