

The following is of a personal nature, and includes a sort of spiritual autobiography. After that, I address a couple questions about religion and teaching at a public institution.

I was raised in a Christian family with strong moral values and a commitment to attend church services regularly. Yet somehow, I did not start really grasping what it meant to be a Christian until I was in my teens. I sensed a hollowness to life, and when a good friend of mine was shot and killed when I was 14, I began to wonder if all there is to life is sports, humor, and vain attempts to impress females. My friend was a tremendous athlete, very popular, and occasionally succeeded in impressing females. When he died, I could not help but wonder: is that it? Is there nothing more to life than what I had? My cautious attitude throughout my teens was that I would have as much fun as possible as long as it would not harm my future. I had a good time, yet did not get into much trouble that way. (But harming others' futures did not seem to bother me that much.)

The summer after I graduated from high school, I faced a life changing decision: to follow the teachings of Christ, and commit the rest of my life to him, seeking forgiveness for my selfish life, or to forget about the way I was brought up, and pursue my pleasures wholeheartedly, regardless of how that may affect others. I saw a definite alternative before me, and I sought answers to a few burning questions that I had—some fairly profound and some definitely mundane. (E.g., Does God, the creator of the universe, really care about me? If I choose to follow Jesus, would I have to be boring, prudish, and lifeless? Is the Bible reliable? Does the music I listen to seriously affect the way I perceive the world for bad or for good? If I became a Christian, would that mean that I could not date non-Christians?)

Music was very important to me at the time, and I had known some people who became Christians, and then gave up “secular music.” I knew those guys were fanatics! I also quickly became aware that meditating on lyrics about casual sexual encounters or unreserved worship of another person (e.g. Air Supply – Google it) was not conducive to a godly life, and I would need to change my listening habits if I wanted to become a “real Christian.” By “real Christian” I meant one who actually believed what Jesus said, and made a daily priority to live life accordingly. Before heading off to Iowa State University for my freshman year, I committed my life to Christ, and he in turn forgave me, and I began to understand the Bible with completely new insight. It felt like my eyes were truly open for the first time. I was especially impressed with a Bible verse—2 Corinthians 5:15: “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” I prayed to live no longer for myself, and my life changed. I prayed for music to listen to, and I stumbled on an album called Passage that was my kind of music, but with lyrics that honored God. At the time, I figured it must be one of the most popular albums among Christians, and had probably sold millions. Yet, to this day, I have met only one other person who had heard of the album or the group prior to my telling them about the music. (The album was the only one ever made by the group; the primary musician and singer was Louis Johnson, one of the Brothers Johnson, a pop/funk/R&B group of the late 70s and early 80s. You may not be able to find Passage, but it

is easy to find the Brothers Johnson.) I prayed for like-minded friends, and at ISU, I quickly became involved in the BSU (Baptist Student Union), a campus ministry that emphasized Bible study and discipleship—learning how to live a Christian life in today’s world. “No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.” I made great friends, and the group was definitely not boring, prudish or lifeless. “I have come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly.” I knew that whatever I ended up doing, I wanted to have a positive influence on other college students who are tomorrow’s leaders.

I decided to go to seminary to gain skills useful in helping others, especially college students, to learn how to live a Christian life. While in seminary, I began exploring issues that were more philosophical, such as how can we trust the Bible, how can a good God allow evil in the world, is there historical merit to the claims of Christianity, what does it mean for God to become a human, and more generally, what are the rational grounds for the Christian faith. I realized that my interests were leading me to a more philosophical and academic focus than I originally had, and thus I sought to pursue formal academic training in philosophy. I also finally admitted that my less-than-exuberant personality was not one that would attract many people to me, and if I wanted to influence others, they would have to be either self-motivated or be a part of a captive audience in some way. Why not teach at a university? But if I were to teach at a university, I would need a Ph.D., and little did I know how much work it requires! The first step was getting an M.A. at Texas A&M University, where my thesis developed some ideas of Eleonore Stump in relation to the problem of evil. By this time of life (my early 30s) others had various degrees of financial and vocational success, yet I seemed to be struggling along slowly. I took solace in Psalm 73, and though I was told by one of my mentors that I would never work as a philosopher (I recall his specific words to me: “There are NO jobs!”), I was convinced that I was on the right path.

[Extremely brief synopsis of my M.A. thesis: I argued that if we take the fall of humanity seriously, we can gain insight into both natural evil and moral evil, since nature was affected by the fall. Also, the person who suffers has the opportunity to suffer along with a God who understands, and may experience a closeness to God that is of great value and would not be possible without the experience. If the ultimate good of a person is to be united with God, as the Christian believes, and the ultimate harm for a person is to be separated from God, then physical and psychological suffering that brings one closer to God is on the balance of things, better than separation from God.]

