

The Benefits of My Evangelical Upbringing

I grew up in a pretty conservative Midwestern protestant situation. I was homeschooled and church was a big part of our social life. There are plenty of things to mock and joke about in this milieu (and I do!) but there are some under-appreciated benefits.

There are benefits to not getting into sex, drugs, and partying as a young person, but that's not what I've appreciated most. As time has passed, I've seen other benefits I didn't think about at the time. I took them for granted and assumed they were omnipresent.

Those benefits are philosophical. Epistemological, not aesthetic.

While not ubiquitous in Christian upbringings, the particular niche of Evangelical Protestantism I came up in was very focused on intensive Bible study, theology, and examining questions of meaning, free will, good and evil. There was an expectation that you should be able to logically prove every belief, examine arguments against it, and wrestle until you had coherent, non-contradictory ideas. Discussing claims made in sermons and questioning their accuracy, alignment with scripture, or logical consistency was normal.

There was utmost respect for reason and analytic philosophy. Difficult scriptures were studied in depth, arguments on all sides examined, original Greek and Hebrew checked, historical context learned, and commentaries consulted.

I always enjoyed this. I liked studying the Bible and various theologians. I loved their debates and disagreements. I was fascinated by questions of fate vs. free will.

There was a sense in which we Christians always felt the need to, "Be ready always to give an answer for the hope that you have". You didn't just believe stuff, it was incumbent on you to really examine it and understand it, and be able to explain it even to antagonists. I remember diving into apologetics and preparing to be attacked from all sides by classmates and professors when I took college philosophy classes.

I was disappointed.

Everyone in the class was an atheist (this was the very early 2000's, before the resurgence of spiritual interest common today), but reflexively so. It was a default setting. No one had any arguments. None of them seemed to have examined anything. And it didn't seem to trouble them. I was looking for some fights! I wanted to challenge and be challenged. It was as if everyone – even those wanting to major in philosophy – didn't much care to examine the most fundamental questions of being and existence and morality and meaning. They would laugh at or dismiss ideas sometimes, but freeze up if asked to

explain.

This was a real shock to me.

I had one TA who asked any theists to raise their hand. I was the only one. Some people snickered. He said, “Don’t laugh. All the best analytic philosopher were theists. Aquinas would run circles around most of you. Do you know why? Have you engaged this stuff?” He was an atheist moving towards agnosticism, but he had mad respect for anyone who did good philosophy (I later discovered he became a Bhuddist and quit academia. He was my favorite philosophy professor, so I’m not surprised). There was one other philosophy prof who was a Christian, and everyone was afraid to debate him. I think he dreamed in airtight symbolic logic.

I didn’t realize at the time that the intellectual tradition I’d inherited in all those Bible studies and debates and books was straight from Aristotle. The more I studied the history of philosophy, the more I realized I wasn’t the one who was wacky or out of step. Questions of God and religion had been taken the most seriously by the most serious thinkers. The whole Protestant project was, in a way, a big philosophical “eff you” to those who said don’t think for yourself, just act out the rituals. It was a celebration of reason. (This is not to say Orthodoxy and Catholicism do not retain a lot of sound philosophy, or that Protestantism always does. All religion tends to have interesting ideas at its core, and devolve into a less rigorous social movement subject to capture as it grows).

I often wonder how people go about their lives acting on important core ideas and assumptions without seeming to have any interest in or feel any necessity to examine, define, and make logical sense of those ideas and assumptions. Being wrong is one thing. Being uninterested in examining tacit truth claims is another.

I’m not looking down on people who are uninterested in or not conversant in inquiry into these things. I just don’t understand it. And because I value getting to the *why* of things, I am very grateful that I grew up in an arena that prized the most foundational questions, and expected one to be intellectually and morally accountable for their own beliefs – and comfortable being a bit of an outsider.

I must’ve seemed so weird. An early teen spending hours underlining, cross-referencing, diagramming, checking translations in my Hebrew-Greek keyword Bible, writing arguments and counter-arguments. Fortunately in my social circles, it wasn’t weird at all.