How PhD Students are Sociologically Seduced by their Education

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Alvin Plantinga summarizes the graduate school experience for many young Christian Philosophy Ph.D. students.

"Consider a Christian college student from Grand Rapids, Michigan, say, or Arkadelphia, Arkansas - who decides philosophy is the subject for her. Naturally enough, she will go to graduate school to learn how to become a philosopher. Perhaps she goes to Princeton, or Berkeley, or Pittsburgh, or Arizona; it doesn't much matter which. There she learns how philosophy is presently practiced. The burning questions of the day are such topics as

> *   *the new theory of reference;*
> *   *the realism/anti-realism controversy;*
> *   *the problems with probability;*
> *   *Quine's claims about the radical indeterminacy of translation;*
> *   ... and all the rest."*

"It is then natural for her, after she gets her Ph.D., to continue to think about and work on these topics. And it is natural, furthermore, for her to work on them in the way she was taught to,

> *   *thinking about them in the light of the assumptions made by her mentors and*
> *   *in terms of currently accepted ideas as to what a philosopher should start from or take for granted,*
> *   *what requires argument and defense, and*
> *   *what a satisfying philosophical explanation or a proper resolution to a philosophical question is like."*

"She will be uneasy about departing widely from these topics and assumptions, feeling instinctively that any such departures are at best marginally respectable. Philosophy is a social enterprise; and our standards and assumptions - the parameters within which we practice our craft - are set by our mentors and by the great contemporary centers of philosophy."[1]

The focus of Plantinga's speech is the question:

How should Christian philosophers go about practicing their academic calling?

The same question applies to all of us, regardless of our specific discipline.

Academia is a social enterprise. What Plantinga described in philosophy could be said of history, or Biblical studies, or theology, or science or cultural studies.

As academics,

- we learn,
- we are mentored and trained, and
- we think and write

in social communities of our mentors, peers and students.

The intellectual, social and moral norms of our communities shape us in profound ways.

How does this happen?

How does the "social enterprise" of academia actually influence and shape us?

Depending on the discipline, this question would be answered in different ways.

Plantinga gives a series of examples of how to think about this topic in the area of philosophy.

We could also approach the topic before us as a historical study and examine how a particular thinker has been shaped by his cultural context. Why, for example, does a brilliant Christian thinker like Augustine get so enamored by Neoplatonism that he argues that Christian men should only sexually make love to their wives like they love their enemies – they should do it, but not enjoy it?

At what point has a particular thinker gone off the rails theologically? This is an important and interesting question, but it is outside the scope of this paper.

In this article, I would like to look at the **sociological** reality of what we experience in our academic communities. Each discipline has different categories with which it examines reality. We could think of each of our disciplines as the lenses that we use in a microscope. One academic discipline magnifies one's vision by 10 times, another by a factor of 100 and others 1000 times. Depending on which discipline's lenses you use, you see different things.

We are going to look at the Ph.D. student's experience from the perspective - or lens - of sociology and seek to answer the following question:

How does the "social enterprise" of academia actually influence and affect us?

Sociology's unique lens seeks to bring into focus the social behavior of human beings and how we as individuals are influenced by groups and cultures we are a part of. A sociologist seeks to penetrate the smoke screen of self consciously intended human behavior and seeks to answer *"What are unintended consequences of a particular social behavior?"*

Let's consider a sociological perspective of how the Ph.D. educational process influences a typical evangelical student. By intentionally considering a subject from a sociological point of view, we may see details we would otherwise miss. To make this more understandable, I am going to discuss one specific student, Edward Evangelical, who recently finished his undergraduate education and has applied and been accepted by a leading University for his Ph.D. studies.

Intended Outcome and Unintended Consequences of a Ph.D. program

The first distinction sociology would make looking at our topic tonight is that there is a difference between the intended outcome of social behavior (actually getting a Ph.D.) and the unintended consequences of getting a Ph.D..

The question, "Why is Edward getting his Ph.D.?" has an easy answer.

The obvious answer is that Edward is interested in getting a job in his particular discipline researching, teaching and writing. This in sociological terms is called the Manifest Function.

But what else is going on in the process of a Ph.D. education? What are the latent functions (or *unintentional consequences*) of Edward's Ph.D. education?

The sociological term that describes Edward's Ph.D. education is Socialization.

Socialization is the process by which children are born and raised by their families and educated and assimilated by their particular societies.

During socialization, a child,

> ➢ learns a language,
> ➢ acquires a morality of virtues and vices,
> ➢ learns how to relate to others and is
> ➢ given a sense of identify.

Depending on the society one is born into, this socialization can be very different. Obviously the socialization of a Saudi Arabian Muslim girl in Riyadh is

going to be very different than the socialization of an Irish Roman Catholic boy in Dublin.

As sociologist Peter Berger explains, "Society not only controls our movements, but shapes our identity, our thought and our emotions. The structures of society become the structure of our own consciousness."[2]

As children we are all socialized by our societies.

What I would like to suggest to you is that this also occurs to a large extent in Edward's Ph.D. education. A Ph.D. education is an incredibly powerful and shaping experience which in some ways is similar to the experience of the primary socialization of a child being shaped by his family and society.

In sociological terms, this type of a transformational socializing experience later in life is called a secondary socialization.

What are the forms of the secondary socialization of Edward's Ph.D. education?

At this point, there is a need for some sociological jargon to act as a lens for analyzing Edward's experience. I will try to keep this jargon to a minimum.

There are 6 stages of this secondary socialization process.

