

THE ROAD TO ELSEWHERE: ALABAMA, TENNESSEE, AND NORTHERN

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120

Recently I published a book called *Christ is the Question*. The title was intended to provoke double takes: in my field one is popularly supposed to provide answers, not questions. But it is the questions that have determined my intellectual trajectory, and I believe that is true of all the others described in these pages. Indeed one of the things that has struck me about many of my colleagues' stories is the inconcinnities that have so often provoked the questions that have led them into their scholarship. I mean those little things that don't fit, the experience of out-of-placeness, the things that pop up and aren't the way you were always told they must be. Those are the things that start you thinking, the things that may launch one onto an "intellectual trajectory." This happened to me very early.

I was born in Aliceville, Alabama, a town of some 1500 inhabitants. It was a new town, founded in 1913. My parents arrived there very shortly thereafter, so you would have thought they were part of the core of the town. However, there were two older settlements nearby, one called Pleasant Ridge and the other Franconia, where the community cemetery was and still is. Those people who lived in Franconia and Pleasant Ridge were the old families of Aliceville; we always remained among the new families. And whereas many of my school friends would refer to "Cousin John" or "Aunt Miriam," for me these people were Mr. Somerville or Miss Cunningham. Of course there were others who were outside that circle of kinship and status. On the southern edge of the town stood the Mill Village, a cluster of small houses erected and owned by the cotton mill, Aliceville's largest employer. The workers who lived there obviously did not address leading citizens as "Cousin" or "Aunt." All this seemed at the time perfectly natural; only later did I sense that something didn't quite fit.

It was a southern town, on the edge of the Black Belt. That name for the region came originally from the deep black soil that was characteristic of the flat land a bit further south. Our own soil tended toward red clay. After many, many years of planting cotton it had become less and less fertile. Agriculture continued to be economically viable only because of cheap labor. Large farms depended on share cropping, and almost all of the sharecroppers were black. That, of course, is the other reason for the region's name.

Apart from the economic structure, being southern meant for us something else. Before the Vietnam War we were the only part of the United States that had suffered defeat in war and even, as we all grew up thinking about it, occupation by a foreign army. Stories of the past related by grandparents and countless chance remarks by parents, teachers, and others, kept alive and passed on to my generation that silent

sense of defeat. It took the form of a deep, rarely spoken resentment, normally hidden beneath a wonderful sense of manners – the one thing I do still partly miss about the Old South – that sense of graciousness and courtliness which, at its best, entails genuine caring and welcoming for other people. Under the surface lingered something different: a current of violence. Dark stories that a child might overhear while sitting in the barber shop: young men bragging that they had punished an “uppity” black child by hoisting his feet and bashing his head against the floor.

121

The town existed because of a railroad, the Alabama, Tennessee, and Northern. Starting in Mobile, it eventually ended in Reform, Alabama, just twenty miles north of Aliceville and not much more than two hundred miles from its starting point – a sad distance from Tennessee, let alone the North. The ambition embalmed in the railroad’s name as well as the limits its owners had to settle for said a lot about us all. Still, our town was there because the railroad had needed it. Steam locomotives required places at regular intervals where water could be added to their boilers. For the AT&N one of those intervals happened to coincide with an empty space close to the old settlements of Pleasant Ridge and Franconia, so the line’s owner founded a town there and named it for his wife, Alyce.

My father was the AT&N’s first stationmaster in Aliceville, and the railroad would be a very large part of my early life, as it was of the town’s. As soon as I was able and my father taught me how, I tended the ticket window occasionally, learning useful skills. One day, after I had become fairly adept at this, an old man, a black man who was blind, came to the ticket window of the Colored waiting room and asked for a ticket to Panola, a village even smaller than Aliceville, about eighteen miles away. I gave him his ticket and he counted the change, and I was so impressed by the way the blind man could so easily handle change and get it right that I said, “Thank you, sir.” Perfectly natural, one would think – but not in Aliceville, Alabama, in 1940. To be sure, nobody had ever told me that you don’t say “Sir” to a black man. My father looked at me questioningly, but said nothing. Yet I knew immediately that I had done something inappropriate. Still, how could I not? This impressive man who was himself so gracious – how could I not honor him? Years later that inconcinnity aligned itself with many others to produce a constant whisper in my conscience: “There is some basic structural self-contradiction in everything that you’ve learned and in this place where you are.”

That, of course, introduces the elephant in the living room: race. We had no segregated living in Aliceville. There was no zoning. Three houses away from ours but on the opposite side of the railroad was a small unpainted house where George and Lilly Farmer lived. George was a laborer for one of the saw mills in town. Lilly was our maid. I think she probably got a dollar or two a week, plus whatever food she might take home. Lilly mostly raised me. Lilly was my constant companion as I grew up, and her children became my first playmates. Tee, her oldest, was my age, and we played together rather regularly. “Tee,” an odd name; later I learned that it was short for

Booker T. Washington Farmer. His kid brother was named Joe Louis Farmer. George and Lilly Farmer, living without complaint in a segregated society, always obeying the rules, nevertheless named their sons for the great African American educator and author of *Up from Slavery* and for “the Brown Bomber” who had become the world heavyweight boxing champion in 1937. It never occurred to me at the time that this might be significant.

