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Can Believers Be Bible Scholars? A Strange Debate in the Academy

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That is a shocking claim, but Fox is simply asserting what many others in the academy have thought for a very long time. Even if the secularization of the larger academy is a *fait accompli*, Fox and many others are concerned that the majority of scholars studying the Bible are believers of some sort, mostly Christians and Jews involved in the serious study of the Bible.

Fox teaches at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and he is unsparing in his denunciation of what he calls faith-based scholarship. In reality, what he means is that scholars who study the Bible as believers forfeit any claim to scholarship. Could there be any more telling evidence of what the secularization of the academy has wrought?

The naïveté of Fox's approach is self-evident, but he apparently fails to see that even an atheist brings a certain "faith" to the work of scholarship. As he sees it, Jewish scholars who would wish to publish academic research on the Old Testament are simply to be discounted because they may well believe in the existence of deity and may see the Old Testament writings as sacred. Beyond this, Christians are to be discounted wholesale, and Christians who engage in biblical scholarship are to be denied the status of scholars, regardless of which testament is their focus of study.

"Faith-based study of the Bible certainly has its place," Fox concedes—but those places are "synagogues, churches, and religious schools, where the Bible (and whatever other religious material one gives allegiance to) serves as a normative basis of moral inspiration or spiritual guidance." His next statement serves as the theme for his entire essay: "This kind of study is certainly important, but it is not scholarship—by which I mean *Wissenschaft*, a term lacking in English that can apply to the humanities as well as the hard sciences, even if the modes and possibilities of verification in each are very different."

Look carefully at Fox's next sentence: "Any discipline that deliberately imports extraneous, inviolable axioms into its work belongs to the realm of homiletics or spiritual enlightenment or moral guidance or whatnot, but not scholarship, whatever academic degrees its practitioners may hold."

This is where Fox's own lack of intellectual honesty brings his argument to a standstill. Does he really believe that he, or anyone else for that matter, comes to the task of scholarship with absolutely no "extraneous" presuppositions? No, Fox

concedes that “everyone has presuppositions and premises,” but he insists that, for scholars such as himself, “these are not inviolable.” He continues, “Indeed, it is the role of education to teach students how to recognize and rest their premises and, when necessary, to reject them.”

Of course, this simply begs the question. Why is the presumption of atheism any *less* inviolable than belief in Jesus Christ as Lord? In its own way, the same argument holds true for assertions of agnosticism, since the true agnostic argues that the question of God’s existence simply cannot be answered. That is about as inviolable an axiom as one is likely to encounter.

Give Fox his due, he attempts to exclude believers from the academy with fair warning. “Faith-based Bible study is not part of scholarship even if some of its postulates turn out to be true.” Thus, even if the believing scholar makes a scholarly argument that non-believers find convincing, that work is still to be denied the status of scholarship, simply because the person is neither agnostic nor atheist.

Fox does attempt to distinguish between “faith-based Bible study” and “the scholarship of persons who hold a personal faith.” He explains, “there are many religious individuals whose scholarship is secular and who introduce their faith only in distinctly religious forums.” Nevertheless, Fox never really explains how these persons are anything other than secular in their scholarly conclusions. Does he believe that persons live in separate intellectual spheres and can operate as authentic believers in one sphere but not in any other?

Fox’s frustration is clear: “There is an atmosphere abroad in academia (loosely associated with postmodernism) that tolerates and even encourages ideological scholarship and advocacy instruction. Some conservative religionists have picked this up. I have heard students, and read authors, who justify their biases by the rhetoric of postmodern self-indulgence. Since no one is viewpoint neutral and everyone has presuppositions, why exclude Christian presuppositions? Why allow the premise of errancy but not of inerrancy? Such sophistry can be picked apart, but the climate does favor it.”

Fox may dismiss these arguments as “sophistry,” but he never answers his own questions. Why should the premise of biblical errancy be considered ideologically neutral, but the assertion of biblical inerrancy is considered to be evidence of distorting bias?

“The claim of faith-based Bible study to a place at the academic table takes a toll on the entire field of Bible scholarship,” Fox laments. “The reader or student of Bible scholarship is likely to suspect (or hope) that the author or teacher is moving toward a predetermined conclusion. Those who choose a faith-based approach should realize that they cannot expect the attention of those who don’t share their postulates. The reverse is not true.”

Get it? In Fox’s scheme, the secularist wins the coin toss whichever side turns up. “The best thing for Bible appreciation is secular, academic, religiously-neutral hermeneutic.” That is an astounding claim, and one that demands a far more developed argument and series of definitions. Does Fox actually believe in the myth of a “secular, academic, religiously-neutral hermeneutic?” Does he believe in the Easter Bunny?

