

"Finding God at Iowa" Forum

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I'm not accustomed to speaking to an audience in the matters of faith. I've delivered sermons and meditations a few times in First Mennonite Church, of which I'm a member. I've been called on to "say a few words", knowing that I'm a man of few words! I then worry about the task weeks in advance and procrastinate until the last minutes when I finally write down those "few words". Jason's request to speak here today was no exception! Speaking on a subject in my academic area, I can usually "wing it" without much difficulty. One would think that, on a subject so much central to one's life, that is, personal faith, it would be even easier, but that's not my experience.

There are probably several reasons for the difficulty of talking about matters of personal faith. As Les Sims mentioned last fall, sharing the most private aspects of our being-- our faith - leaves us vulnerable to the judgment of others, in which I include others both within and without the Christian faith. As Les also stated, the ideal of "Separation of Church and State" tends to be interpreted in a public university as a separation of the secular and the sacred in every aspect of our lives. To quote Les: "...free and open debate of ideas and issues is celebrated, but in practice [the university community] does not recognize religion and faith as valid aspects of scholarly inquiry." There is a tendency among many intellectuals to view anyone professing a Christian faith with ridicule, and to consider the Christian as being anti-intellectual and closed-minded, while those professing another religious faith, such as Buddhism, for example, are viewed with more respect (or at least less disrespect).

For me, another reason for my discomfort in speaking on this topic, compared to my academic area of expertise (operations research - basically, mathematical modeling and analysis of industrial systems, and algorithms for their optimization), is that I can speak confidently with a certain level of authority in the classroom. Although many people do speak

authoritatively on matters of faith, I'm uncomfortable with their pronouncements, and uncomfortable delivering my own.

Let me begin with what I do know with some authority, or think I know-- my background. I think that this will explain many of the ideas that I'll get to later -- perhaps it will even explain it better to you than it does to me, in fact!

I grew up on a farm in southern Illinois (outside of Patoka, population 500). My family attended the Methodist Church there. I attended the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, with a major in mathematics and minor in physics, earning a B.S. in '65. I continued on to receive M.S., also in math, in '66.

Most of my undergraduate days I had no interest in religion, although I considered myself Christian in some sense. In the fall of '64, I had become involved with *InterVarsity Christian Fellowship* (IVCF). I was a "loner" in college, and was attracted to the atmosphere of friendship which I saw in the IVCF members.

On the other hand, their meetings raised a lot of questions, mostly theological, which were unsettling to me-- the major one being the problem of why a God, if He exists, allows such suffering and evil in his creation.

Other issues which troubled me included the divinity of Jesus, the concept of the substitutionary atonement, the authority of the Bible, and the historicity of the resurrection. I wrestled with these problems for several months, and, during the winter break of my senior year, attended the IVCF missionary conference, "Urbana '64", on our campus.

I must have expected to find some answers there to these problems which were troubling me, but I don't recall them ever addressed in any significant way. What I did observe there was that Jesus was a reality in so many lives,

and that this gave a strong sense of purpose. Graduation was looming a semester away, which must have prompted me to give thought to my future, and I estimated my chances of making wrong choices, of messing up my life without any clear goals or purpose, were very high indeed!

In the last few minutes of the conference, held in the university's Assembly Hall with many thousands present, during the midnight communion service on New Year's Eve, I had a profound experience of Christ and committed myself and my life to Him. It's difficult to convey in words what I experienced-- it was a conviction that Jesus was present, not "outside" but within my, and that I was loved and accepted. Every thought became a prayer, because it occurred in His presence. I had put Him in charge of my life and trusted Him to make the decisions-- a naive idea, I was to learn later, as I still had to struggle over many decisions (but not alone, let me add!)

Let me describe another aspect of this experience, so as to help you understand where I'll be coming from in my later discussion. When I made the commitment to Jesus, I set aside those questions which had been central in my thinking the previous several months (the problem of evil, the divinity of Jesus, the resurrection, the atonement, etc.) and committed myself to a person, not a set of doctrines. "Believe and be saved?" I had come to no conclusions about what to believe on these and other issues! I didn't even, as some Christians insist is necessary, confess my sins, repent and ask forgiveness.