It was while playing with Tee that I learned to be a racist when I was about four. All playmates sometimes have cross words. One time Tee and I had a disagreement in which he was clearly getting the better of the argument, so I resorted to the ultimate weapon. “Well,” I said, “you’re just a nigger.” I can still see his face. I knew at once that I had broken something beyond ever being able to make amends.

I think there must have been many times when, hearing the mournful whistle of a steam engine, I dreamed of escaping from my life in Aliceville – but you couldn’t run away from racism nor from the habits of defeat on the AT&N. My first escape was by books. My mother had one year of college and a passion for seeing that her children were educated. She was a serial subscriber to magazines, including magazines for me: from *Child Life* in my earliest reading years to *Popular Science Monthly* around sixth grade. The latter was highly formative, because we all assumed that I was to be an engineer. How else did you escape from our lower-middle-class situation into a better world?

My father had never finished high school, but he too had a passion for education, for the education he didn’t get. Down in Shubuta, Mississippi, where he was born, they were so hard up for teachers that for a short time he was pressed into service teaching elementary school. Naturally his limited education soon forced him into other kinds of work as he scabbled to earn a living (his father had died when he was twelve), but he never forgot his teaching experience. He was a natural teacher, and when he had children, they became his pupils. He, as much as my mother, was determined that my two older brothers and I would not suffer his fate.

My father was a charter member of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the Club’s selections spread steadily across shelves that, one by one, occupied the walls of our living room. Early on I began to explore them. In my naiveté I read things that were not “appropriate to my age level.” My dad had begun teaching me to read when I was two and to do arithmetic by two and a half. Four months short of my sixth birthday, he undertook to enroll me in school, only to be told that the rules required me to wait another year. He inquired whether the rules specified that schooling must begin with the first grade. A search revealed that apparently no one had ever thought it necessary to legislate that. So a year later I was enrolled in second grade. I discovered that, having been tutored daily by my parents in that year, I was far ahead of my classmates in reading skills, in facility with numbers, and in the drive to know.

The other elephant in the room – and, for me, the train out – was religion. I mentioned above that Aliceville was in the black Belt; it was also in the Bible Belt. Fun-

damentalism and racism are, of course, natural companions. However, an extraordinary thing happened in the conservative Presbyterian church in which I grew up. The Presbyterian Youth Fellowship, which met every Sunday evening, became central to my social and moral formation. Through that little group and the region-wide organizations to which it was linked, the church introduced us to a larger world and eventually, quite accidentally, to a kind of critical thinking that, at least in my case, had large, unintended consequences. It sent us to conferences. We met young liberal ministers who were discontented with the way things were and determined that we should understand why there were reasons to be discontented. At one conference I received the Eucharist from the hands of a black minister, a well-educated, thoughtful, and gracious man, himself an anomaly in the Southern Presbyterian Church (officially, the Presbyterian Church, U.S., a denomination whose boundaries coincided with those of the Confederate States; it would reunite with the national Presbyterian body only years later, after the Civil Rights movement).

When I moved to nearby Tuscaloosa to attend the University of Alabama, I automatically gravitated to the Presbyterian Student Center that had recently been established alongside the campus. (In my sophomore year I moved into the center and, for my rent, became the janitor, with my roommate, a fellow engineering student from Pittsburgh.) As I became more and more active in the Westminster Fellowship, I also became involved in the national and international student Christian movement. The sCm had been organized in Europe after World War II, its roots in the anti-Nazi resistance. Soon links were forged to older American student organizations, like the Student Volunteer Movement and the YMCA (both once strongly present at Yale through the Hope Mission and Dwight Hall), as well as denominational organizations. A new umbrella organization was formed, the United Student Christian Council. My first trip to New York City was as the Southern Presbyterian representative to the USCC – an experience not nearly as frightening in the event as it had been in anticipation.

Meeting those people in national and then international conferences, of course, introduced me to a world which was rather larger than Aliceville. Still, Aliceville had in a strange way also touched on that world. When I was about ten years old, the army established a prisoner of war camp in Aliceville. A year or two later, on a gray day in June, 1943, I stood with my father and hundreds of other local citizens to watch a special train rumble into town, bringing the first group of captured German soldiers, defeated members of Rommel's *Afrikakorps*. Eventually the camp, located on the edge of town just south of the Mill Village, would house nearly 6,000 prisoners – four times the size of the town. Some of the prisoners were extraordinarily talented. In the camp they published a newspaper, organized choruses and orchestras, performed plays, created paintings and sculptures, and thus formed connections with local residents. Every now and then some of them would come under guard to the AT&N depot to pick up freight or packages – my father was the Railway Express agent for Aliceville.