1) Pluralism and Privatization

2) Academic Social Structure and Roles

3) Academic Relationships and Conversation

4) Academic Conformity and Social Control

5) Academic Reality Maintenance

6) Academic Symbolic Universe and Relativity

1) **Pluralism and Privatization**

Universities are institutions of learning and knowledge in our pluralistic societies. They are, in fact, mini-pluralistic-societies in themselves. Almost any belief that is present in society is also present in a university. As a consequence of this diversity

of world and life views, many people are exposed to new and very different ideas, perhaps for the first time.

Imagine for a moment someone growing up in the Sunni Muslim world of Saudia Arabia. There is only one public religion and only one accepted interpretation of it. Evangelism from a Buddhist or Christian or any other religious perspective is outlawed. This type of society shields the individual from personal choice and doubt. A non-pluralistic society solves questions regarding belief and faith and removes the very question of, "What do I believe?"

What are the consequences of this exposure to pluralism on Edward?

During Edward's undergraduate experience, he was involved in the UCCF Christian Union at his University. He, alongside other undergraduates, was deeply involved in Bible Study and prayer groups, and he occasionally shared his faith with his peers. But there is no Christian group with an intensive social system to support and encourage Christian graduate students at his new university.

Edward has moved to the city where his new university is located and has attended a couple of evangelical churches. He now attends a good Bible teaching church, but discovers that he is the only Ph.D. student in attendance. Edward has the odd experience of feeling alone in his studies

- ➢ as he is the only evangelical student in his department
- ➢ and he is alone in his church without anyone who can relate to what he is doing in his research studies.

Sound familiar?

Two things happen to Edward as a result of this experience.

A) Exposure to pluralism increases Edward's questions and doubts concerning his evangelical beliefs

From a sociological perspective, it is normal that someone will have fewer doubts if they are exposed to fewer questions or challenges. Think about it. How likely is it that a conservative Jewish young man, who currently practices the Torah and never talks to someone outside his religiously conservative community, would come to doubt his beliefs? Not very likely.

The reverse is also true. When Edward from a traditional evangelical community is fully exposed to the pluralism of the modern university, how likely is it that he will experience some questioning of his beliefs, if not full blown doubt? Fairly likely.

This is true in Edward's case. Edward, while studying for his Ph.D., has no relationships with strong Christians who are going through a similar experience as his. The different belief systems he is exposed to while attempting to be successful in the very competitive academic world are sometimes baffling to him. At the least, they create an environment where his theological beliefs by necessity appear odd or different at times.

Since there are no required religious beliefs in a pluralistic society, these choices are left to the individual. In modern culture (and universities), personal religious beliefs are not imposed from the outside, but are personally chosen. Individuals become the decision makers for whatever religious beliefs they do (or do not) affirm. Religious belief is seen as an extension of personal choice and preference without a sense of permanence or solid identity. Religions in such a pluralistic environment become marketed commodities like choices in a religious supermarket. I can choose my faith -- and I can unchoose it -- whenever I want. Religious faith in a pluralized society is a personal choice and fearful doubt is often its constant companion. Religious conviction becomes a bit squishy.

The point I would like to highlight for our discussion is that this process of self-doubt and religious doubt is a natural sociological consequence of religious individuals' extended exposure to pluralism. Edward keeps asking himself "Why do I believe what I believe?" and "How do I know that it is true?"

B) A pluralistic society increases privatization

How do Edward's mentors and peers (a mini pluralistic knowledge society) treat his religious belief?

University of California law professor and cultural commentator Philip Johnson argues:

"Any person who wishes to assert the viability of Christianity in the modern university must come to grips with the faith / knowledge problem. Of course, a scholar can be a Christian as a matter of faith, regardless of his or her attitude towards scientific knowledge, just as anyone can choose on the basis of faith to be a Muslim or a Rastafarian or a radical feminist. Prestige in the university goes only to those commitments that are seen as capable of generating knowledge."

What is important in a pluralistic university setting is not what you believe and practice in your private life, but your academic output and status.

There is an unspoken conviction around Edward asserting that whatever you privately believe should remain just that -- private. One's private beliefs should have no influence on one's academic research. In fact, there is a great deal of pressure to encourage a privatized faith – that is a faith that has no effect on your scholarship. The usually unspoken attitude of Edward's mentors and peers is *"Edward, if you must be an evangelical, do not let it affect your work -- or us. Keep it to yourself Edward. Keep it private."*

The pressure of the academic environment pushes a typical Ph.D. student like Edward to separate his personal beliefs and practices from his professional practices. He begins living in two worlds, a private world of personal belief and preferences, (like his preference of coke as his favorite soft drink) and the knowledge-based outer world of his academic discipline.

2) <u>Academic Social Structure and Roles</u>

When Edward shows up for the first day of his Ph.D. program he is confronted by a well established institution with an elaborate social structure which has a detailed role for him and clear expectations for his beliefs and behavior.

The role of a Ph.D. student in a graduate school is clearly defined from the perspective of the institution, but only a small part of this role is written down in the promotional materials of the Ph.D. program. Most of the expectations for a Ph.D. student like Edward are embedded in the social understanding of Edward's mentors and peers.

To understand Edward's world, we need to focus on what is called the sociology of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge seeks to understand the processes by which any body of knowledge comes to be socially established as "reality."

In sociological terms the accepted understanding of life that a community shares in common is called a *"symbolic universe."* A symbolic universe is described by sociologist Peter Berger as follows:

> It is the sum total of "what everyone knows" about a social world, an assemblage of maxims, morals, proverbial nuggets of wisdom, values and beliefs, myths, and so forth."[3]

Academia -- and our particular portions of the academic world -- has such a symbolic universe. Sometimes the tension we see between the different disciplines (like the Humanities and the Sciences) is the result of these conflicting symbolic universes.

