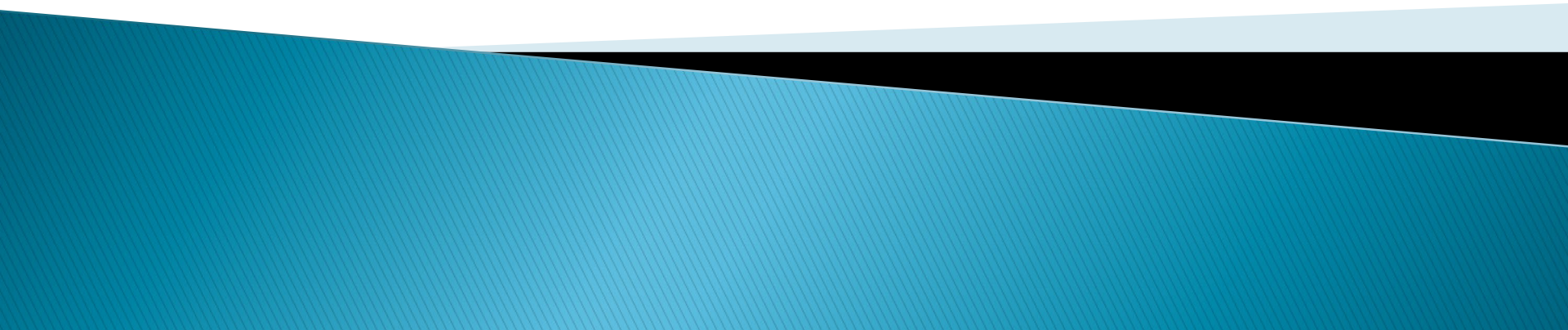# How PhD Students are Seduced by their Education

Dr. Greg Pritchard

Alvin Plantinga

"Consider a Christian college student from Grand Rapids, Michigan, say, … who decides philosophy is the subject for her…
Naturally enough, she will go to graduate school to learn how to become a philosopher… There she learns how philosophy is presently practiced.

Alvin Plantinga

And it is natural…for her to work on them in the way she was taught to,

- *thinking about them in the light of the assumptions made by her mentors and*
- *in terms of currently accepted ideas as to what a philosopher should start from or take for granted,*
- *what requires argument and defense, and*
- *what a satisfying philosophical explanation or a proper resolution to a philosophical question is like."*

"She will be uneasy about departing widely from these topics and assumptions, feeling instinctively that any such departures are at best marginally respectable. Philosophy is a social enterprise; and our standards and assumptions – the parameters within which we practice our craft – are set by our mentors and by the great contemporary centers of philosophy."

A Social Enterprise

Academia is a social enterprise. What Plantinga described in philosophy could be said of history, or Biblical studies, or theology, or science or cultural studies.

As academics,

◦ we learn,
◦ we are mentored and trained, and
◦ we think and write

in social communities of our mentors, peers and students.

How does this happen?

- How does the "social enterprise" of academia actually influence and affect us?

- Let's consider a sociological perspective of how the Ph.D. educational process influences a typical evangelical student, "Edward Evangelical".

Socialization

▸ The sociological term that describes Edward's Ph.D. education is Socialization.

▸ During socialization, a child,
  ◦ learns a language,
  ◦ acquires a morality of virtues and vices,
  ◦ learns how to relate to others
  ◦ And is given a sense of identify.

1) Pluralism and Privatization

- Universities are institutions of learning and knowledge in our pluralistic societies. They are, in fact, mini-pluralistic-societies in themselves.
  - Exposure to pluralism increases Edward's questions and doubts concerning his evangelical beliefs
  - A pluralistic society increases privatization
- How do Edward's mentors and peers (a mini pluralistic knowledge society) treat his religious belief?
- There is an unspoken conviction around Edward asserting that whatever you privately believe should remain just that -- private.

2) Academic Social Structure and Roles

- The sociology of knowledge seeks to understand the processes by which any body of knowledge comes to be socially established as "reality."

- *"It is the sum total of 'what everyone knows' about a social world, an assemblage of maxims, morals, proverbial nuggets of wisdom, values and beliefs, myths, and so forth."* – Peter Berger

- When we enter the graduate world we are submitting to others' expertise as guides and mentors.

  ◦ Everyone in Edward's department "knows" what a legitimate research topic or method looks like.

  ◦ In sociological terms, these social realities of Edward's mentors and peers are called "plausibility structures."

3) Academic Relationships and Conversation

- A Ph.D. student like Edward, like a child, enters into a world of social expectations and a powerful intellectual framework.

- The academic system is built on the assumption that a Ph.D. student is seeking to adjust his beliefs, behavior and practices to his mentor's… And we are.

This secondary socialization is a relational and conversational process

- Few individuals who begin a Ph.D. do not need the corrective feedback and criticism that are part of a Ph.D. program.