Thus I actually met some of them: the Enemy. I learned a few words of German. The Enemy seemed not quite the monster we had imagined. Once again, things didn't quite fit in all the ways they were supposed to. Such experiences, I think, were preparing me for that train to the north and elsewhere beyond the reach of the AT&N.¹

Quite a few years later the Presbyterians asked me to write a book which would serve as one of the textbooks in a rather grandly conceived new Sunday school curriculum. It was to be subtitled *A College Student's Introduction to the Christian Faith*. When I finished it, by now in the summer after my first year of graduate school, I cast around for a main title and settled on *Go from Your Father's House*. This is a tag from the overture to the story of Abraham in the Book of Genesis. There God says to Abraham, "Go from your land and from your kindred and from your father's house to a land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). It struck me as significant that we speak of *going* to college, even if the student stays in the same place. That means leaving the father's house and, if you're any good at all, leaving a lot of other things as well. The problem, of course, is to discern the things that you ought to leave and the things you ought not to leave.²

The first serious and most painful break with my own father came between my freshman and sophomore years of college. My first year of engineering school at the University of Alabama, though successful enough as measured by my marks, convinced me that I did not want to spend my life as an engineer. I was thus ready to be persuaded by arguments that had been advanced for years by ministers and friends that I ought to become a minister. Given my deep involvement with the Presbyterians and with the Christian youth and student movements, that was not unreasonable. Now, however, that plausibility came to seem more than that. It was, in the vocabulary of Protestant churches, a *call* to the ministry, and, like Abraham, I had better listen. My father was appalled, though he was not an irreligious man, and we exchanged words that could never be unsaid. He died twenty years later without either of us being able to say we were sorry.

So when I came back to the university for my sophomore year, I had to negotiate my transfer from the School of Engineering to the College of Arts and Sciences. The chief problem was to find a course of study that would incorporate all those courses in mathematics and science I had accumulated my freshman year, but allow me to concentrate in the liberal arts – and still to finish in four years. The only solution, as I discovered in consultations with the dean, was to major in physics. Thus I could build on the math and science courses while still managing – by taking twenty or twenty-one semester hours each term instead of the normal fifteen – to add minors in both German and psychology, and substantial courses in history and philosophy. That did not leave much time for sleeping; I had pledged a fraternity and was heavily involved in several extra-curricular organizations beside the Presbyterian group, and I was still working ten to twenty hours a week at my janitorial jobs. Still, there was time for the occasional course taken just for fun, like "Introduction to Radio Announcing." That

one taught me how I could shed my Alabama drawl for the mellow Midwestern radio voice that was then in style.

My accidental physics major plunged me into the world of science, consequential for my future in two ways. First, it taught me a certain kind of critical thinking. In later years, as I studied theology and history, certain habits of inquiry that had developed during my physics training resurfaced. I would find myself asking questions a little different from those of my fellow students. Second, it led to my first experience as a teacher. In my senior year, facing a shortage of eligible graduate students, the department chair asked me to serve as a teaching fellow. My assignment was to lead the weekly laboratory sessions that accompanied the lectures in modern physics by Professor Arthur E. Ruark, author with Harold C. Urey of the standard textbook in the field. Under my direction, with only occasional supervision, the students, some of whom were older than I was, recreated a series of classic experiments that marked turning points in the evolution of modern atomic and molecular theory.

In the summer after college, before enrolling in seminary, I found a job as a “junior physicist” with the Rohm and Haas Chemical Company, a subcontractor at the U. S. Army’s Redstone Arsenal, in Huntsville, Alabama – later the George C. Marshall Space Center. Yes, I was actually a rocket scientist.

On the day after graduating from the University, I caught a ride to Huntsville with my best friend, Martha Fowler, and her parents. Her father was the head Resident Engineer of Redstone. Martha was an artist. Though an Episcopalian, she had joined the Presbyterian Westminster Fellowship and became its vice president the year I was president. We had known each other for three years and had worked together on many projects, we had been to a movie or two together, but we had not been romantically involved. Or so I thought. A few weeks later, several recent graduates of Bama who were living in Huntsville gathered for a picnic in a park on Huntsville’s Montesano Mountain. On the way down the mountain, Martha and I discovered that we were deeply in love with each other. I gave her my fraternity pin (I could not afford an engagement ring). We were married a year later, after my first year in seminary and her completion of course work for a M.A. degree in art history and painting at the University of New Mexico. So began a life together that, though it deeply shaped all of the story that follows, was too wonderfully complex to recount here. It was cut short forty-two years later by her sudden heart attack.

I had chosen the Presbyterian seminary in Austin, Texas – tuition there was free at the time. It turned out to be an exciting place, both because of intellectual ferment within its faculty and student body and because of its proximity to the main campus of the University of Texas. In preparation for my theological courses, I had spent the summer working my way through Reinhold Niebuhr’s Gifford Lectures, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. They introduced me to the “neo-orthodox” theology that was becoming so influential in mainstream American Protestantism. This school of thought grew out of post-liberal trends in Europe, above all the formidable output of the

Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Niebuhr, who taught at Union Seminary in New York, and his brother Richard, at Yale, were prominent among a generation of creative thinkers who adapted the European movement to peculiarly American experiences and concerns, especially political and social issues. My introductory course in theology at Austin was taught by our larger-than-life dean, James I. McCord, who would later be president of Princeton Theological Seminary. His own dedication to learning was legendary – he was known to read theology books while driving his large Buick at high speeds on open stretches of West Texas highways, sometimes with unfortunate but never fatal results – and he expected no less a commitment from us. It was he who introduced me to the works of Barth.