It is here that the role of "expert" gains a great deal of force for the typical graduate student like Edward. When we enter the graduate world we are submitting to others' expertise as guides and mentors. Edward's academic community and the invisible beliefs of his mentors become an invisible social web that provides the framework for Edward's education. Everyone in Edward's department "knows" what a legitimate research topic or method looks like. Everyone in Edward's research area "knows" that someone's personal beliefs have no place in his research. In sociological terms, these social realities of Edward's mentors and peers are called "plausibility structures."

What is interesting – from a sociological perspective – is that the presence or absence of these plausibility structures makes certain beliefs either more or less *plausible* for the individual. It does not make them more *credible* – that is true - but more believable in a particular social context. Because everyone knows certain beliefs – like Plantinga's illustration of "appropriate" philosophical research topics, presuppositions, arguments – these invisible social plausibility structures of the community guide academic belief and practice.

This is why social transformation is more powerful if advocated by an entire community who affirm a single understanding of reality. A single individual like Edward can easily -- and unconsciously -- absorb the symbolic universe of his mentors and peers and be socially conformed in his beliefs and practices – without even realizing it. Edward's identity is socially given and socially sustained by his graduate school. Eventually Edwards comes to see himself in large part as his school sees him.

3) <u>Academic Relationships and Conversation</u>

Most evangelicals come to the Ph.D. experience as relatively young individuals who are still building life convictions. Edward is vulnerable to the incredibly powerfully shaping influence of his PhD supervisor who is 30 years older, vastly more knowledgeable, and is very powerful in deciding his future.

A Ph.D. student like Edward, like a child, enters into a world of social expectations and a powerful intellectual framework. Think about it. A child who is being

socialized has parents who are significant others. Edward has a supervisor who is a very significant other.

How many young children want to please their father and mother? How strongly does Edward want to please his supervisor? The academic system is built on the assumption that a Ph.D. student is seeking to adjust his beliefs, behavior and practices to his mentor's.

But this socialization process is not the molding of a piece of plastic, where the individual is inert and passive.

This secondary socialization is a relational and conversational process

This socialization is often an extended conversation embedded in relationships over weeks, months and even years of time.

What makes this even more complicated is many elements of this socialization process are good, proper and right. Few individuals who begin a Ph.D. do not need the corrective feedback and criticism that are part of a Ph.D. program.

But where is the line of acceptable criticism and correction inherent in the training of a Ph.D. program and the manipulation and false framing of issues which presuppose that Christianity is either not true or is irrelevant?

Again Plantinga is helpful in enabling us to see how this intellectual shaping occurs. He gives the example of the young Christian Ph.D. student studying with the philosopher Quine:

> *Suppose she studies with Willard van Orman Quine. She finds herself attracted to Quine's programs and procedures:*
>
> - ➢ *his radical empiricism,*
> - ➢ *his allegiance to natural science,*
> - ➢ *his inclination towards behaviorism,*
> - ➢ *his uncompromising naturalism, and*
> - ➢ *his taste for desert landscapes and ontological parsimony.*
>
> *It would be wholly natural for her to become totally involved in these projects and programs, to come to think of fruitful and worthwhile philosophy as substantially circumscribed by them.*
>
> *Of course she will note certain tensions between her Christian belief and her way of practicing philosophy; and she may then bend her efforts to putting the two together, to harmonizing them. She may devote her time*

and energy to seeing how one might understand or reinterpret Christian belief in such a way as to be palatable to the Quinian.

Plantinga explains the effect of such a powerful academic like Quine on those he mentors.

> *Quine is a marvelously gifted philosopher: a subtle, original and powerful philosophical force. But his fundamental commitments, his fundamental projects and concerns, are wholly different from those of the Christian community - wholly different and, indeed, antithetical to them.*
>
> *And the result of attempting to graft Christian thought onto his basic view of the world will be at best an unintegral pastiche; at worst it will seriously compromise, or distort, or trivialize the claims of Christian theism.*

Few young graduate students are able to stand up to the powerful intelligence of a Quine with his ability to reframe issues and set acceptable or unacceptable presuppositions and categories. Such intellectual mentors are the significant others who are in charge of Edward's socialization. Their definition of reality is asserted as objective reality.

How is this objective reality explained to us? We all build and maintain our view of the world in conversations. When our primary conversation partners are those who hold worldview or fundamental categories antithetical to our Christian convictions, we by default begin accepting their categories and way of framing issues. The way we then approach our disciplines and our faith are then likewise shaped.

4) <u>Academic Conformity and Social Control</u>

The first thing to note about this process of Edward becoming a part of his academic community and absorbing their beliefs and practices is that this is an unconscious process. A Ph.D. student like Edward does not understand this social process, the structures or categories that I am describing. Edward is not self conscious of:

➢ How his education naturally creates doubt-producing questions,
➢ How his academic training is forcing his theological beliefs into a privatized sphere entirely separate from his discipline,
➢ How the influence of the social structure of his discipline creates plausibility for the beliefs of his mentors,

- ➢ That mentors are advocating and teaching out of a common symbolic universe, or
- ➢ How social plausibility structures which make up the academic symbolic universe make his faith appear less plausible.

Academics are better at studying their topic than they are in studying themselves. The typical Ph.D. student like Edward does not self consciously understand this process that he is immersed in. It is embedded into the structure of the social experience. The ancient Chinese proverb applies here: "If you want to understand the water, don't ask a fish." We see by the means of our context, but we don't often become aware of our context.