He cites with appreciation the work of Jacques Berlinerblau, who also argues for a secular hermeneutic. In a response to Fox’s essay, Berlinerblau stated that he read Fox’s essay “with appreciation and glee.” Berlinerblau, who teaches at Georgetown University and Hofstra University, is the author of *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously*, published by Cambridge University Press. Berlinerblau congratulated Fox for calling “attention to a topic that is virtually taboo in biblical scholarship.”

Berlinerblau criticizes the world of biblical scholarship for its “demographic peculiarities,” most specifically the fact that the vast majority of Bible scholars are members of some church or synagogue. He sees this as historically understandable but academically unsustainable. “They continue to ignore the fact that the relation between their own religious commitments and their scholarly subject matter is wont to generate every imaginable conflict of intellectual interest,” Berlinerblau asserts. “Too, they still seem oblivious to how strange this state of affairs strikes their colleagues in the humanities and social sciences.” Significantly, Berlinerblau seems to understand that this imbalance is overwhelmingly in favor of the secularist. “Before this response begins to sound like the prelude to a class-action suit, permit me to observe that the type of discrimination encountered by secularists in biblical studies is *precisely what believers working in the humanities and social sciences have endured for decades*. The secular bent and bias of the American research university is well known. It is undeniable that many of its workers are prejudiced against sociologists, English professors,

and art historians who are ‘too’ religious.”

But, back to believers engaged in biblical scholarship, Berlinerblau is concerned “by the degree to which explicitly confessional researchers sit on editorial boards of major journals, steering committees, search committees, and the hierarchy of the Society of Biblical Literature.”

In contrast to Michael V. Fox, Berlinerblau does not appreciate believers who attempt to compartmentalize their faith and their scholarship into separate worlds. “It is another category of Biblicists that, to my mind, is far more problematic” Berlinerblau explains. “It is comprised of researchers who in every facet of their private lives are practicing Jews or Christians but who—somehow—deny that this may influence their professional scholarly work (which just happens to concern those documents that are the fount of Judaism and Christianity!)”

Sounding slightly less alarmist than Fox, Berlinerblau warns of “a collective ideational drift in the field” of biblical studies—“one that makes it difficult to think or speak about the Scripture in certain ways.”

Berlinerblau must be given credit for a finely-tuned sense of humor. Consider this paragraph: “Assume for a moment that you are an atheist exegete. Now please follow my instructions. Peruse the listings in *Openings* [a listing of academic posts looking to be filled]. Understand that your unique skills and talents are of no interest to those institutions listed there with the words ‘Saint’ and ‘Holy’ and ‘Theological’ and ‘Seminary’ in their names. This leaves, per year, about two or three advertised posts in biblical studies at religiously un-chartered institutions of higher learning. Apply for those jobs. Get rejected. A few months later learn—preferably while consuming donuts with a colleague—that the position was filled by a graduate of a theological seminary. Realize that those on the search committee who made this choice all graduated from seminaries themselves. Curse the gods.”

In his indispensable work, *The Soul of the American University*, George M. Marsden explains how academia came to embrace this degree of secularism: “One way to describe the current state of affairs, however, is that, in effect, the only points of view that are allowed full academic credence are those that presuppose purely naturalistic worldviews. Advocates of postmodernist viewpoints have, as a rule, been just as committed to exclusively naturalist premises for understanding human belief and behavior as were their turn-of-the-century predecessors who established evolutionary naturalism as normative for academic life. One must wonder, however, whether there are adequate grounds for most academics to insist on naturalistic premises that ignore the possibility of fruitful religious perspectives.”

Evidently, Professor Fox needs to read Professor Marsden’s book. Then again, I hold little hope that it would make much of a difference. If nothing else, Professor Fox’s essay, published by the Society for Biblical Literature, indicates where the debate in those circles is headed.

All scholarship is based in some faith and deeply grounded in some set of presuppositions. For the vast majority of those engaged in academia today, that faith is some form of ideological secularism. Christian scholars should always be absolutely transparent and clear about their confessional commitments. As a matter of fact, this should be an absolute requirement of their confessional institutions. At the same time, we should never allow that those who hold alternative worldviews are any less ideologically or intellectually committed. The radical nature of Professor Fox’s proposal indicates just how committed he is to his own faith—and how blind he is to his own faith-based perspective. Watch this debate with interest—it is not going away any time soon.