There were other teachers who would influence me greatly, above all two New Testament scholars whom McCord had chanced to meet in Scotland and brought to Austin as visiting professors. The first of these was Bernhard Citron. A native of Berlin and a Jew, he had been a feature writer for the newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt* until his columns satirizing Adolf Hitler led to his having to flee to Hungary immediately after Hitler's accession to power in 1932. In Budapest, penniless and alone, he stumbled into a mission of the Church of Scotland. Helped by that mission to escape to Scotland, he converted to Christianity, and after a brief internment, ironically, as an enemy alien, he earned a Ph.D. in theology at the University of Edinburgh. His wide learning in literature and history and his own unusual gifts as a communicator made him a riveting figure for a number of the students, especially those of us of a restless and hyper-curious nature. (Another member of the faculty dearly beloved by this group called us the Young Turks; we presented him with a red fez the day of our graduation). Citron offered us tutoring in German and, for good measure, led the Young Turks in a reading of Marx's *Das Kapital*. More important, he taught us that the New Testament was a Jewish book.

The other visiting professor who was, unbeknownst to me at the time, preparing me for a life of New Testament scholarship was Ernest ("Paddy") Best, born in Belfast. He had a wonderful sense of humor and no patience at all for pious nonsense or for sloppy reasoning. His sharp one-liners exposing both became a feature of the discussions traditionally held after student trial sermons in the chapel – to the visible consternation of some of our more traditional faculty members and the delight of the Young Turks. It was Best who first spoke the name of Rudolf Bultmann in the halls of Austin Seminary – at least within the hearing of students. Bultmann, at the University of Marburg, was the most influential New Testament scholar of Europe at the time. It was Best who introduced me to his scholarship, which included both setting the New Testament within the history of Greco-Roman religious movements and a meticulous reconstruction of the history of the layers of oral tradition and written composition that produced the Gospels.

My experience with the student Christian movement naturally inclined me toward the campus ministry, and the seminary's location on the verge of the University of Texas campus gave an opportunity to try out that possible vocation. By another

happy accident, a woman from my home town was one of the two lay pastors (women were not yet ordained in the Presbyterian Church) for the very large and active Westminster Fellowship at the University Presbyterian Church. It surprised no one that assisting in that ministry became my field work assignment in the Seminary—full-time the summer of my marriage and part-time for my second year. And that relationship led to my first truly international experience.

Several of the students in the Westminster Fellowship had participated in the ecumenical work camps that helped in the rebuilding of postwar Europe, sponsored by the World Council of Churches, the American Friends Service Committee, and other organizations. That experience led the group to organize a series of similar efforts in Brazil, the first of which was held in 1954. The following year, two work camps were planned, and I was employed to lead one of them, sharing leadership with a Brazilian seminarian, João Coelho. The dozen North American students Martha and I took with us—representing several other places across the country as well as our own group—would be joined in Rio de Janeiro by an equal number of Brazilian students, recruited by the Christian Student Union of Brazil.

Our task, which was to take the entire month of July, had been planned by staff of a Methodist settlement house, the Instituto Central do Povo, in the oldest and one of the largest of Rio's slums or *favelas*, on a steep hill overlooking the harbor.³ A poll of the residents in this shantytown, all of them people from rural areas of Brazil who had come to the capital seeking work, led to the decision that a sidewalk across the hillside would be the most useful thing we could make for them. Our motley group included one engineering student from California; apart from him, we had little to offer in the way of serious construction skills. We did have youth and motivation, but had it not been for the extraordinary cooperation of the residents of the favela, we would have accomplished very little. Not that we were universally welcomed the first day; we were a bunch of foreigners who couldn't even speak proper Portuguese and an equal number of Brazilian university students, who must have appeared to many of our clients as privileged kids slumming. Many of the men in the favela worked in the docks, and we were told that not a few belonged to the Communist party. That accounted for some of the heckling we heard the first week, and some of the anti-*Norte* sentiments that were scribbled in our fresh-poured concrete. There was one muscular giant in particular, nicknamed *Galego*, "Galician," for his blonde hair, who came every day to make fun of us. Then one day an odd thing happened when we were unloading a truck full of cement the Brazilian way; that is, a man in the truck would place a 50 kg. sack on my head and I would stagger off with it to the pile near the trough where we mixed the concrete by hand. Galego watched this sorry spectacle for a few minutes, then ran over, grabbed *two* of the sacks and trotted off with them. That went on till the truck was quickly emptied. Then Galego clapped me on the shoulder, picked up a hoe, and started mixing the next batch. He worked with us every day until our project was finished.

A month later Martha and I and the French exchange student who had accompanied us on a trip into the interior with a dangerously erratic missionary pilot – another story for another time – came back for a quick visit to the favela before we took our flight home. As we walked proudly along the length of “our” sidewalk, several of the residents who had joined in the work came out to greet us. To my astonishment, one of them was Galego. After the bone-crushing *abraço* that is the normal Brazilian greeting between friends, Galego motioned excitedly for us to follow him. At the point where we had completed our project, he stopped and pointed. The sidewalk did not end where we had left it, but continued down the other side of the hill. Under Galego’s direction, the residents had built that themselves after we had left. At that point everything we had done, mistakes and all, seemed worthwhile.