Again, I do not want to suggest that this process is necessarily a self-conscious manipulation on the part of the Ph.D. supervisor. Edward's advisor is a typical mentor and is not self consciously orchestrating Edward's secondary socialization. Rather, he has gone through the social process of gaining a Ph.D. himself and sees it as normative and natural for a Ph.D. student to acclimatize himself to the university.

This socialization process is a seduction

A seduction is a slow and subtle process that is not conscious on the part of the seduced. Likewise Edward's socialization process is not self conscious. There is no blunt effort to get Edward to jettison his faith. He is merely becoming a part of his academic community and his faith is coming under increased pressure to become one additional set of private but unrelated personal preferences.

Why is this secondary socialization of a Ph.D. education so subtly powerful?

Academia is a social structure that has been created and maintained over decades of experience. There is a historical gravity and weight to roles and structures of the university. "Everyone knows" how the Ph.D. process is supposed to function. Edward starts his Ph.D. work with a clearly defined role as a Ph.D. student. Everyone in this world knows what a Ph.D. student in his discipline should do.

Why is this secondary socialization of a Ph.D. student like Edward so powerful? Because individuals like Edward who are enrolled in a Ph.D. program *want* to become successful members of the academy.

We want to fit in. We want to receive the status of accepted members of the Ph.D. club. We want the calling card. We want to obey the subtle rules of the academia groups we are part of. We want to become successful and achieve

the status of accomplished researchers, writers and teachers. We are motivated to adapt to academia.

This is not a purely psychological process of wanting to please someone else. Part of this is accepting a role as a Ph.D. student along with certain social expectations that are implied in that role. Edward is choosing to be socialized. He wants to achieve the fully socialized goal of becoming a successful member of the academic club.

It is possible for someone to resist the social pressure of a Ph.D. and develop an alternative set of standards and convictions that guide his behavior. But there is a coercive effect of such a social reality on any participant. The social consensus of the group is powerful and seeks conformity to the standards, roles and expectation of the group. If someone seeks to resist this pressure, they experience the psychological pressure of being an outsider who may be shunned or shown signs of disrespect.

5) <u>Academic Reality Maintenance</u>

Any evangelical doing his/her Ph.D. at a leading western university is a cognitive minority. Few individuals affirm the same theological position in the university as Edward, and he feels a certain isolation and vulnerability. This social setting creates a social pressure on the evangelical to adapt to the broader setting.

Many young evangelicals are often swept off their feet by the questions and agenda of their intellectual community.

A typical Ph.D. student like Edward is totally unprepared for the onslaught of arguments, assumptions or the rooted social structure of his discipline's symbolic universe. Edward's mentor is 30 years older than Edward and knows vastly more than Edward does. How is Edward effected by this vast amount of "what is known" by his mentor and others?

Alvin Plantinga lived through the Logical Positivism school 40 years ago which asserted with total confidence that the statement "I believe in God" has no meaning. He explains the intellectual and emotional power and effects of an intellectual argument or system that is so popular.

> *"Positivism had a delicious air of being* avant garde *and with-it; and many philosophers found it extremely attractive. Furthermore, many who didn't endorse it nonetheless entertained it with great hospitality as at the least extremely plausible.*

As a consequence many philosophers - both Christians and non-Christians - saw here a real challenge and an important danger to Christianity…

Many philosophically inclined Christians were disturbed and perplexed and felt deeply threatened; could it really be true that linguistic philosophers had somehow discovered that the Christian's most cherished convictions were, in fact, just meaningless? There was a great deal of anxious hand wringing among philosophers, either themselves theists or sympathetic to theism.

Some suggested, in the face of positivistic onslaught, that the thing for the Christian community to do was to fold up its tents and silently slink away, admitting that the verifiability criterion was probably true.

Others conceded that strictly speaking, theism really is nonsense, but is important *nonsense.*

Still others suggested that the sentences in question should be reinterpreted in such a way as not to give offense to the positivists; someone seriously suggested, for example, that Christians resolve, henceforth, to use the sentence "God exists" to mean "some men and women have had, and all may have, experiences called 'meeting God'"; he added that when we say "God created the world from nothing" what we should mean is "everything we call 'material' can be used in such a way that it contributes to the well-being of men.")

A whole generation of Christian philosophers were swept off their feet. The intellectual power of such a philosophical system made it seem overwhelmingly true. Their responses differed:

   a. Some admitted logical positivism was true
   b. Some said that Theism was nonsense, but important nonsense
   c. Some reinterpreted Christianity

But actually all of these responses are the same – accepting the questions and assumptions of the challenging epistemological system. All of these individuals had already conformed to the system, and their responses were inevitable consequences – because they accepted the question.

Sociological theory describes this process of deconstruction or destabilizing someone's worldview as "nihilation." The world nihilation comes from "nihilism," the philosophical belief that rejects the existence of meaning in the world. In

essence, this process of destabilizing someone's worldview seeks to push someone toward nihilism.

The word that is commonly used to describe this disorienting experience of a lack of meaning in one's life is *anomie*. Sociologist Berger defines anomie as "a condition of rootlessness, disorientation, of no longer feeling at home in the world."[4] The root of the word anomie is *nomos* – the Greek word for law. To lose one's primary belief system is to be left lawless or normless. One who experiences *anomie* feels disoriented and becomes correspondingly more open to considering a new worldview. Edward's Ph.D. education undermines his basic worldview convictions and subtly pushes him toward the untenable position of being disoriented.

