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The 'died-again Christian' syndrome¹ Its etiology as manifested among fundamentalist students of the Old Testament in South Africa²

*Johnny is the chemist's son but Johnny is no more
What Johnny thought was H^2O was H^+SO^4*

(lyrics from: 'Acid Head' by Tourniquet)

ABSTRACT

Many Old Testament students (and subsequent scholars) come to the subject as eager fundamentalist Christians hoping to one day join the ministry. It is therefore not surprising that an exposure to the findings of biblical criticism and its exposure of the all-too-human, pre-Christian and alien nature of the Hebrew Bible has not infrequently contributes to a crisis of belief and, not uncommonly, a complete loss of faith (be it temporary or permanent). The cognitive dissonance involved in the rethinking of one's childhood faith, the disorientation of having one's consciousness transformed and the doubting engendered by insights that contradict the dogmas of one's own Church traditions can be experienced as a shattering of reality – an inversion of the process of being born-again. This paper aims take a closer look at the etiology of the 'died-again Christian syndrome' as it is manifested among Old Testament students in the contemporary South African context.

A INTRODUCTION

In *Kerkbode* (16 November, 2001:6), the official newspaper of the Dutch Reformed Church, published a letter, part of which reads in translation:

I am a student at one of the Dutch Reformed Church's theological faculties. I am worried about the training those of us preparing for the ministry receive. It feels

1 This article was written as part of a post-doctoral fellowship in the Department Old Testament Studies in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria. It is dedicated to all those who have eaten from the tree of knowledge, realised that they were naked, and now live as best they can east of Eden. Those who know that the only 'sage' you can believe in, is the herb that goes into your cooking pot. Those who can tell you that you will find the meaning of 'life' only in a dictionary.

2 A much more illustrated version of this article was read as a paper entitled '*Old Testament studies as a recipe for losing faith? A social-psychological perspective on the South African scenario*' at the 2005 conference on *The Bible in Africa*, at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal in Pietermaritzburg (the annual OTSSA meeting). It was classified as belonging under the rubric of *South African Issues and Teaching the Old Testament in Africa*. As noted there, *the humour featured in this article is not meant to make light of a serious subject but, paradoxically, to emphasise the very complex and problematic nature of the issues involved.*

like we are being thrown to the lions. It is shocking to have to hear from first year students that a lecturer told them already in their first module of Old Testament studies that Abraham is just a story. I know students who have lost their faith as a result.

In the subsequent edition of the paper (16 December 2001:8), the author of another letter wrote in response:

The letter about theology students who lose their faith was one of the most shocking letters I have ever read in this paper. Since then I have made an effort to speak to other former and current students and was devastated by what some have had to say. At the University of Pretoria a lecturer apparently began his very first lecture to these students by telling them that the stories in Genesis are fiction and did not literally happen.

In the same edition, the author of another letter wanted to know what the Church planned to do with the lecturer and asked:

'... does he really belong in a faculty for the training of future ministers in the Church. Just think about it: if Jonah and the fish is (just) a story, if Abraham's history is also only just a tale, how many more 'stories' might there be?

These abstracts represent but the tip of the iceberg of a debate about the nature of the Bible which, though it has been with us for centuries, has particularly intensified over the past decade in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa with ever-increasing mutual hostility between those one might label 'fundamentalist' and those often referred to as being of a 'liberal' or 'critical' disposition.³ In both Church and public media, within the Dutch Reformed Church and in its Synods, in local congregations and in the three theological faculties involved in the training of ministers, something ominous is brewing. This year alone, renewed and more serious efforts have been launched by students of a fundamentalist disposition at the University of Pretoria to have lecturers indicted for what is alleged to be their denial of the literal historicity of certain events depicted in the Bible. Apparently then, it seems that teaching the Old Testament in the new South Africa has become a dangerous and controversial business, potentially hazardous to the mental