After TAMU, I attended the University of Notre Dame, which is a great place to study philosophy for several reasons. The department is diverse, so a variety of interests may be pursued. The graduate students when I was there were very motivated to teach well along with developing research, and we learned a lot from each other. At ND, a theistic approach to philosophy is acceptable, as well as an atheistic approach. To paraphrase one of my advisors at ND (Peter van Inwagen), most people, including philosophers, have religious beliefs that are greatly influenced by experiences apart from philosophical reasoning. This fact is not often

acknowledged. Still, we think that philosophical reasoning should be applied to religious beliefs, and that it has strong influence on many people's religious beliefs. At ND, there was more openness of ideas than there is at most university philosophy departments, which allowed a great learning atmosphere. Many departments will rule out certain approaches to philosophy without giving them a hearing, and while that also occurs on occasion at ND, it is much more rare than at other places.

For the Christian, there is no fear of seeking truth, for Jesus is Truth, and all good "why" questions eventually end with an answer involving God. I think that Alvin Plantinga was probably the most influential at fostering an open-minded attitude at ND, and he was supported by many others, including Fred Fredosso, Tom Flint, and Dean Zimmerman, to name just a few. Reading the best atheistic arguments by some of the greatest thinkers ever has sharpened my views on religious beliefs, but I have seen no good reasons to relinquish my faith. That is why I continue to appreciate being around those who do philosophy from a variety of perspectives, such as at WIU, even though the variety is getting much more narrow with time. I firmly believe that an open atmosphere for learning is a good thing! Good philosophical exchanges occur when the participants let the presuppositions be known, and then allow a free exchange of ideas from there.

While at Notre Dame, I continued my church involvement (in a church heavily influenced by WillowCreek), and served as an elder in my church for three years, and would give the Sunday morning message a couple times a year or so. We are not sure how God provided for our finances, although student loans were admittedly part of the provision! Our last year there, we had a home group from our church who would get together and talk about how to apply scriptural principles to our lives—our family, our home, our community, and our places of employment. Of course we also had a great time eating and discussing sports. When we moved, we had a celebratory graduation/moving away party with about 80 people in attendance. I think most of them came because they were going to miss our wonderful children . . . that and the Mexican food, since my wife worked at a Mexican restaurant, and we learned how to barter for food.

Getting a job in philosophy is not an easy task, and the position at Western had around 100 applicants, many with very strong qualifications. Other positions had even more competition, and while there were other options for me, I was grateful to get a job at WIU. It has been a nearly ideal location to raise a family, though now with the children out of the house, I would prefer being closer to an airport, medical specialists, and more retail and restaurant options. An especially important verse around the time of the move to Macomb was Deuteronomy 31:8, a verse originally given to others who were moving: "And the Lord is the one who goes ahead of you; he will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed." When I originally wrote this in 2001(?), I said "I realize that I am relatively young and optimistic (talk to me again in 20 years), but I want to, and I believe I can make Western a better place to go to school." . . . Well, it has been, as I write now, about 20 years, and though I have had many

tough experiences related to the dismantling of the philosophy program at WIU, I still think I have made and will continue to make WIU a good place to get an education.

To clarify a couple questions:

1) What do I mean when I talk about Christianity?

Christianity includes the idea that humans have a problem (sin) that has separated them from their creator. In order to remedy the situation, God gave his son Jesus to teach, to model a good life, and most importantly, to provide a sacrifice for sin—to pay a debt that no other human could pay. Those who put their faith in Christ, seek forgiveness, and follow him by living as he desires (by repenting) are Christians. So to be a Christian means that one has certain beliefs, but more importantly, it means that one has a relationship with the living God through his son Jesus.

2) Do I teach Christianity in my classes?

No and yes. In most of my classes, the topic does not come up very often, if at all. I do, however, teach philosophy of religion, and in that class, we emphasize rational discussion of religious beliefs (my intro course also has a section on philosophy of religion). PHIL 405, as an academic course, presents many different perspectives on religious beliefs. The focus is on the reasonableness of various positions, with a specific intent to be objective and unbiased in presentation and content. (Though beware—this type of intent is never entirely fulfilled by any instructor!) In the course we read and discuss many great thinkers who are atheists (including philosophers such as David Hume, Bertrand Russell, Nietzsche, Sartre and William Rowe) and also many who are believers (including Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Alvin Plantinga, and Timothy O'Connor), and some in between (e.g. Hick). A few of my students have thought that I was an atheist, due to the way I approach the topics in a rational manner. But applying rational standards to religious beliefs does not imply that one is or will become an atheist. I do try to live out a Christian life in the classroom, though failure to do so is common. In the U.S., most people have heard the message of Christianity, but many lack close exposure to a Christian life. It is in that sense (by my actions aside from the content of the course) that I (hopefully) might be said to teach Christianity, but it is also in that sense that I am no different from any other professor or teacher who is modeling the values that she or he thinks are important, whether those are religious values, intellectual values, or moral values. If you wish to learn more about philosophical reflection on religious beliefs, I recommend that you A) take my course on philosophy of religion, PHIL 405, cross listed as REL 405 or B) send me an email or both.