6) The Academy's Symbolic Universe and Relativity

Karl Marx once wrote that anyone wanting to do serious philosophical work needed to pass through the "fiery brook" of the thought of the atheistic philosopher Feuerbach. It was suggested 40 years ago by the sociologist Peter Berger that the sociological perspective constitutes the 'fiery brook' through which the theologian must pass.

This is because this sociological perspective as I have described here implies that knowledge is socially constructed and thus relative. Decades before postmodernism, sociology of knowledge was causing many young theologians to question their faith.

The form of this relativism is less important than the sociological pressure to question one's most basic beliefs. Whether the particular form of the academia influence is –
  ➢ the sociological idea of socially constructed reality,
  ➢ literature and history's hermeneutics of suspicion,
  ➢ some form of epistemological postmodernism or perhaps
  ➢ scientific positivism,

  the result is the same.

Many evangelical Ph.D. students during their studies begin to feel that the foundations of their faith are crumbling.

Academic Cynicism

The danger of this sort of a doctoral education is that it creates cynicism toward traditional beliefs in general and evangelical beliefs in particular. As Peter Berger writes,

> The "sociological perspective is not conducive to an onward-and-upward outlook, but will rather lead to one degree or another of disenchantment with regard to the interpretations of social reality given in Sunday schools."[5]

The same could be said of most academic disciplines. There is a popular saying that someone is seeing the world through "rose colored glasses" or is a "Pollyanna" to describe someone who is naïve, gullible, and unrealistically optimistic.

The academic tendency and temptation is the reverse: an academic is seduced by the siren call of a prideful superiority and sarcasm. I would argue that the naturally corrosive effect of a typical Ph.D. education is to make one more prideful, skeptical, cynical and without a sense of the transcendent or purpose in life. In a word, a Ph.D. education tends to lead someone toward an agnostic and cynical perspective.

There are many more agnostics in the academic world than hard boiled atheists. William Craig, one of the world's leading Christian debaters, has stated that he is increasingly finding it difficult to find good tough atheists to debate. Often if they are atheists, they don't want to take a stand in the public arena. Much more common is an academic who has an agnostic position. Such agnostics are trying to step away from the tough discussion of "is there a God" or "is Christianity true?" into an agnostic's popular skepticism. Agnosticism seems to project an image of neutrality.

Agnosticism's Myth of Neutrality

Agnosticism has questionable intellectual credibility, but great plausibility. In other words, this agnosticism is not necessarily true, but it certainly appears to be true within the social plausibility structure of Edward's department and college. The solution to Edward's growing dissonance is the seemingly honest and reasonable solution of agnosticism. Edward may feel that since no one has absolutely provable answers, the best solution is to not decide.

Options of how to respond to the Academy's Sociological Seduction

As long as an individual's worldview for understanding life works reasonably well, they will have fewer doubts about it. But what happens when their worldview doesn't work? What happens when Edward is confronted with the seemingly objectively true academic world we have just described, which appears to be in conflict with his evangelical convictions?

A cognitive dissonance grows between Edward's private religious beliefs and his professional academic world and its beliefs. *Cognitive dissonance* is the tension we feel by holding two seemingly very different and conflicting beliefs or belief systems. There is a tension between Edward's worldview and the academic world (and its symbolic universe) he is increasingly becoming a part of. Each of these symbolic universes or meaning-systems (both academia and evangelicalism) seem at times to be drawing him away from the other. There exists a cognitive dissonance between them in his mind.

The word "doubt" has as its root meaning the idea of being in two minds about a particular belief. Doubt is affirming two different and conflicting perspectives of belief and unbelief. The word "doubt" then is another way of describing Edward's cognitive dissonance. The root meaning of doubt is to be on the horns of the dilemma between belief and disbelief. Eventually such an individual has one foot on the wall of faith and one of the wall of disbelief. But profound doubt is not sustainable for the long term. Edward's academic social setting is pushing for a resolution.

Eventually there has to be some sort of resolution to this ongoing tension. Let me suggest that there are at least 4 different possible solutions for Edward to resolve this ongoing problem of cognitive dissonance.

A) Cognitive Conversion – Conversion to the Academy's Agnostic Symbolic Universe

Someone who affirms a clear evangelical worldview will at times feel socially uncomfortable within the primary academic worldview. In sociological terms Evangelicalism is a *"cognitive minority"* and thus has a somewhat tenuous and uncomfortable relationship with the broader majority view. This social difficulty is not necessarily because the majority view is bigoted or oppressive, but because it refuses to accept the evangelical worldview as knowledge. Evangelical

convictions seen from this majority view are a faith position, or personal preferences, but such evangelical beliefs are not knowledge.

Many young believers have been swept off their feet by the powerful academic world at just this point. The choice becomes simple for such a person under this intellectual strain: Edward either chooses to remain cognitively defiant toward the majority view, or he adapts to the majority view. If Edward conforms to his social setting, there is ultimately a rupture as he gives up his theological convictions and takes a faith leap toward an agnostic position. Such converts to agnosticism later often use the categories of almost a conversion in describing this change.

There are several primary factors involved in someone converting from evangelicalism to agnosticism.

Intellectual insights

The logical systems and languages of the academic community provide many linguistic interpretive tools for understanding our world. Like the Eskimos who have 20 different words for snow, the academy has many subtly different tools for describing and analyzing reality. The varied tools of analysis give a great deal of insight into the world we live in. The cognitive insights that come from these perspectives increase the confidence graduate students feel in their respective disciplines.