3 It is interesting in this regard that in the official statements of the Dutch Reformed Church during the last decade (and especially following the assemblies of the General Synods in 1998 and 2002) regarding the nature of the Bible, both fundamentalist and liberalist approaches to the text were rejected as extremes. In this regard, the Church appears to have opt for something in between these two opposites yet, among the laity, the entire spectrum of views still survives with a predominate tendency towards the fundamentalist pole. Several books on the nature of the Bible appeared that were written by Dutch Reformed scholars, including those of Deist (1986), Spangenberg (1998), Van der Watt (2000), Nicol (2002), König (2002) and others. The need for renewed formulation came about particularly as a result about the debates concerning the nature and authority of Scripture as these crystallised out of the discussions in the public media around topics like the Historical Jesus, The 'new Reformation', Gay rights, etc. In some way, what is now happening here is similar to the debates in the Anglican Church in Britain during the 60's (Bishop JAT Robinson who in the infamous '*Honest-to-God*' debate also talked about the 'new Reformation' and called for a new understanding of God and Christ as a result of the contributions by Tillich and Bultmann) (Robinson 1963). During the 1980's, there was again heated debate, this time involving the *Sea of Faith* Movement spearheaded by the non-realist philosopher of religion, Don Cupitt, who called for a completely post-modern and naturalist approach to faith (Cupitt 1980, 1984)

health of both students and lecturers alike. Studying the Old Testament, so it seems, has become for some a *recipe for losing faith*.

But why should this be the case? After all, are students not supposed to *grow* in their faith when they learn about the nature and origin of the biblical texts? In a perfect world, yes. In our world, apparently not. And it's not difficult to see why. For we are living in the turbulence of a paradigm shift in South African culture, not only politically and socially but also religiously and intellectually. It should therefore not be too difficult to see why someone who has for his or her entire life known only a fundamentalist view of the Bible, experiences severe cognitive dissonance when intellectuals of the same spiritual and religious tradition seem to be implying that everything learnt thus far, everything that gave joy, security, and consolation, everything taught as capital T-Truth, normative, unquestionable and untouchable – that all this is actually mistaken and based on outdated all-too-human opinions.

In this paper I aim to provide a social-psychological perspective on the typical experience of students from fundamentalist backgrounds as they attempt to reconcile their childhood faith with what they learn in biblical criticism of the Old Testament. The social matrix itself is derived mostly from the scenario at the University of Pretoria among students of the Dutch Reformed Church between 1994, when I was a first year student, and 2004, a decade later (i.e. Old Testament studies in the *New South Africa*). The students concerned are those of 'generation-X' and their lecturers are the first generation of Old Testament scholars in South Africa who are all comfortable with and at home in critical scholarship. Such is the current status quo, notwithstanding the fact that both the students and the professors come from the same fundamentalist background in the Church. As a result, both students who have studied since 1994 in post-Apartheid South Africa and the professors who lectured them will find something familiar in what follows below.

Given the current situation in both the Church and academic contexts, the research of this paper should be relevant for the foreseeable future although the issues merit more elaborate and in-depth inquiry. Whether, however, my findings are representative, and of value in elucidating what is the case at other Universities and among those of other Christian Church backgrounds, I leave for those who are more familiar than me with the particular scenarios to decide.

B THE ETIOLOGY OF THE 'DIED-AGAIN CHRISTIAN SYNDROME'

It is somewhat surprising to find that, though there are many studies of the fundamentalist phenomenon and many on psychological aspects of Old Testament biblical criticism, there is no bulk of research literature in psychology of religion or Old Testament scholarship dealing with the loss of faith among fundamentalist students of biblical criticism. Thus when in 1977, Old Testament scholar James Barr included a section containing psychological perspectives on fundamentalism in his seminal study on the fundamentalist phenomenon, the focus was almost completely on the psychological profiles of fundamentalists-in-action. As such, precious little was said about the psychological dimension involved when those from a fundamentalist background have to deal with incorporating the findings of Old Testament biblical criticism into their cognitive frame of reference. The same scenario is also the case in subsequent related literature (cf. Teeple 1982, Barr 1984, Barton 1988, Hanson & Hanson 1989, Boone 1989, Carroll 1991, Armstrong 2001, et al.)

Of course, one of the reasons for the paucity of research data on losing faith, at least as far as Old Testament scholarship is concerned, may be the fact that 'autobiographical criticism' in biblical scholarship is a very novel post-modern innovation that has only begun to make an impact with the rise of reader-response and ideological critical perspectives, e.g. various forms of liberation theology, feminist criticism, etc. For how many prominent Old Testament theologians

can you name from the modernist era who have made an effort to inform their readers as part of their research of the trials and tribulations of their own journey from Sunday School childlike faith to Faculty-of-Theology critical belief. Not many, for such were taboo in the context of objective depersonalised scientific research. At best such information is restricted to a moment of boldness in the preface of some publications on the nature of the Bible and its interpretation.