I’m sure that our sidewalk crumbled away long ago, but the effects on me of that summer, my first experience in a foreign land immersed in a different language, were lasting. At the conclusion of my seminary training my experience of the world widened again. I won a Fulbright fellowship to study for a year at the University of Tübingen in Germany. By that time I knew that biblical studies would be the focus of any scholarship I would continue in my ministry, and critical study of the Bible in North America had long depended on German imports. I might as well go to the source. As luck would have it, the New Testament side of Tübingen’s Protestant theological faculty was lacking a star the year I was there, but no matter. I plunged into serious advanced study of both Hebrew and Greek, polished my German not only in classes but also by reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer, student of Karl Barth and martyr of the German resistance, and Franz Kafka. I was also very active in the Student Congregation which met Sunday evenings at the *Stiftskirche* near the campus; I preached occasionally, gave a talk on race relations in the American South, and formed strong friendships. Our congregation included newly arrived Hungarian students fresh from the 1956 Soviet repression, students from all over Germany, and others from as far away as Canada and Iceland.

On my return I received a call to become Presbyterian University Pastor in Memphis, Tennessee. My flock included students at Memphis State University (now the University of Memphis), the Presbyterian liberal arts college Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes College), and the medical units of the University of Tennessee. That went on for four rather exciting years. Among other things, those years were a crucial period in the civil rights movement, and I was engaged with the integration of Memphis State. On the day of the enrollment of the first black students I spotted a Ku Klux Klan procession lining up near our storefront chapel and raced across the back campus to warn the President. A day or two later one of our most active undergraduates appeared at our center with two of the black students. They had complained to a dean in her hearing that none of the religious groups seemed to welcome them. “We do,” she replied instantly. Years later she wrote me, “We hadn’t discussed it, but I knew it was true.”

In my fourth year, with some feelings of guilt about leaving the scene of the struggle, I applied for and won a fellowship which gave me one year of graduate school. I applied to Yale, Columbia, and Harvard, and was accepted to all three. I knew virtually nothing about any of these places, but Harvard required competence in Latin on entry, and that eliminated it. New York seemed to me the epitome of big-city alienation, not a place for a growing family. About Yale I knew a bit more: I had close friends in Memphis who had studied there, and one had given me a copy of the rare, photocopied notes of Robert C. Calhoun's famous – and famously unpublished – lectures on the history of Christian doctrine.

So I came to Yale, with a wife and two daughters and a third soon to come, and no clear idea how they were to be fed when my one-year fellowship ran out. Fortunately, I won a second fellowship, which supported us almost comfortably to the end of my degree program. Nevertheless, I was sufficiently terrified by the financial uncertainty that I rushed through my studies, completing my work in residence in three years and the last chapter of my dissertation in my first year of teaching, a temporary stint at Dartmouth College.

Upon receiving the Ph.D., I tried the campus ministry again, back at Yale. My responsibility was to find ways to minister to graduate students. Not easy; a Catholic friend referred to it as the ministry of “lurker priests.” The work was, if frustrating, richly satisfying in many ways, especially my participation in the worship of Battell Chapel under the leadership of William Sloane Coffin. Nevertheless, it became quickly apparent that my Ph.D. in New Testament studies was of limited use for being a good pastor. That “calling” I thought I had been hearing all those years was really to be a teacher, confirmed by the year in Dartmouth with splendid colleagues and strong students. I applied for posts in several places and went for interviews at Swarthmore and at Indiana University in Bloomington, where a brand-new department of Religious Studies was being organized under the leadership of William F. May, another Yale Ph.D. When I received offers from both places, I chose the large state university for the excitement of greater diversity and being present at the creation of a new program.

This was in 1965, and what was happening in Bloomington was an example of a transformation of the way religion was to be researched and taught in U. S. higher education. Until that point the field was almost completely defined by denominational seminaries and, to a lesser extent, by departments of “religion” or “Bible and religion” in denominationally related colleges. Ironically, the way to a sudden vast expansion of study of religion in public institutions came through a decision of the U. S. Supreme Court in 1963 – the “School Prayer Case” so infamous in some evangelical circles for its finding that organized prayer or Bible reading in public schools violated the first amendment of the Constitution. There was little media attention to a later paragraph in the decision: “Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may

not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.”⁴ But wary administrators of publicly supported universities, long buffeted by both sides of the debate about teaching religion there, did read the paragraph very carefully. Almost overnight, departments of religious studies sprang up in state universities all over the country. Following their lead, many older departments in private institutions reorganized their “Bible” and “religion” departments into “departments of religious studies.” Yale had been ahead of the curve: already in 1963, the year of the Schempp decision, the old Yale College Department of Religion became the Department of Religious Studies with responsibility for both undergraduate instruction and graduate degrees under the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

These changes in administrative structure profoundly affected the social context within which scholarship and teaching about religion were conducted in this country, and I had the good fortune to be present at the creation, as it were. My own intellectual trajectory reflected and participated in a reimagining of the study of religion and specifically the study of the Bible that was occurring during this period.

