Leadership University *Reprint*

Reprinted from First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life • December 1991• Number 18

Books in Review

Chapter and Verse: A Skeptic Revisits Christianity

The Reluctant Skeptic

Chapter and Verse: A Skeptic Revisits Christianity. By Mike Bryan. *Random House. 324 pp. $22.*

Reviewed by Phillip E. Johnson

Mike Bryan is an atheist, raised a Methodist, who wanted to write a book about "Christians who actually believe the Bible versus all the other kinds." So he spent time in residence at Criswell College in Dallas, an institution dedicated to producing crusaders for the cause of biblical inerrancy.

Bryan has provided an absorbing account of what he found there and how it affected him. The book is of particular interest because so many professors in the secular universities are talking about the pressure to be "politically correct" on subjects such as feminism and affirmative action. How does the situation compare in a fundamentalist college that is dedicated by definition to furthering a dogma?

It compares very favorably, according to Mike Bryan. In the secular universities things are up for grabs, with the result that everyone is engaged in a power struggle. At Criswell the basic premise is settled: professors and students alike wouldn't be there if they didn't accept it. As a result, professors feel free to expand their students' intellectual horizons by teaching them to understand competing premises sympathetically. Here is a typical description of what Bryan saw and heard in the classroom:

The theology was fascinating, the classes fun, the students were real people. . . . And where was the lockstep indoctrination I had feared from a Bible college? I sought for it in vain. Everyone was a conservative Christian, but much of what I heard from [the Criswell professors] was assorted challenges to students, to the point of riling them up. Speaking to captive audiences that agreed with their own beliefs, the professors constantly challenged those beliefs by calling attention to opposing views and requiring students to know them and understand them. "Liberal" was one of the first words that came to mind as a description of the atmosphere in Criswell College classes.

The Old Testament course Bryan remembered taking at Columbia was very different. There students were *not* encouraged to consider seriously any alternatives to the professor's naturalistic philosophy, or to the "inerrant" theory that the Pentateuch was patched together from documents of different centuries.

Sometimes the prayer warriors in the Criswell student body get a little impatient with the mind–stretching. In the manner of budding practitioners in a law school who want to learn how to attract clients and win cases, they ask "Do we really need all this?" Like a law professor telling students that they may one day be Supreme Court Justices, President Paige Patterson replies that Criswell graduates are meant to be generals in the Lord's army, not privates, and as such they have to understand the adversary's thinking. Patterson himself is a general on the conservative side of the Southern Baptist denomination's notorious internal war, and Bryan's portrayal of his easygoing ways will astonish anyone familiar only with the media stereotype of the participants in that conflict.

Bryan was favorably impressed not only with the intellectual atmosphere at Criswell, but with the personal integrity and generosity of the faculty and students. They were nothing like the television gangsters that have been such a gift (Godsend?) to the skeptical media. Near the end of the book, Bryan examines his own mixed feelings after Paige Paterson has genially introduced him at an alumni banquet as the school's guest atheist. Bryan is confident that Patterson's "unfailing kindness" is not merely the calculated cordiality that anyone might show to a visitor who is known to be writing a book about the experience. No, Patterson's "generous and undoctrinaire attitude, shared by almost everyone else at the school," is "another mark of his irrepressible mischievousness and genuine interest in all folks and their diverse ways–a mark of his personality, not his faith."

But why are these personal virtues so pervasive at Criswell College, if they are not marks of the faith? Bryan describes the atmosphere of "unadorned, joyful piety of the place," and quotes Patterson to explain where it comes from:

One of the things that happens to you in conversion is that there's a fundamental change in your attitude toward people when the Lord moves into your life. You don't any longer see them as the girl who sells you the hamburger or the guy who changes your tires. You see each of them as very precious people, each of whom has a fascinating personal story. You get to where it's fun to be with them, see what makes them tick.

If Mike Bryan likes the people at Criswell so much, why doesn't he answer the altar call and spread the kind of joy that accompanies the finding of a lost sheep? The question is starkly presented because Bryan is under no illusions about the nihilistic world he presently inhabits. His metaphor for that world is the Mark Rothko Chapel, a shrine of the religious left on the campus of St. Thomas College in Houston. The chapel is supposed to be like a big tree that offers shade to everyone, and the lobby table holds all the sacred texts: the Bible, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Bhagavad Gita, and so on.

Bryan sees the chapel as "the perfect embodiment of the godless world, the array of God–seeking texts on display notwithstanding, or even proving the point: belief in everything, belief in nothing." Visitors upon seeing the famous religious paintings look puzzled, or disappointed, but never joyous. "Where is the hospitable shade? Where was it for Rothko? The painter committed suicide before his pictures were hung."

Bryan understands that intellectual nihilism reflects an underlying spiritual despair. "There must be some connection between the disbelief on the part of most artists today in any kind of organizing principle for the universe (God), and their refusal to employ readily grasped organizing principles in their work. There must also be a connection between artists' disdain for those 'classes' that still believe in God and their delight in confronting those rubes with offensive images, such as the photograph of a cross dipped in a jar of urine."