As far as the gap in the research in psychology of religion itself – which can be confirmed just by a quick peek at the table of contents or the subject index in any standard textbook on the subject – this may be due to several factors. Prominent psychologists of religion from yesteryear (e.g. James, Freud, Jung, Adler, Erickson, Maslow, Allport, Fromm and others) – despite a few of them even being Old Testament commentators of sorts themselves, and at times touching on issues related to the present concern, were for the most part simply not interested in what concerns us here. None of them published an exhaustive study written for the sole purpose of describing in detail the dynamics and mechanics of the kind of crisis of belief so many students from conservative backgrounds over the course of the past two centuries studying the Old Testament have had to pass through.

Not, of course, that they should have done so to be great scientists. It's just that there's not much from their writings to work with here.⁴ Or from the writings of contemporary psychologists of religion for that matter, since the currently popular concern among most psychologists of religion when it comes to religious doubt⁵ and losing faith in fundamentalism lies primarily with the deconversion experiences of ex-cult members. Mind you, a closer look at the challenges a deprogramming therapy involves and the psychological trauma that ensues is, however, quite revealing of something very analogous to what critical Old Testament scholars are up against when they attempt to help fundamentalist students make sense of biblical criticism.

One article from psychology of religion that was, however, closer to what I had in mind was that of Yao (1987), who discussed what he calls 'the shattered faith syndrome'. The author himself played a pioneering role in founding what is aptly called 'fundamentalists anonymous', a not so secret society based in the United States which, it would seem, has thus far posed no known threat to George W Bush's antics in favour of homeland security – unless of course national intelligence remains true to form. Anyway, it is unfortunate that Yao's study is particularly linked to the context of American fundamentalism and then concerned only with deconversion in the most general sense and therefore only of relative elucidative value in the context of Old Testament studies in South Africa.

As for publications in the field of psychology of religion on the local scene, I have scanned the available literature for potential dialogue partners and after compiling an initial list of what

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- 4 William James's '*Varieties of Religious Experience*' written at the beginning of the twentieth century contains some related material but there is no in-depth consideration and discussion involved (James 1902). Leon Festinger's 1957 publication '*A theory of cognitive dissonance*' mostly tells us why most fundamentalists remain such in spite of the evidence and deals only in passing with the crises of belief. The popular '*Stages of faith*' by James Fowler (1981) is hopelessly idealistic, teleological, ideological and stereotypical in its liberalist evolutionary linear delineation of bourgeoisie age-related growth in personal faith. It trivialises the loss of fundamentalist beliefs as a mere phase in the movement from one stage to another. The same is the case with the role of doubt in the study of Allport (cf. Donahue 1985).
 - 5 Various interesting studies on religious *doubt* have been undertaken (e.g. Thouless, Allport, Batson, et al.). Jung's infamous insistence that he had no patient over 35 whose problem did not have something to do with finding a religious outlook on life, and the references to the struggles of his own pastor father may be included here. These tend to focus on religious doubt in the context of stages in life, e.g. High-School, University, through midlife, etc. but none is exclusively devoted to a descriptive etiological analysis of the experience of doubt in the context of Old Testament studies

appeared to be promising suspects the only progress I made was by narrowing it down to nothing. Eventually, I had to fall back on years of both personal experience with shattered faith (cf. Gericke 2003:487-520), compliments of my addiction to reading anything and everything on the Bible, and on numerous discussions with other students and lecturers and professors who had suffered the same fate or knew the story of someone who did. At last I came up with my own reconstruction of what I have chosen to call, in my own moment of boldness, ‘the died-again Christian syndrome.’ The motivation for this Evangelical/Gospel-of-John type of designation for the condition will become crystal clear as we go along.

1. The ingredients

So how is studying the Old Testament a recipe for losing faith? What is involved in the making of this dish? Linking up with my cooking or baking metaphor, let me begin by discussing the list of ingredients involved in the recipe.