To understand those changes, it is necessary to look at a bit of more ancient history. Judaism and Christianity are not only, along with Islam, uniquely “religions of the book”; they are also religions that pay a great deal of attention to *history*. They not only made history, they also *made up* history. Several things in the experience of the early Christian movement pressed its leaders to invent their own story of the past, present, and future. First, the Jewish scriptures were, from the beginning, the encompassing matrix within which the new sect, like all Jewish groups, worked out their own interpretations of life, using every tool available. As their own lore about the Messiah Jesus grew and took form, and their new writings about him and about their own experiences came to hold authority, those older scriptures, now commandeered as “the Old Testament,” had to be fitted into some kind of scheme with the new writings. The new interpreted the old – “fulfilled” them, as the Christians often said – but also depended upon them and the age-old traditions of their interpretation. Moreover, this continuity with the ancient story of Israel, a story that began “in the beginning” of all things, was important in their self-defense against their detractors. They were not just some novel superstition, as the Roman writers frequently said.

By the late second century, the Christians had formed a grand narrative beginning with creation, incorporating the whole story of Israel, climaxing in the peculiar story of the Gospels, and reaching its denouement in that weird book at the end of the New Testament called the Apocalypse. It is quite an extraordinary narrative and several people, notably Northrop Frye, have pointed out that it becomes the model for what a narrative is for western culture writ large, with a beginning, a middle and an end.⁵ This grand mythic narrative was construed in the church as the “history of salvation.” It was the story of God creating the world, of human beings making a royal mess of it again and again, and of God taking slow deliberate steps to fix it until he could put everything to rights at the end.

Some form of this narrative provided the ground on which Christian theology has played its endless variations for many centuries. At the dawn of what we call Modernity, however, the master narrative began to face new challenges. The adjective “scientific” began to be applied to the noun “history,” and, beginning with the eighteenth century, *science* itself was taking on quite new connotations in contrast with its classical meanings. *Scientific* history could be distinguished from folk history, for example, and especially from *myth*. In the study of Christianity’s history and its scriptures, the “historical critical method” evolved—not really one method but a family of related assumptions and techniques. In Protestant circles, for only later was it embraced by Roman Catholic and Orthodox scholars, it was seen as continuing the Reformation program by returning to the sources, to the *original* history, freeing it from all of the dogmatic accretions and pious superstitions that had surrounded it through the ages. Thus scientific history would rescue us from myth and ritual and superstition. This enterprise provoked a vehement response, and the struggle between “modernism” and “fundamentalism” racked both European and American churches at the beginning of the twentieth century.

By the time I got to graduate school there were two massive Protestant ways of trying to appropriate modernist historiography, both of them largely European transplants to this country. One way was to refine the history of salvation by providing it with a foundation of scientific history. We would analyze the sources, using all the tools of archaeology and of cultural and literary history in order to find out *wie es eigentlich gewesen*: “what really happened.” Our scientific work would simply purify the biblical story of its mythic accretions, enabling us to read in its pure form the story of God acting in history.

On the other side were those who criticized this historicist approach, arguing that it entailed committing oneself to a particular philosophy of history that itself is time-bound and contingent. While these scholars agreed that it was important to uncover, so far as possible, the facts underlying the early Christian movement and the stages by which its beliefs, practices, and scriptures took shape, for them that kind of historical research only set the stage for the real job: “demythologizing” the Christian message. That meant to strip away the objectifying structures that were the community’s cultural inheritance in order to expose the call to a radical decision for “authentic existence” that each individual must make. Not history but each person’s unique historicity was at issue. This existentialist mode of interpretation was identified with Rudolf Bultmann. He and his students dominated the field when I came to graduate school.

On both sides of this controversy, both the focus on Heilsgeschichte and the existentialist construal of what the Bible was about, the Jews played a peculiar role. For the former view, they played the part of the people who were denied salvation. If for Christians the Bible was Heilsgeschichte, for the Jews it was *Unheilsgeschichte*: as a people, having failed to acknowledge their own Messiah at the historic moment of truth, they had been replaced in God’s plan of salvation by a new people, potentially

embracing all nations. For Bultmann and his followers, the Jews represented rather all of the forms of “self-contrived security” by which we try to evade the naked existential decisions through which alone we become authentic individuals. That was the real meaning, many German Protestant theologians thought, of the “legalism” that they saw in traditional Judaism’s devotion to the commandments of the written and oral Torah.

The Holocaust of Nazi Germany had shown all but the most obtuse that there was something deeply wrong with all the ways in which Christian theology had dealt with Judaism. The struggle both to understand the history of Jewish-Christian interaction and to make sense of it theologically was – and continues to be – a huge factor in the studies I was undertaking. I had some accidental advantages as I tried to work through this dark issue. I had grown up without many prejudices – or much knowledge – about Jews. There was only one Jewish family in Aliceville; they ran the dry goods store. At the University of Alabama I had a great piece of luck. As a sophomore, weighed down with all those physics courses, I was casting about for something less intense, and I happened onto a course called “Introduction to Judaism.” It was taught by Rabbi Henry Fischel, a German refugee with a Ph.D. in ancient philosophy. Sixteen years later I found him again, as a colleague at Indiana University. His research had shown that Jewish thinkers in the Roman Empire, including leaders of the rabbinical academies, were actively engaged with many of the rhetorical and philosophical trends in the larger culture. In this insight he was ahead of his time.