The author swears that he remains a child of the 1960s, with no leanings to neoconservative politics. "Nevertheless, we would all agree that this culture is nearly overwhelmed by all the bullshit and bad faith, by the literally spellbinding vacuity, top to bottom, left to right." That much disenchantment with the culture produced by the death of God invites the big question: why does someone who knows he's lost in the desert turn away from an oasis that offers living water?

Criswell students tell Bryan that the stumbling block is pride, and he admits that he is afraid of looking like a fool. "Secularism is the easy road today. Telling friends with Ph.D.'s you've become a born–again Christian takes nerve." The irony is that those friends are undoubtedly relativists about everything except a few pet ideas like the death of God. Yet Bryan can't help thinking that these inconsistent relativists must be absolutely right. Why?

His problem isn't just with the fundamentalists' inerrancy doctrine, or their regretful insistence that unbelievers go to hell. Bryan has some attractive alternatives. He experiences an "epiphany of sorts" in a Catholic church in El Salvador, where the liberationist sculpture reflects an understanding of human suffering more suited to the spirit of our times than the Baptist emphasis upon personal sin. Why not, then, join the Catholic Church, which has many mansions?

Bryan also has an important conversation with the pastor of the Methodist church of his childhood, now retired. Bryan is unimpressed by the kind of vacuous liberal theology that C. S. Lewis called Christianity–and–water, but Don Pevey's liberalism inspires respect because it grows out of personal experiences with which Bryan can identify. "I would like to have spent hours with this man whose Christianity doesn't claim to be definitive, much less exclusive, who simply finds in the faith and communicates very effectively to anyone who cares to hear one deep and beautiful mystery: God incarnate determined to save his children from themselves." Why not become that kind of Methodist?

The answer has to be that the deep and beautiful mystery is, regrettably, a fairy tale. Bryan explains the ultimate stumbling block early in the book, in his discussion of liberal theology's campaign to "demythologize" Christianity. The attempt had to be made because we live in a technological age where "Science, not Scripture, is now inerrant." For a time, reason and revelation lived comfortably together in the two–level system of Aquinas, but a crisis arose when reason (Galileo, Hume, Darwin) began to cast doubt on what Scripture had revealed. As Bryan sums up the situation:

The advances in scientific knowledge of the past four centuries have undercut the textual integrity of the Scriptures as a whole, but perhaps more damaging is the nature of the scientific enterprise itself, which postulates anti–supernaturalism as a necessary first principle for its endeavors. Thus the initially peaceful coexistence of reason and faith has become, in the secular mind, an irreconcilable contradiction. Faith is now opposed to reason–opinion, to put the best light on it, or ignorance, to put the worst. The Reformation thinkers had said all along that splitting reason from revelation would be fatal because it would give man an independent role and thus separate him from an objective, inerrant source for knowledge–Holy Scripture. They were correct.

But modern man substituted science as another source of inerrant knowledge, and Bryan cannot shake off the influence of that choice. He is impressed by C. S. Lewis' argument that, although the Christian theistic point of view can comprehend science, art, and morality, "the scientific point of view cannot fit in any of these things, not even science itself." (That is because to reductionist science our minds are merely machines selected for their efficiency in producing offspring.) Bryan followed a similar line of reasoning but with different premises. "While Lewis and [Francis] Schaeffer presupposed our sense of meaning and purpose, I decided that I must therefore be a machine because nothing but a machine could evolve from a machinelike, purposeless process."

There are liberal theologians who embrace scientific naturalism but still think of themselves as Christians: in fact, they dominate the mainline seminaries. Bryan recognizes that these accommodationists have discarded the only metaphysical basis that can support a mystery of God incarnate determined to save his children from themselves, and so their Christianity survives only as a metaphor. That is why the Christians he respects are the genuine, unapologetic supernaturalists, but he thinks that option is foreclosed to one who has drunk deeply of the water of naturalism, death–giving though he may know it to be.

Chapter and Verse is generous in spirit but tough in mind, and the people it describes are a joy to meet. I hope Mike Bryan will visit another important subculture and write a book about the experience. This time I wish he would forego religion and inhabit the world of the scientists. He might take a good look at evolutionary biology, or at the dogmatically reductionist world of the biochemists who hope to redesign humanity after they crack the human genome code. Do these people understand, as the Criswell faculty does, that all thinking rests upon presuppositions, which by definition are not derived from logical argument or evidence? Do the biologists know the difference between what they presuppose and what they demonstrate, and are they even interested in finding out?

As Socrates used to say, you can't be too careful when it comes to scrutinizing the teachers into whose care you are committing your soul. Mike Bryan should look into it, and then write another book. He can put me down for one of the first copies.

Phillip E. Johnson is a Professor in the School of Law at the University of California, Berkeley. His most recent contribution to *Fisrt Things* was "Presbyterians for GLARF" (August/September).