- Such intellectual mentors are the significant others who are in charge of Edward's socialization. Their definition of reality is asserted as objective reality.
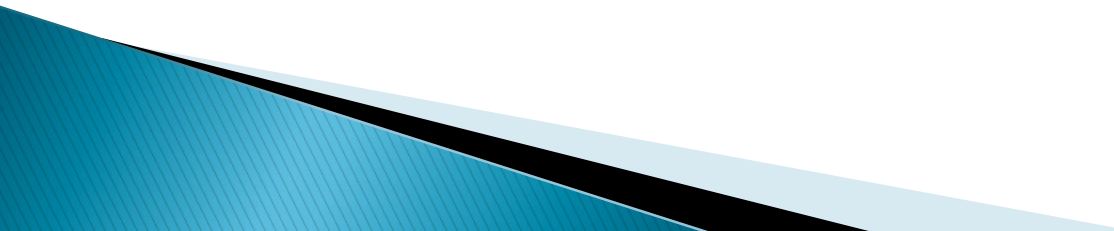
4) Academic Conformity and Social Control

Edward is not self conscious of:

- ◦ How his education naturally creates doubt-producing questions,
- ◦ How his academic training is forcing his theological beliefs into a privatized sphere entirely separate from his discipline,
- ◦ How the influence of the social structure of his discipline creates plausibility for the beliefs of his mentors,
- ◦ That mentors are advocating and teaching out of a common symbolic universe, or
- ◦ How social plausibility structures which make up the academic symbolic universe make his faith appear less plausible.

This socialization process is a seduction

- A seduction is a slow and subtle process that is not conscious on the part of the seduced.

- *Why is this secondary socialization of a Ph.D. education so subtly powerful?*
  - There is a historical gravity and weight to roles and structures of the university. "Everyone knows" how the Ph.D. process is supposed to function.
  - Because individuals like Edward who are enrolled in a Ph.D. program *want* to become successful members of the academy.
  - We want to fit in. We want to receive the status of accepted members of the Ph.D. club.

- The social consensus of the group is powerful and seeks conformity to the standards, roles and expectation of the group.

5) Academic Reality Maintenance

- Any evangelical doing his/her Ph.D. at a leading western university is a cognitive minority.

- *Many young evangelicals are often swept off their feet by the questions and agenda of their intellectual community.*

- A typical Ph.D. student like Edward is totally unprepared for the onslaught of arguments, assumptions or the rooted social structure of his discipline's symbolic universe.

Nihilation

▸ Sociological theory describes this process of deconstruction or destabilizing someone's worldview as "nihilation."

▸ The word that is commonly used to describe this disorienting experience of a lack of meaning in one's life is *anomie*. Sociologist Berger defines anomie as *"a condition of rootlessness, disorientation, of no longer feeling at home in the world."*

6) The Academy's Symbolic Universe and Relativity

▸ The form of this relativism is less important than the sociological pressure to question one's most basic beliefs.

▸ Many evangelical Ph.D. students during their studies begin to feel that the foundations of their faith are crumbling.

Academic Cynicism

- The academic tendency and temptation is the reverse: an academic is seduced by the siren call of a prideful superiority and sarcasm.

- A Ph.D. education tends to lead someone toward an agnostic and cynical perspective.

Agnosticism's Myth of Neutrality

- Agnosticism has questionable intellectual credibility, but great plausibility.

- Edward may feel that since no one has absolutely provable answers, the best solution is to not decide.

How to respond to the Academy's Sociological Seduction

▸ *A cognitive dissonance* grows between Edward's private religious beliefs and his professional academic world and its beliefs.

▸ The word "doubt" has as its root meaning the idea of being in two minds about a particular belief.

▸ Eventually there has to be some sort of resolution to this ongoing tension.

A) Cognitive Conversion: Conversion to the Academy's Agnostic Symbolic Universe

- If Edward conforms to his social setting, there is ultimately a rupture as he gives up his theological convictions and takes a faith leap toward an agnostic position.

- There are several primary factors involved in someone converting from evangelicalism to agnosticism.
  - *Intellectual insights*
  - *Status and Respect*
  - *Methodological Agnosticism*
  - *Moral Compromise*
  - *Plausibility Structures of the Academic World*

B) Cognitive Surrender: Liberal Christianity

- The second option available to any young evangelical Ph.D. student is to move in a theologically liberal direction.
- Peter Berger writes that *"one simply accepts the fact that the majority is right, then adapts oneself to that point of view."*
  - *"Theological liberalism whose crucial concern was cognitive adjustment of Christianity to the (actual or alleged) world view of modernity and one of whose major results was the progressive dismantling of the supernaturalist scaffolding of the Christian tradition."*

C) Cognitive Retreat: Separating Faith from Reason

- Privatizing Faith and Academic work into two separate and non-conflicting spheres
  - There is no danger of conflict or accusation from his mentors and peers if Edward's faith is a private set of beliefs which do not affect or apply to his work.

- Fideism – Faith separated from Reason
  - A fideist, Plantinga writes, is one who *"urges reliance on faith rather than reason, in matters philosophical and religious"* and who *"may go on to disparage and denigrate reason."*

D) Cognitive Independence: Confident Orthodoxy

- Honesty about the issues

- Need for honesty about apologetic questions

- Recognition that the academic world is dominated by Intellectual fads

- Evangelical academics should have more independence and self-confidence

- Confidence that the Gospel is "Word of Truth"