Henry was the first of the wonderful colleagues and mentors that I had on the Jewish side of things: in seminary, Bernhard Citron, mentioned above; at Yale, Judah Goldin, Brevard Childs, Erwin Goodenough; later Sid Leiman, James Kugel, Steven Fraade; at Dartmouth, Jacob Neusner. In my first year of graduate school, Nils Alstrup Dahl, a brilliant and independent-minded scholar of the University of Oslo, was a visiting professor, and I took his year-long course in “the Christology of the New Testament.” It was utterly formative for my subsequent work. Dahl would return to Yale in 1965 and I would enjoy being his colleague from 1969 until his retirement in 1981. Dahl’s great work was to show that the identity which Jesus came to have in the memory and practice of his followers was the product of a process of interpretation not unlike that exposed in the recently discovered “Dead Sea Scrolls.” The process was a complex interplay among Jewish scripture; traditional means of interpreting that scripture, of several different types and sub-cultural contexts; and the historical experience of the followers, including especially their struggle to make sense of the fact that their Messiah was crucified.

A half century ago the standard handbooks of New Testament scholarship still treated “Judaism” and “Hellenism” in the first century of the common era as two separate and conflicting cultural worlds. Historians of the movement that became Christianity saw it as shaped by the conflict between these two cultures, and scholars debated whether it was Judaism or Hellenism that had dominated its formation.

Typically the handbooks spoke of the two cultures as the “background” of early Christianity. We have learned, slowly, that this metaphor makes no sense. Life, including the life of social groups and movements, is not performed on a stage with culture as a backdrop, it is lived in the midst of culture, which always includes many sub-cultural forms and currents.

Moreover, the image of Judaism and Hellenism in perpetual conflict was vastly oversimplified and, in fact, wrong. There was one vast cosmopolitan culture of the Greco Roman World in which various ethnic groups like the Jews had already found their various ways and degrees of participation and identity, and out of that mix one peculiar new cult called Christianity emerged, itself taking multiple forms as it imitated and transformed some of those same modes of identity and belonging. Only some years later did I find ways to articulate this insight, which was shaking our whole discipline through the work of pioneers like those I have mentioned above.

Let me return briefly to the early steps of my scholarly pilgrimage: the dissertation. I had come to Yale to study “biblical theology” – a subfield which the faculty had deleted from the catalogue in the months between my acceptance into the program and my arrival in New Haven. I had become interested in the radical extension of Karl Barth’s theology by his student Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer argued that the liberal Protestant accommodation to progressive modern culture had failed both practically and theoretically. The accommodation depended upon acceptance of the post-Enlightenment notion that “Christianity” was one species of the genus “religion.” Protestant apologetics undertook to show how Christianity satisfied certain essential human needs. The trouble was that, if the Enlightenment project were carried through consistently, the areas of life for which religion was needed became smaller and smaller. God, understood as a “working hypothesis,” as a “God to fill the gaps” in scientific knowledge, risked technological unemployment. A humanity “come of age” did not need “religion” as guardian. Barth had taught, however, that religion was only one of the many devices that humans construct to hide themselves from the “totally other” God of the Bible. The point, then, said Bonhoeffer, was to discover a “religionless Christianity.”

I had to write a substantial paper for the course that I took with Nils Dahl in my first year at Yale, so I discussed with him the possibility of exploring some New Testament basis for Bonhoeffer’s “worldly” Christianity. He smiled quietly and said, “Why don’t you write an analysis of the verse, “My kingdom is not of this world [John 18:36].” I was taken aback. It seemed the ultimate put-down. Still, it was not easy to say no to Nils Dahl, so I plunged into the baffling complexity of scholarship on the Gospel of John. By the end of the year I had produced a fifty-page paper on “Jesus as King and Prophet in the Fourth Gospel.” Dahl liked it. It would be, he suggested, a good topic for a dissertation. And so it was.

Anyone investigating the Gospel of John in the late twentieth century had to confront the work of Rudolf Bultmann. He had published extensively on the subject,

including a massive commentary which had gone through multiple editions, beginning in 1941.⁶ His work was a landmark both of detailed reconstruction of the Gospel's hypothetical written and oral sources and of the attempt to set those sources within the broader history of religions. "History of Religions" in this case refers to a specific school of historiography which had emerged in Germany in the late nineteenth century. It aimed to reconstruct the discrete religious movements and institutions active in lands around the eastern Mediterranean in the Hellenistic and Roman periods and to discern in them the antecedents and influences that shaped the Christian religion in its early years.⁷

Almost every modern scholar who has written about the Fourth Gospel makes liberal use of the words "puzzle" and "riddle." It is a baffling book, filled with ambiguities and double entendres, non-sequiturs, and characters who are obtuse. For Bultmann there were two reasons for the puzzles. One was that whoever had put together the final edition of the Gospel had done a bad job of editing. The first thing one had to do was to sort out what the original sources must have looked like before they were put so haphazardly together, and to rearrange them into the coherent outline they must have had when first assembled. The second reason for the puzzle was that the most important of these sources had originally conveyed a Gnostic myth – originally not about Jesus at all but about John the Baptist, understood as a heavenly figure who had come briefly to earth to deliver a revelation to the elect few and then returned to heaven. It was because this myth had been broken – "demythologized" in the way in which Bultmann thought the whole Bible must be for "modern man" – that it had become so puzzling.