Status and Respect

Part of the process of being socialized into academia's symbolic universe is the university's status magnetism. The university life is very attractive to the typical Ph.D. student like Edward. As I described earlier, Edward admires his mentors and he desires to be respected by his mentors and peers. Edward wants to receive the status of success and respect that the University conveys on those who have successfully navigated the Ph.D. process and who affirm appropriate beliefs.

Methodological Agnosticism

Hidden in the typical university department's symbolic universe is the profound agnosticism that I described above. In other words, some young evangelicals feel a pressure to give up their evangelical convictions to attain the status of becoming an academic. One normatively accepts a bracketed agnostic methodology in practicing many disciplines. For example, a typical sociological method in studying religion is to assume "methodological agnosticism." A sociologist operating from such a method assumes that there is no God and interprets the empirical data as if the only causal elements are the social realities.

It is a very short step from "methodological agnosticism" to a personal agnosticism.

Moral compromise

What I find very interesting in this process is that many of these intellectual conversions to agnosticism have been preceded by moral compromises. One evangelical New Testament scholar who proceeded me at Northwestern University had an affair and divorced his wife – and surprise! – decided en route that his evangelical convictions were no longer true. Intellectual beliefs are often secondary attempts to rationalize or justify one's moral commitment.

Plausibility Structures of the Academic world

The possibility of converting to academic institutional agnosticism becomes a real possibility when we see others who are similar to us convert to such agnosticism. As I have already suggested, part of the plausibility or believability of academic agnosticism comes from the plausibility structures of the university. It is the university's social structures that help make this philosophical wager appear plausible rather than any particular intellectual argument. Agnosticism's plausibility is partly that one finds so many other successful and respected academics who believe it. It is eminently respectable to affirm what many of your peers have already affirmed. By conforming to the social norms, one reduces the cognitive dissonance one experiences by being a believer in the university.

And like any new convert, such newly minted agnostics often become zealous in their evangelism of others who appear to them to be captured by a false consciousness. Such new converts feel a need to seek the conversion of others. Thus we often find the most zealous agnostics and even atheists are those former believers who have been socialized into the world of academia and feel a personal need for others to do the same.

B) Cognitive Surrender – Liberal Christianity

The second option available to any young evangelical Ph.D. student is to move in a theologically liberal direction. The fundamental step toward this sort of *"cognitive surrender"* is to assume that some aspect of the academy or modern thought is true. Peter Berger writes that "one simply accepts the fact that the majority is right, then adapts oneself to that point of view." He explains the theological method as the heart of this option:

Theological liberalism whose crucial concern was cognitive adjustment of Christianity to the (actual or alleged) world view of modernity and one of whose major results was the progressive dismantling of the supernaturalist scaffolding of the Christian tradition.[6]

The famous example of this sort of liberal theological method is Bultmann, who argued that belief in miracles of the New Testament has no place in a world which uses electrical lights.

The liberal option surrenders much of the worldview content but keeps the Christian categories. Such an individual accepts much of the majority cognitive symbolic universe but continues to use Christian categories and terminology. Peter Berger describes these individuals: "Modernity is swallowed hook, line and sinker and the repast is accompanied by a sense of awe worthy of Holy Communion."[7]

In its modern origin in the 19th century, liberal Christianity was an attempt to maintain some Christian belief in the face of Christianity's cultural despisers. But elements of historic Christianity were given up as naïve or unbelievable in light of the advance of German Biblical criticism, Enlightenment philosophy or Darwinian evolutionary science. T. S. Eliot defined liberal Christianity as a "progressive discarding of elements in historical Christianity which appears superfluous or obsolete."[8]

For example, one of my advisors and friends in my PhD program was a process theologian who still used the basic categories of the Christian faith but had given up much of its historic meaning. While I was completing my Ph.D. he published a Christology. I was puzzled by this and so asked him in one of our many friendly conversations, "Why did you publish a Christology when you do not believe any of the historic Christian understandings of who Christ was?" (He did not believe that Jesus was the son of God or divine). He responded, "Just because I don't believe the historic understanding of Christianity, doesn't mean I can't use the categories of the faith." He didn't believe in Christ, but he was writing a Christology because he wanted to advance the social cause of pacifism. He was using religious words like "Christ" and "faith" as if they were cups and he had the full right to fill them with the content of his choice.

Today the university is producing many liberal Christians who have discarded elements of historic Christianity that they feel cannot be affirmed if they accept the broader academic consensus as a starting point.

How does this Intellectual Compromise work?

Plantinga described a Christian acquaintance who was attempting to synthesize his Christian beliefs and his philosophical training from the Harvard philosopher Quine.

> *One philosopher I know, embarking on just such a project, suggested that Christians should think of God as a set (Quine is prepared to countenance sets): the set of all true propositions, perhaps, or the set of right actions, or the union of those sets, or perhaps their Cartesian product. This is understandable; but it is also profoundly misdirected.*

If this philosopher accepts Quine's starting point, God becomes "a set."

Berger argues that the variety of liberal theologies is endless but their method is the same, as it "proceeds to relativize religious tradition by assigning it, in part or as a whole, to a consciousness that is now passé, 'no longer possible to us,' and to translate it, partially or wholly, into terms that are supposedly consonant with the alleged modern consciousness."[9]

This process of appealing to Christianity despisers for an audience is a failed effort of attempting to give up the particular offending elements of the faith at that particular moment. Liberal Christians are similar to an old, wrinkled and hardened prostitute performing a theological striptease. By removing one historic Christian belief after another, liberal "Christians" are desperately trying to attract the attention of worldly and jaded agnostics, who are not particularly interested in the product being sold.