There's a danger in expecting other persons' Christian experiences to match your own-- I've certainly encountered a lot of that when I describe my "conversion" experience. Some of my Christian friends with an evangelical bent, such as those at IVCF, questioned the authenticity of my experience because it didn't seem to fit their mold. Likewise, my more "mainstream" Christian friends viewed my experience with skepticism as well, considering it "merely" an emotional experience.

So, even with the caveat that each individual's experience may be different and none "normative", perhaps I risk sounding

authoritative when I suggest that being a Christian means making the decision to follow Jesus as a disciple, rather than affirming certain beliefs and doctrines about the divinity of Jesus, the mechanism of the atonement, the resurrection, to name just a few which some Christians consider to be of such "fundamental" importance as to serve as a litmus test for one's faith.

As I see it, the Jesus of the gospels asked those whom he called to "Follow Me", so that they might learn from him. He didn't insist on their first affirming belief in any doctrine! It was only after they had lived with him, shared his sorrows and triumphs, listened to his sermons, that they came to realize who he is, and to believe, so that Peter could finally affirm that Jesus is the Son of God! I think that is the way that Jesus dealt with people both then and now. Nor, I believe, is repentance a prerequisite-- on the contrary, it's only after living daily with Jesus do we begin to realize how far we fall short of the way that Jesus wants us to live, and how much of which we have to be repentful!

This change in my life led to a lot of thinking about career choices, and I felt convinced that, although my natural inclination is to hole up in a lab and to avoid much human contact, was intended for a career in college teaching. This change in thinking in itself I consider miraculous, because it was totally out of character. I hadn't given such a career a first thought, let alone a second thought, because of my big problem with shyness and my dread of dealing with people, especially in groups! My aim became to obtain a job teaching math or a related subject in a church-related college, either here in the U.S., or abroad.

With this as a goal, I felt the need for a short period (1 year) of theological training. And so, after receiving my M.S. in math in 1965, then, I went to the Chicago area, got a parttime job teaching math at the YMCA Community College (now defunct), located in the loop, and enrolled in the M.A. program of Garrett Theological Seminary (which is Methodist) on the Northwestern University campus in Evanston. I stayed longer than I had originally intended, leaving Garrett after 3 years of study and a thesis short of an M.A. degree, but with a new wife, Melinda (whom I had met back at the

University of Illinois). After working two years as a programmer for IBM, followed by another four years in graduate school at Northwestern University for another M.S. and Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering & Management Sciences, I finally accepted a teaching position here at the University of Iowa in 1974, nearly 24 years ago!

During those years in the Evanston area, Melinda and I became acquainted with the Mennonites worshipping there, and felt as though we had finally found a "home". Partly this attraction was to the pacifist position of the Mennonites. (Remember that these were the years of the late 60's and early 70's, during the Vietnam conflict!) I wasn't a very vocal activist against the war, but at seminary I became convinced that Jesus's way was that of a pacifist, and felt affirmed by the Mennonite's firm conviction of this also. I also appreciated the Mennonites' emphasis on discipleship and community, and their respect for the Bible without insisting on its inerrancy and ultimate authority.

I need to make the disclaimer, however, that the views I'm expressing today are in no way "official" Mennonite teachings! The Mennonite Church has no theological litmus test for membership-- only a commitment to Jesus as Lord is insisted upon for baptism and membership, not the Apostle's Creed (which we seldom recite), for example. Which is not to imply that Mennonites have few theological beliefs-- only that they may be quite diverse. My beliefs (or lack of them) to some Mennonites might be considered misguided if not heretical! But I think it's fair to say that Mennonites are less concerned about *orthodoxy* (right beliefs) than about *orthopraxy* (right practice, i.e., obedience to the teachings of Jesus in life).

With that background recounted, let me finally address the question suggested by Jason to all the speakers in this series: How does my faith *inform*, i.e., influence or impact, my academic life and endeavors?