There were reasons why, in the mid-twentieth century, this daring reconstruction was more persuasive than it seems in my too-brief summary. One reason had to do with the discovery by Western scholars in the early twentieth century of an obscure group of practicing Gnostics, a baptizing sect whose first language was Aramaic, surviving since antiquity in regions around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers of modern Iraq and Iran. (Whether they have survived the more recent upheavals in those countries, I do not know.) They seemed to Bultmann and others the missing link to those traditions that lay behind the Fourth Gospel.

Thanks to Bultmann, I faced two great obstacles in writing my dissertation. The first was that I would have to learn to read Mandaean, as the dialect of the obscure Mesopotamian sect was called by Western scholars. That was difficult, for the Mandaean alphabet was inscrutable and no dictionary or grammar of that branch of Aramaic had as yet been published, but I managed somehow to work through the most important texts. The second great obstacle came when I was finished: I had come to the conclusion that Bultmann was utterly wrong. And if the greatest New Testament scholar of the twentieth century had been wrong about one of his most elaborate and tightly-argued conclusions, what chance was there that any of my proposals could withstand scrutiny?⁸

There was, however, no turning back. Once the Bultmannian edifice collapsed, I was stuck with the original question, “Why does the Gospel of John read like a riddle?” I began to ask myself whether there are not situations in which a riddle is a preferred means of communication. Might not a sect whose revisionist beliefs and practices met with hostility and disbelief by their own natural community, whose stories about their founding prophet made him seem more and more alien to the world around them – might they not begin to tell those stories in a riddling, ambiguous fashion? Viewed that way the Fourth Gospel seemed to me not a mishmash of badly edited, recycled “sources,” but a composition of breathtaking artistry, inviting the reader into a knowing superiority to most of the characters in the narrative, but then disrupting that satisfaction at each succeeding turn of the narrative, throwing the reader into a state of precarious uncertainty about the mysterious stranger at the heart of the story.

Trying to understand what kind of group in what kind of situation might produce such a narrative led me out of the narrow confines of New Testament scholarship and the History of Religions into the social sciences. I discovered the large literature about the sociology of sects and cults. I learned about conflict theory and about social stratification, status crystallization, and many other obscure notions. I stumbled into cultural anthropology and ethnography. Before I knew it, I discovered that I was doing something like social history.⁹ I was not alone in making that turn. Among the most important of my interlocutors during those years were three colleagues here at Yale, Leander Keck, Abraham Malherbe, and Ramsay MacMullen. Soon there were many others in the Society of Biblical Literature and abroad. To paraphrase Arlo Guthrie, we began to feel like a movement.¹⁰

Although I had decided, from seminary on, to concentrate in biblical studies, I had all along been deeply engaged with questions about the ways in which religious belief and practice inform ethics. With my fellow Young Turks in Austin I had accepted Marx’s dictum that the important thing was not merely to understand history but to change it. Social change, obviously, was driven by other factors beside ideas, and in time I came to feel that a certain idealist slant foreshortened much contemporary ethical debate, not unlike the narrow focus on ideas against which I had reacted in the history of early Christianity. It was not surprising, then, that my readings in sociology and in cultural anthropology would lead me to explore what I was calling “an ethnography of early Christian morality.” I had made several trial runs on this project in papers and lectures when an invitation to give the Speaker’s Lectures at Oxford in 1990 and 1991 presented the opportunity and challenge to formulate a more systematic description. The lectures became a book in 1993.¹¹

My intellectual trajectory turns out to have been a not-very-smooth curve. It has followed a number of zigzags through the years, trying to respond to all those wretched inconcinnities. Many of my answers turned out to be just as wrong as the ones I was refuting, but that’s to be expected – other generations will have to worry about

those. I still marvel that I have spent this whole career working on such a tiny little document, comprising just a few pages of relatively simple Greek. That, however, has less to do with my deliberate choices than with certain trajectories embedded in the history of western culture.

Notes

136

- 1 For a detailed account of the Aliceville camp and Aliceville's experience with its inmates, see Ruth Beaumont Cook, *Guests Behind Barbed Wire: German POWs in America: A True Story of Hope and Friendship* (Birmingham, Ala.: Crane Hill Publishers, 2007)
- 2 Wayne A. Meeks, *Go from Your Father's House: A College Student's Introduction to the Christian Faith*, The Covenant Life Curriculum (Richmond, VA: CLC Press, 1964).
- 3 See <http://www.institutoicp.org.br/>.
- 4 *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).
- 5 Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).
- 6 Eventually translated as Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. R. W. N. Hoare and J. K. Riches (Oxford: Blackwell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971).
- 7 I have tried to describe the emergence of the History of Religions School in an essay forthcoming in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*.
- 8 The dissertation was published as Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum (Leiden: Brill, 1967).
- 9 My first venture into an interdisciplinary reading of John produced "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 44–72. After that I turned to the much larger pool of data in the letters of the Apostle Paul, yielding eventually *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
- 10 Recently a symposium volume reviewed a quarter-century of scholarship in one of the areas of my interest: *After The First Urban Christians: The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Five Years Later*, ed. Todd D. Still and David G. Horrell (London ; New York: T & T Clark, 2009).
- 11 Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1993).