The particular beliefs that liberal Christianity assumes change over time. The underlying presuppositions of a particular epistemology (or ontology, ethics, etc.) that are assumed in a new expression of the liberal theological method, come in and out of fashion in the academic world. Like a fashion show that promotes the flashy and *chic*, the academy continues to be fascinated by the "new." For example, one almost never hears today of liberation theologies or process theologies that 25 years ago were very popular.

Today, a more common form of liberal theological method is the extreme wing of emergent theology. Post-modernism has been so influential in the modern world because it has insights and ideas which are true. The leading thinkers of post-modernism have created what might be considered a secular doctrine of the fall. They have documented how humans beings are self oriented and use knowledge and power for their own agenda and priorities. They have understood some aspect of the human condition and mapped out some of the currents of how

human beings are formed and warped by this persistent human selfishness. So far, so good. This critique is insightful and can be helpful.

But from this position of throwing out "modernism" and accepting postmodern epistemology, all classical forms of doing theology are seen as naïvely modernistic in light of the postmodernism critique. Again it is the same liberal theological method – accepting some element of a current theory or idea and then modifying or discarding all elements of theological thinking that do not seem to be completely aligned with it. Some "evangelical" post-modern theologians have already eliminated salvation through faith or the use of Bible as the primary source and authority of theology.   We see in this postmodern evangelicalism the spawning ground for a new form of liberalism.

C) Cognitive Retreat – Separating Faith from Reason

There are at least two different options in separating Faith from Reason: Privatizing and Fideism.

1) Privatizing Faith and Academic work into two separate and non-conflicting spheres

Perhaps the most popular option for how young evangelical academics reconcile their faith and their work is to ignore it. Often the easiest choice is to follow the privatized model to separate one's faith from one's academic work. There is no danger of conflict or accusation from his mentors and peers if Edward's faith is a private set of beliefs which do not affect or apply to his work.

A friend of mine was a pastor of a large evangelical Oxford church that had over 30 Oxford faculty members attending. He suggested to me that this is the basic position of most of these individuals. They affirm a personal faith and bring their families to church. But their faith basically stops when they enter their colleges. These are individuals who are brilliant in their fields, many of them senior scholars and professors, but their faith and Christian minds are often underdeveloped and relatively unused. This is no sophisticated theoretical choice but a pre-theoretical and pietistic commitment.

2) Fideism – Faith separated from Reason

Remember Tertullian's comment on this topic almost 19 centuries ago?

"What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem,
The Academy with the church,

Or heretics with Christians?"[10]

This idea of the separation of faith from reason (fideism) has echoed through Christian thought for the last 19 centuries as a solution to the problem of reason and faith.

Alvin Plantinga defines fideism as a "basic reliance upon faith alone, accompanied by a consequent disparagement of reason and utilized especially in the pursuit of philosophical or religious truth." Thus a fideist, Plantinga writes, is one who "urges reliance on faith rather than reason, in matters philosophical and religious" and who "may go on to disparage and denigrate reason." Fideism asserts that religious truth can be perceived by avoiding the dead end of reason and rely instead on faith in God and his revelation. Such pietism is attractive as someone can view their faith as personal and private choice without either integrating it into one's academic discipline or justifying why it is true. Such a fideism provides a means of justifying one's faith, and reducing one's cognitive dissonance without the hard work of explaining or defending it.

D) Cognitive Independence – Confident Orthodoxy

I obviously do not have a positive perspective on the 4 previous options: Cognitive Conversion to Agnosticism, Cognitive Surrender into Liberal Christianity, Cognitive Retreat into a Privatized Faith, or Fideistic Faith. The first two are fundamental compromises of orthodox faith. The last two I would argue are understandable but misguided attempts to have faith in the modern world.

Honesty about the problem

What should be clear at this point are the enormous social pressures that virtually every Ph.D. student feels during their Ph.D. studies. This process is normative for most evangelical Ph.D. students as a fundamental part of their education. To the extent that a Ph.D. student is not conscious of this process, they often become conformed to their social contexts. The first step toward faithfulness and intellectual healthiness is to become conscious of this situation. Being aware of how of our social setting affects us is the first step toward a solution.

There are several additional key steps to resolving this issue.

Need for honesty about apologetic questions

In the normal process of getting a Ph.D., a typical Ph.D. student has dozens of questions which come from the interface between his faith and his discipline.

These are questions that a typical Ph.D. students does not have the immediate answers to. There is no way someone can engage in a Ph.D. program and not be confronted by many serious questions.

This is normal but again a typical Ph.D. student doesn't know this. C.S. Lewis argued that a Christian scholar should "face up to those elements in original Christianity which he personally finds obscure"[11] as these very tensions are the doorway to deeper insights and provide the means to grow in one's faith and understanding.

Without this robust honesty, when the student has no well thought through answers, a brick is removed from the wall of their faith. If someone does not face their questions, the questions don't go away. Each new unanswered question is a brick removed from the wall of faith and placed in a new wall of disbelief. Without an intentional focus on honestly identifying questions, and then subsequently finding resources and mentors to help answer these questions, these questions can seem overwhelming.

Intellectual Fads

In a curious way, academia is particularly susceptible to fads. Oxford philosopher Basil Mitchell writes that "there occurs the special sort of silliness and subservience to fashion to which intellectuals are peculiarly susceptible."[12] Part of a self consciously Christian perspective is that we need to be a bit skeptical of the latest fad or breathtaking insight that some academics become so enamored by.