I think all of us have different answers to this question, partly because of the type of endeavor and field of knowledge in which we're engaged. As an industrial engineering

instructor, at least in the type of courses which I teach, there's very little course content on which I find that Christian faith can offer any insight. The exceptions are the ethical implications of some of the problems which might be addressed. For example, operations research often addresses the minimization of costs or maximization of profits for a company-- is this a proper goal without accounting somehow in the model for the humane treatment of the company's workers? Another problem which comes to mind (a Ph.D. dissertation for which I served on the examining committee) is that of the use of assigning transfer prices in a multinational corporation, with the goal being to shift taxable earnings from one country to another, thereby avoiding their responsibilities in some host countries. Another influence of my faith relates to my pacifist convictions which means, of course, that I refuse to participate in military-related research, ruling out grants from the Dept. of Defense.

I think that for me, the greater impact of faith in my academic life occurs in the tension between time spent on teaching versus time spent on research. When the amount of time is short, how is it allocated? My opinion is, especially in the past-- I'm hoping that it's changing now-- that most of the incentives push the balance toward research, at the expense of spending time to improve one's teaching. I believe that for us Christians, our scale should be tipped the other way!

I don't recall ever discussing matters relating to religious faith in the classroom-- while it's perfectly appropriate in many courses, in some of the humanities, for example, it doesn't seem relevant to the material which I teach, except as it relates to the ethical use of technology as I mentioned above. In any case, it seems to me-- and to you also, I hope-- terribly inappropriate to try to evangelize in the classroom!

Occasionally I have an opportunity to talk about matters of faith with students, one-on-one. Most often, in my experience, this occurs with international students, who are curious about Christianity and who, unlike their American counterparts, talk more freely about religious issues without embarrassment. Some of these international students I've heard from later, saying that they had become Christian, and I would like to think that in some cases I might

have stimulated their earlier interest in Christianity.

I wish that matters of religious faith were considered valid topics of inquiry on campus. Instead, both for those with and without Christian beliefs, there seems to be a big reluctance to engage in discussions in an open-minded way. Faith is personal, and therefore considered private, and something that polite people don't discuss in public!

There are Christian students who arrive at the university afraid to be challenged in their beliefs, and unwilling to engage in an intellectual inquiry. I think that this fear results from the mistaken notion (in my view) that the Christian must commit himself or herself to certain beliefs and truths, and that to abandon those beliefs would endanger his or her relationship to Jesus. These students read the Bible and in effect respond, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it!" This, in turn, reinforces the stereotypical attitude that others have about the place of Christianity in the university community. The search for truth is one of the highest endeavors of the university community, with the hope that the "truth will set us free", but few students really engage in this endeavor with open minds.

Years ago, when I was a student and society less secular, students were very private about their faith or lack of it, thinking that if their non-beliefs were exposed they would be considered not-OK by others. Nowadays, perhaps, they are private about any interest they might have in faith because if exposed, they would be considered naive, unsophisticated, and anti-intellectual by their fellow students and their instructors.

As stated by Carolyn Liebert in the recent issue of the newsletter of our Center for Teaching,

"... developmentally, most [undergraduate] students are passing from a phase where they believe their ideas are as valid as anyone else's into a phase where they recognize the importance of investigating wider evidence and accepting the possibility that many

viewpoints are valid (and indeed that their own ideas may be wrong.)"

That strikes me as perhaps a bit too optimistic a statement: I think that many, both believers and nonbelievers, never pass into that second phase. I think that we Christians on campus need to strongly encourage this kind of dialogue. And I hasten to add that I'm not referring only to the students, but to all of us in the university community! Too many of us are committed to our own ideas, and refuse to accept the possibility that other ideas are also valid, and that their own ideas may be wrong.

As Robert Frost has said,

"Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence."

I could go on, but I'm beginning to "sermonize", which was not my intent. Thanks to those of you who've had the patience to bear with me, and thanks especially to Jason Chen, who has taken the initiative to organize this monthly lunch forum and given us all the opportunity to become acquainted with others on campus who wrestle with the questions about how our faith should impact upon our university endeavors.