

3 *Can Smart People Believe in God?*

Years ago, I was proctoring an exam at the school where I teach here in New York City. I only had three or four girls in that large room, so there was no possibility of any of them cheating. So, I sat on top of my desk and someone had left a Bible there. I started reading the Bible, peering up every couple of minutes, making sure out of the corner of my eye that they were behaving. It was an uneventful exam, but when I got to the end of it, the girls almost threw their papers at me and ran out the door! I was left wondering, “What on earth is going on here?”

I walked down to the math office a little worried, this being my first year at the school. The students were talking to my boss, the math department chair. They were whispering but walked out of the room when I arrived. I strode up to the department chair and said, “What was that all about?” She responded with a smile, “Well, they came up to me, ‘Dr. Peeler, Dr. Peeler! Do you know what Mr. White was doing during our math exam?’” And Dr. Peeler said, “No, what was he doing during your math exam?” “Mr.

White was reading the Bible!” And Dr. Peeler said, “So?” And the students said, “Can you imagine anyone intelligent reading the Bible?” Dr. Peeler sat back in her chair and said, “Girls, I read the Bible all the time.”

Now this happened at a Catholic school! What is it like in a secular school? I am talking about what the girls actually get as a message from the culture, certainly not from the school where I teach. At my school, we talk about God all the time, but our culture and especially academic culture, disparages the idea of intelligent people believing in God. In fact, in the modern university, Christianity is often singled out as an impediment to the advancement of scientific knowledge. Students who hold on to a personal faith in God are criticized in their college classrooms. And I am not saying this *in theory*, I am talking about facts. I have been involved for 30 years in Bible studies at Yale, Columbia, and for a few years at Princeton. I have known many students who have been called on the carpet publicly for their beliefs by their professors.

Last year, Dr. Ernst Mayr, professor emeritus of zoology at Harvard, told *The New York Times* the story of a colleague at the University of California. The professor in California gave his class a questionnaire at the beginning of a course on evolutionary biology. These were the questions: “Do you believe in God? Do you believe in the Christian God?” (It did not say the Buddhist God, or the Hindu God. It

said, “Do you believe in the Christian God?”) “Do you read the Bible? Do you believe every word in it, literally?” Every student in that course had to fill out that questionnaire. But the professor said that what surprised him was that, at the end of the course when he gave out that same questionnaire again, the vast majority of those who had said “Yes” to the questions at the beginning of the course said “Yes” at the end of the course, they still believed in God. And Ernst Mayr went on to criticize not the dogmatism of the professor, but of the students who held onto their personal faith in God!¹

On the other hand, two dear friends of mine from Yale, who are now married and working in inner city medicine in Chicago, were in their Introductory Biology course together with about a hundred and fifty other students. The professor asked the class, “How many people here believe that God created man?” Just a few hands went up, five or six including my two friends. Now I can guarantee that in classrooms at Yale or Columbia many more than 5 or 6 out of a hundred and fifty believe that there is a God, but they are intimidated from saying so. Yet the professor turned it around and said to the class, “I have to admit that it takes as much faith to believe in evolution as it does to believe that God created man.” That was an honest professor!²