Let me give you an example of this in the field of theology. A number of years ago, theologian Clark Pinnock wrote a book on pluralization. Wheaton College held a theology conference on the topic of pluralization, and Pinnock's book and its argument caused rippling bewilderment and uncertainty at the conference. The theologians were initially confused and didn't know how to answer the questions that the book raised.

During the discussion a couple of individuals raised questions about Pinnock's assumptions and method. They argued that Pinnock had read widely but was fundamentally theologically unstable. He had been for and then against inerrancy and half dozen other core theological positions over the previous 30 years. For example, he had been at one time sympathetic to liberation theology and then had reacted against liberation theology in a sort of Reagan economics. In short, Clark Pinnock had never been accused of stability over the course of his writing career. These respondents to Pinnock helped us to understand that his book wasn't important in itself, but served only as a sort of theological fuse. The book made us aware of something happening in the broader intellectual world. Seen from this perspective, they argued, it should come as no surprise that

Pinnock was over-reacting to the next new idea or fad. They counseled their colleagues that one should not be swept off one's feet by the latest academic theory or particularly bright or persuasive writer.

The correct response was to have a sense of historical perspective and confidence, and to not be undone by the latest fad. Theology's persistent temptation is to dress in the latest academic fad with new terminology, assumptions and methods. Christians should be historically rooted in the robust orthodox faith that has withstood 2000 years of reflection, debate and discussion.

Plantinga reminds us that evangelical academics should have more independence and self-confidence.

"Verificationism (logical positivism) has retreated into the obscurity it so richly deserves; but the moral remains. This hand wringing and those attempts to accommodate the positivist were wholly inappropriate…

For Christian philosophers should have adopted a quite different attitude towards positivism and its verifiability criterion. What they should have said to the positivists is: "Your criterion is mistaken: for such statements as 'God loves us' and 'God created the heavens and the earth' are clearly meaningful; so if they aren't verifiable in your sense, then it is false that all and only statements verifiable in that sense are meaningful."

What was needed here was less accommodation to current fashion and more Christian self-confidence: Christian theism is true; if Christian theism is true, then the verifiability criterion is false; so the verifiability criterion is false…

And my point, to repeat myself, is that Christian philosophers should have displayed more integrity, more independence, less readiness to trim their sails to the prevailing philosophical winds of doctrine, and more Christian self-confidence."

The Christian academic's calling includes evaluating his discipline's intellectual foundation and developing his own Christian approach to his discipline.

Again Plantinga is helpful:

"So the Christian philosopher has his own topics and projects to think about; and when he thinks about the topics of current concern in the broader philosophical world, he will think about them in his own way, which may be a different way.

"He may have to reject certain currently fashionable assumptions about the philosophic enterprise - he may have to reject widely accepted assumptions as

to what are the proper starting points and procedures for philosophical endeavor. And-and this is crucially important-the Christian philosopher has a perfect right to the point of view and prephilosophical assumptions he brings to philosophic work; the fact that these are not widely shared outside the Christian or theistic community is interesting but fundamentally irrelevant."

What happens when we begin to do just this?

Alvin Plantinga, by applying the above reasoning, has led a philosophical renaissance of Christians in Philosophy.

I want to conclude this lecture by giving a lengthy quote of an article by Quentin Smith, a leading atheistic philosopher, which lamented the growing influence of Christian philosophers.

> By the second half of the twentieth century, universities... [became] in the main secularized. The standard... position in each field... assumed or involved arguments for a naturalist world-view; departments of theology or religion aimed to understand the meaning and origins of religious writings, not to develop arguments against naturalism.

> The secularization of mainstream academia began to quickly unravel upon the publication of Plantinga's influential book, *God and Other Minds*, in 1967. It became apparent to the philosophical profession that this book displayed that realist theists were not outmatched by naturalists in terms of the most valued standards of analytic philosophy: conceptual precision, rigor of argumentation, technical erudition, and an in-depth defense of an original world-view. This book, followed seven years later by Plantinga's even more impressive book, *The Nature of Necessity*, made it manifest that a realist theist was writing at the highest qualitative level of analytic philosophy…

> Naturalists passively watched as realist versions of theism, most influenced by Plantinga's writings, began to sweep through the philosophical community, until today perhaps one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians. Although many theists do not work in the area of the philosophy of religion, so many of them do work in this area that there are now over five philosophy journals devoted to theism or the philosophy of religion, such as *Faith and Philosophy*, *Religious Studies*, *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion*, *Sophia*, *Philosophia Christi*, etc. *Philosophia Christi* began in the late 1990s and already is overflowing with submissions from leading philosophers.

God is not "dead" in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments.[13]

Philosophy may be the first academic field in modern times where orthodox Christians may be influencing the discipline, but God willing, it won't be the last.

[1] Much of this article is in dialogue with Platinga's "Advice to Christian Philosophers," which is quoted often throughout the following pages. See Plantinga, Alvin. "Advice to Christian Philosophers." *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers,* vol. 1 (1984).

[2] Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), p. 121.

[3] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 65.

[4] Peter Berger, *Sociology Reinterpreted: An Essay on Method and Vocation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1981), p 148.

[5] Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, p. 151.

[6] Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), p. 9-10.

[7] Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, p.19.

[8] T.S. Eliot. "The Idea of a Christian Society." in *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949).

[9] Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, p. 40. See the historical overview of this process in George Marsden's *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp 21-30.

[10] Tertullian. *On the Prescription of Heretics,* 7.9.

[11] C.S. Lewis. The *Joyful Christian* (New York: Touchstone, 1977), p. 183.

[12] Basil Mitchell. *The Justification of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 130.

[13] See Smith, Quentin. "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism." *Philo* 4.2. *Philo Online*. Web.