1.1 The first ingredient: A fundamentalist background

Of course, there are many students who have no problem dealing with biblical criticism. Many who were not raised in fundamentalist spirituality will find studying the Bible in a non-fundamentalist manner spiritually interesting, liberating and, yes, sometimes even boring. My concern in this paper is not with these lucky devils but with those poor souls for whom biblical criticism takes the ‘fun’ out of fun-damentalism leaving only the part that sounds something like ‘dementia’.

In this paper I assume as operative James Barr’s understanding of the fundamentalist view of the Bible. According to Barr (1977, 1984), ‘fundamentalism’ is not, as popular belief would have it, a consistently *literal* interpretation of the text but rather the belief that the Bible is *inerrant* in all matters referred and alluded to therein. For fundamentalists can themselves often be found resorting to *non-literal* modes of reading when the literal sense seems factually erroneous (e.g. reinterpreting the ‘days’ as ‘ages’ in Genesis 1). Conversely, my references to a ‘critical’ perspective is simply a way of referring to any non-fundamentalist type of scholarship which does not assume or conclude that the Bible is factually inerrant in every possible sense of the word.

The student at risk of falling prey to the ‘*Died-Again Christian Syndrome*’ is typically one who, apart from believing the Bible to be inerrant, exhibits a background profile that also meets the following criteria:

- The student comes from a religious tradition where the Bible is believed to be the Word of God in the sense described in a plenary verbal theory of inspiration.
- The student views the ideal belief system as one which is ‘biblical’, thus assuming that the Bible is a uniform and coherent body of discourse and that only ‘biblical’ Christians are ‘true’ Christians.
- The student believes that the Bible’s message transcends culture and history and that it is unique, special and quite different from the mythologies and superstitions of pagan cultures. In short, it communicates absolute, eternal, normative, dogmatic, propositional truths.
- The student has internalised everything he or she has learned in Sunday School and has a theological background prior to studying biblical criticism derived mainly from reading and enjoying popular fundamentalist (often evangelical and pietist) devotional religious literature.

As should be apparent here, the majority of students and their lecturers have come from such a background, which was and still is thoroughly fundamentalist. On its own, however, fundamentalism as an ingredient in a recipe for losing faith is not enough to initiate a crisis of

belief. For what is needed to complete the process is some 'anti-matter', or in this case, Old Testament studies.

1.2 The second ingredient: Old Testament studies

In general, if you're a believer then studying the Old Testament is like they say on the *Outsurance* ad: 'you always get *something* out'. However, studying the Old Testament in this day and age is even more like *Forest Gump's* momma's 'life-is-like-a-box-o'-choc'lates: ya never know whatcha gonna get.' And, if you engage in Old Testament studies as a fundamentalist, the endeavour soon becomes something analogous to playing hopscotch in a minefield: any jump in any direction – or, in this case, learning the philosophical implications of various critical approaches to the text – has the potential to amputate your faith (at best) and blow it to kingdom come (at worst). No one whose religious ideological profile corresponds even roughly to the one outlined above can, therefore, on entering a class in Old Testaments studies, be prepared for some of the horrors that will be in store for them there. For, in retrospect, they will come to think that they have been tricked into entering a citadel of chaos, the dungeons of which conceal the curse of eternal damnation. For consider the components of this ingredient in the recipe:

1. From *Old Testament hermeneutics* they will soon learn that their own interpretation of the text during devotional bible reading has been an exercise in dogmatic *eisegesis*. What they thought had been infallible one-on-one guidance from the Holy Spirit turns out to be nothing of the sort and for the first time the domesticated text loses the status of a talisman or fetish.
2. From the *study of ancient Near Eastern culture* they will learn that Israel was not after all so different from their pagan neighbours as they assumed and that the fundamental assumptions and structure of the Israelite faith was at times even derived from those religions the ancients saints so often hypocritically ridiculed.
3. From *historical criticism* they will learn that traditional views about authorship are OUT and that Jesus was wrong to think that Moses wrote the Pentateuch and David the Psalms. Moreover, the critical reconstruction of the history of Israel shows that much of what supposedly happened in the actual past never actually did or at least not in the way the events are described. There never was any literal theophany: YHWH did not really appear and speak to people. Much of what used to be considered salvation history has turned out to be myth and, so the argument goes, if the Old Testament Fall is mythical then so is the New Testament Redemption.
4. From *narrative criticism* they will learn that YHWH is a character in a story-world and his acts and words are literary constructs, created by the narrator in order to promote a particular evaluative point of view. So are all their favourite Old Testament 'saints' who, if they existed as historical persons at all, were probably not as pious or heroic as they appear in the biblical stories for their characters and actions have been reconstructed in the texts to conform to the value system of later theo-political ideology.
5. From *Old Testament theology* they will learn that the text contains many mutually incompatible and, from a modern Christian perspective, unorthodox ideas about God. They soon realise that the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent 'Lord' they have worshipped all their lives is not so 'biblical' after all but an updated and domesticated version of YHWH, the all-too-human ancient tribal deity who, at least in this testament, is himself the cause of much evil and has the Satan as an employee rather than an enemy. Also, unlike the Lord, YHWH knows nothing of heavenly rewards or hellish punishments and the only meaning in life seems to be in resolving oneself to be and beget and be and beget until your one-way ticket to Sheol arrives. Horrifically then, on their own terms, the fundamentalists realise that they have been worshipping an idol of their own making since their theology is not as

‘biblical’ as they were led to believe. And now it seems that it can never be, given the pluralism in the theologies of the Old Testament which imply selection and rejection come what may. Moreover, reading the so-called messianic prophecies and any other Old Testament text in context seem to suggest that even though the New Testament authors can be forgiven for being children of their time with regard to exegetical methodology and hermeneutic assumptions, it still does not make a whit of difference to the fact that the Old Testament texts had nothing at all to say with reference to Jesus of Nazareth.⁶

There is no more time at this point to look at how fundamentalist students conceive of the implications of other critical approaches like tradition criticism, redaction criticism, social-scientific criticism, feminist criticism, deconstructive criticism, etc. – all of which, from the fundamentalist perspective, are immensely unsettling in their own way. This apart from the draining effect an overview of the reception history of particular texts has on the student. Suffice it to say that once you observe how all readers of bygone days have tended to project their own preferences onto the text and then claimed that the texts backed them up you can no longer do it for yourself. It is always amusing to see how people naively recreate the text in their own image until you realise like David did in response to Nathan’s story that ‘*you’re the man!*’

Of course, lecturers seldom if ever bother to spell out these shattering implications and no lecturer ever tried to deliberately shock anyone when I was a student. Moreover, it is a fallacy to think that a lecturer can ever *make* anyone lose faith. For to lose it is an act of *will*, only possible if you are yourself convinced by a particular critical perspective and have made a conscious decision *against* your own previously held convictions. There is always the option of simply rejecting a critical view if it is not to your liking – and this is what most fundamentalists do anyway. But anyone who reads more than just the prescribed materials, which seldom if ever contain anything radical enough to destroy one’s faith, and reads between the lines of international critical scholarship, as opposed to limiting oneself to the reactive devotional and apologetic rhetoric of conservative scholarly literature, the thrust of the anti-fundamentalist implications will become readily apparent.

Of course there are many students who just don’t get it. However, if you’re a fundamentalist, God help you if you ever do! For let’s be crude here – students from fundamentalist backgrounds will, after thinking about the discoveries as outlined above, say to themselves that if what critical scholarship has to say is true, who can believe *anything* anymore? For now theology becomes mythology, salvation history becomes pious fiction, the biblical books the result of pious fraud, the biblical God becomes an ancient Israelite projection, divine commands become all-too-human conventions, the spiritual realm becomes an ideological social construct, the Church a oversized cult, biblically-derived dogmas datable cultural products, and so on *ad nauseam*. The dogmaticians of their own Church, it seems, have practised wayward exegesis even as they said it must not be so.

Also, now the students themselves realise that they are not the graciously elect and had never really been privileged to being privy to the deepest truths of the universe as their Calvinistic

6 This is the gist of the arguments in Brueggemann (1997) whose *Theology of the Old Testament* is the prescribed textbook for the subject. All the old problems facing Old Testament theology as outline by Hasel (1972) resurfaces in Brueggemann who acknowledges them, radicalises them and, in his own self-refuting post-modern way, relativises them. These include, *inter alia*, the problems of history, theological pluralism, the relation between the Testaments, the question of method, the relation to Church theology (dogmatics/systematic theology), etc. Gerstenberger (2002) also takes up the strain.

background had led them to believe. Mortifyingly, they now seem to have been just as superstitious and out of touch with actual and ultimate reality as any myth-saturated pagan barbarian from yesteryear. For in the Christian tradition it has always been taken for granted that the Bible is *the* epistemological source to consult for knowledge of God. It was supposed to be inerrant divine *revelation*. But now it seems to be nothing but the all-too-human words of scribes, priests, and other assorted riff-raff who wouldn't recognise a god if they met one.

2. The result?

Now mix together the first and second ingredients – the fundamentalist mentality on the one hand and Old Testament studies on the other. Place them together in the 'oven' of the mind, turn the dial up to exactly 180 degrees opposite of room temperature and bake the concoction for whatever time it takes until you smell something burning. And then what happens? In the vulgar jargon of today's generation – what you find between 'shish-kebab' and 'shiver' in a typical English dictionary – *that's* what 'happens'! For when someone has spent his or her entire life as a character in the world derived from the Biblical story, has established social relations on the basis of fundamentalist beliefs, has made a public commitment to them, has his or her existential anxiety dulled as a result of it, has meaning in life derived from it and, lest we forget, has a financial and even a career investment riding on the maintenance of it, the prospect of losing and having to reconstruct one's childhood faith is probably not exactly a reason to drool in anticipation and jump for joy.

3. Having your faith and eating it too: popular strategies for survival

Not surprisingly therefore, several strategies for survival have been followed by students from fundamentalist backgrounds in the past (including those who subsequently became ministers or professors) to alleviate some of the cognitive dissonance experienced as a result of the new perspective on the texts:

1. The most popular strategy of survival is to ignore and repress the problem and just try to get through the course with as little in-depth reading as possible so as to obtain the qualification you need to return in the role of a minister to the context of the Church. Here amiable and ignorant company and the passage of time will eventually dull whatever cognitive dissonance was introduced.
2. Another not infrequently encountered way of coping for some involves quitting your studies altogether and retreating back into the socio-religious world of blissful ignorance concerning any challenge the critical study of the Bible might hold for your faith
3. A third option is available to you if you find biblical criticism offensive and cannot conceive of a spirituality inspired by it but still wish to obtain post-graduate qualifications and academic respectability as a platform for propagating fundamentalist beliefs with sophistication. In this case, the strategy is to stay in the game and pretend to take biblical criticism seriously but to remain seeking solace in conservative apologetic scholarship. Consequently those following this strategy can be found chronically polemising and complaining about what they perceive to be the demonic threat of liberal theology.
4. The fourth strategy, also popular but distinctly different from the three fundamentalist options that preceded it, is the one in which you realise that to continue in fundamentalism is to opt for a spiritual lobotomy and committing intellectual suicide. You realise that critical perspectives have a point and so, after a few moments of disorientation and confusion, you experience your exit from fundamentalism as 'liberating' after realising its constrictive nature. Soon you see less and less conflict between faith and reason and have little trouble becoming more critical before attaining a second naiveté and feeling completely at home in a wholly critical approach to the biblical text. People who take this option can typically be

very critical in their approach to the text but this capacity held in conjunction with peace of mind is often made possible because specialisation in biblical studies seldom requires one to think through the philosophical and theological implications of the research.

5. Finally, you might, on the one hand, have in common with the previous group the realisation that to continue in fundamentalism is out of the question as its assumptions and ideas have been thoroughly discredited beyond revival. Yet for you, the liberal or critical option is not particularly inviting since even here there appear to be equally repressive and fallacious types of arguments in favour of what seems simply a more sophisticated and eclectic form of fundamentalism. However, for you the realisation of the bankruptcy of all available religious options is not liberating but – excuse the language – absolutely bloody terrifying. You were happy in your fundamentalism but cannot bear living in self-deception no matter how strong the temptation to repress. Ergo, you become an agnostic or atheist.

But what happens from a physiological (metaphorically speaking) perspective when the recipe is sampled?

4. Eat your heart out: phases of the ‘Died-Again Christian Syndrome’

Given these strategies of survival, evasion, and apostasy, those fated to become victims of the eating process – i.e. the ‘Died-Again Christian Syndrome’ itself – will find themselves on a journey which, in its totality may be seen as typically passing through *three* distinct phases. These are:

1. The tasting, or *constructive phase*: the student constructs the meaning, significance and implications of the critical data for the personal fundamentalist belief system
2. The chewing or *deconstructive phase*: the student deconstructs his reality and spiritual identity by juxtaposing as binary oppositions the now-discredited fundamentalist beliefs with what is implied as viable based on the acceptance of the critical perspective constructed in the first phase.
3. The swallowing or *reconstructive phase*: the student attempts to reconstruct a new personal perspective on religious phenomena and an identity that takes cognisance of what is demanded in the aftermath of phases one and two.

Kindly note that if you make a break for it after the *constructive phase*, as most fundamentalists will want to do, you will avoid, for the most part, running face first into the negative symptoms this damned little dish of destruction has in store for you. If, however, you manage to pass beyond the first phase and enter the *deconstructive phase*, the negative symptoms will start to manifest themselves and the sight will be neither simply pretty nor simply ugly but rather a bit of both, really – in other words: pretty ugly! The paw-paw will strike the fan at the end of the *deconstructive phase* when the kitchen lies in ruins, dinnertime is approaching and there isn’t a crumb in sight. Should you manage to avoid this by immediately moseying ever-so-doggedly onto the *reconstructive phase* to find a new home in liberal or critical theology, the severity of the negative symptoms of the ‘Died-Again Christian Syndrome’ will be unpleasant but not impossibly so. Their duration will also be of a relatively short nature. If, however, no religious option somehow related to the former spirituality is found (i.e. you end up in atheism or agnosticism, after liberalism and radicalism are found to be as problematic as fundamentalism itself) the severity and duration of the negative symptoms of the syndrome can be intensified and prolonged beyond what is humanly possible to endure without being psychologically scarred for life.

5. The feeling of warmth deep down inside and the joys of heartburn: symptoms of the ‘Died-Again Christian Syndrome’

So what does the concoction derived from the recipe for losing faith tastes like? More literally, what is it like for someone from a fundamentalist background to experience the kind of cognitive

dissonance that occurs when one discovers that the Old Testament (and therefore the Bible) is not the kind of book one had always believed it to be? What is it *like* to *lose* faith? What is it like *psychologically* when, as someone once wrote, your God is dead and, come to think of it, you're not feeling so good yourself? Just what *are* these negative symptoms associated with the '*Died-Again Christian Syndrome*'? They are the following and, as suggested, will be manifested variably among individuals in terms of type, duration, frequency, intensity and quantity, depending on which phase of the syndrome one is in and what happens during that particular phase.

1. *Specific psychological symptoms*: Reactive depression, identity confusion, existential anxiety, cognitive dissonance, feelings of sadness, spiritual disorientation, feelings of loneliness, a recurring nostalgia for former certainties, disillusionment, loss of self-confidence and self-respect, a loss of zest for life and former mental vitality, cynicism, feelings of nihilism and the loss of meaning and purpose, indecisiveness, repression, obsessive compulsive negative self-talk, apathy, anger and frustration, entertaining a death wish and thoughts of suicide, self-loathing, endless reconstruction of the self-image, analysis paralysis, a feeling of fear, horror and revulsion at life and reality, etc.
2. *Specific physical and behavioural changes*: Extreme passiveness or hyperactivity, social isolation, anti-social behaviour, restlessness, changes in appetite and possible eating disorders, chronic fatigue, insomnia or narcolepsy, self-destructive behaviour, impulsive and compulsive activity patterns, inability to commit or trust, etc.

These symptoms can, in both theory and practice, last anywhere from a couple of hours to a couple of decades. Their nature merits their unification in the concept of the '*Died-Again Christian Syndrome*' for, as should be apparent, the syndrome basically amounts to and involves an inversion of positive symptoms like joy, meaning, security, warmth, comfort, euphoria and general feelings of happiness and well-being typically associated with the 'born-again' experience. And if you cannot possibly relate to the combination of negative emotions listed above I suggest that you make a point of renting a video or DVD of the films *The Matrix* (part 1) and *The Truman Show* to get only an inkling of an idea of what the feeling is like. In the plot of both these films the main characters eventually stumble across the horrible fact that reality is not what they, all their lives, believed it to be. 'Reality', in fact, turns out to be no more than a technologically simulated social construct. Such a discovery, believe me, is far worse a fate than the lesser evil of finding out that there is a reason why Santa Claus looks suspiciously like 'dad' or that of learning for the first time where meat comes from. For in this case, it's not just the feeling that all the magic has gone – apparently there never was any magic to begin with.

6. Conclusion: recovering from the mess in the kitchen and preparing for the next one: prognosis and preventative measures

The '*Died-Again Christian Syndrome*' can be excruciatingly painful but it need not be terminal. There is, however, no quick and easy recipe to follow for dealing with it since, as far as treatment is concerned, not every form of therapy on the market may be suited to everyone given the uniqueness of individual personality and circumstance. Consequently, treatment is symptomatic and individual and preferably always holistic. Unfortunately, as far as an offensive pro-active approach as opposed to a defensive re-active solution to the problematic is considered, as long as fundamentalist spirituality remains the order of the day in the Church and its popular media, teachers of the Old Testament will always be fighting against the odds and we can prepare ourselves for an epidemic in the years to come.

But when we *do* encounter fundamentalist students in our classes, which is 90% of the people 90% of the time, there are better and worse ways of dealing with the situation. Critical

perspectives, though they should without question be taught, should never be used as a kind of shock treatment for the ripping apart, the belittling or ridiculing of, or the laughing at any student's beliefs about the Bible and what he or she might think counts as inspiring ideas about it. I am not saying that lecturers do this deliberately but sometimes we forget what it was like being a student. Distance lends enchantment – you forget how hard it was. So we must be careful in how we communicate. No matter how naïve, wayward, pathetic, cliché, sugar-coated, misguided or outdated their cherished beliefs may seem to be from our perspectives, you don't mess with people's personal faith. It's 'just not done in Israel'.

So when, due to particular circumstances, one of our student's reality is shattered as paradigms clash, the least we can do is to help them pick up the pieces and let them know that we are there for them. We can also relativise the crisis itself by pointing out that, even though a critical mindset is inextricably part of all scientific endeavours, any particular critical view or theory can be taken with a pinch of salt. For though from the outside and for undergraduates it may look like Old Testament biblical criticism is hardcore science dealing in objectivity and capital-T Truth, 'there ain't no such animal'. Such notions are only appropriate for quiz shows and pocket encyclopaedias. At the forefront of research where all the action is, what counts as fact and truth is nothing but a running debate.

Of course, if it isn't one thing it's another, since our students tend also to be modernists, naïve realists and positivists. Thus appreciating this thoroughly post-modern vision of what goes on in Old Testament scholarship may be unsettling in itself – and, God help us, lead to another horrible syndrome of its own. But it may also help many students to relax and spare them the disillusionment that comes from the equally futile and desperate strategy of trying to find security after fundamentalism by naively put all your faith eggs in the basket of any particular and currently popular critical theory. Also, we should not try to make our students copies of our own selves. Instead, we should allow them to seek out their own identity by providing them with disinterested non-partisan descriptive and evaluative overviews of the contents and pros and cons of all viewpoints on a particular matter, whether conservative or critical. This strategy will not only prove to be a more balanced approach but will lessen the stress also on ourselves when we have to 'please explain' regarding why our own favourite ideas seem from some perspectives to be unorthodox or outdated, as they must.

Finally, those of us who have had the syndrome and lived to talk about it, would do well to show our fellow travellers the highways and byways we and others have followed to cope with the cognitive dissonance that shatters the reality of everyone afflicted with the horrors of the '*Died-Again Christian Syndrome*'. We should show them that we too can and have cried and are not and will never be 'big boys' with 'hard facts'. Come to think about it, establishing a local chapter of 'fundamentalists anonymous' may not be a bad idea. It may make the difference between our students dealing with the condition or becoming individuals who, if they do not retreat back into fundamentalism out of sheer nostalgia for consolation, will probably be scarred for life and end up contemplating ending their own. Nobody deserves such a fate. Nobody. For no one's system is immune to the recipe for losing faith, which, in its current format, has more than once become a recipe for disaster.

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