

LS — Week 3 Response

Ansell's essay on the Fall was very stimulating. His deconstruction of the traditional reading of the serpent's role reminded of the observation made by Dmitri's lawyer on his alleged murder in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "There is an overwhelming chain of evidence, and at the same time not one fact that will stand criticism, if it is examined separately." We all know the serpent is Satan; but where exactly does it say that again? We all know this independently evil force tempted our ancestors to destruction; but when precisely did it tell them to eat the fruit? We all know Eve was deceived by the serpent; but is her attempt to shift the blame actually any better than Adam's? And so forth. I thought it was well done, even though it did gloss over some things (e.g., minimizing the cursing of the serpent), and even if I'm unsure of his main theological conclusion, that humans are the one and only original source of evil in creation. I also find merit in contrary arguments that the serpent's subtle insinuation and sowing of doubt is characteristic of a masterful "father of lies".

One minor aspect he didn't mention is one I noticed when reading it in Hebrew the first time: at the end of chapter 2, Adam and Eve are called 'naked', '*arum*'. In the very next verse — obscured by the chapter division introduced later — the word for 'wise' used of the serpent is a homophone, '*arum*'. An implied connection between nakedness/innocence and wisdom, or even simply a link between one creature and another (hence on equal footing, not to be listened to instead of the creator), could be an interesting one and consonant with Ansell's argument.¹

I kept waiting for the quote at the end of the essay, where Jesus tells us to be "as wise as serpents, and as innocent as doves". At my school staff give devotions in turn and for a while I've been preparing one on that verse for similar reasons to Ansell's: it's not the serpent's craftiness that's the problem; it's the lack of innocence. We're invited, even commanded, to be crafty — regardless of translation, crafty in whatever way serpents or *the* serpent was crafty — as long as we keep it in check with innocence.

The devotion connects to teaching in terms of raising hard questions, perhaps even dangerous questions. Ansell says the serpent was doing just this, "exploring" why God told them not to eat the fruit when he was "cut short" (p. 44). This defence might be generous to the serpent, but I think it's a good description of one way we can serve students' curiosity and intellect.

On one end of the spectrum, the end that's less frightening to our fairly conservative base, is what I think of as "trolling" students: forcing them to be uncomfortable with and challenge their assumptions. A favourite example is a large map of the world I hang in my room from when I taught geography. It's oriented such that south is at the top. Students invariably ask, "Why is your map upside down?" I reply, "It's not upside down. Look at the text. If it turn it the other way around you won't be able to read what it says!" They reply, "You know what I mean! Why is the world shown the wrong way up?" I keep pushing: "What do you mean, the wrong way up? I don't understand." "Well, north is supposed to be on top!" "Which side is the top in space...?" After confusion, delight almost always follows as they realize the social construct of north = up.

¹ I mentioned this to a Bible scholar friend and he said commentators sometimes relate the nakedness to the lack of knowledge (of good and evil). He added: "Some kabbalistic commentaries connect nakedness to spirituality: clothes as a metaphor for the body, 'the garments of skin', *kotnot 'or*, which is another wordplay between 'skin', 'leather', 'light'." This latter is reference to the near-homophony of '*or*' 'light' (frequent in Genesis 1) and '*or*' 'skin'.

And that opens the door to a discussion of norms born in the northern hemisphere, and how we subtly scientize our perspective and make it seem objective. This is perhaps similar to the serpent's intended role in a "very good" creation.

On the other end of the spectrum are the questions that sometimes make parents anxious and alienate students. I taught Grade 12 English last semester and one of the main themes in our version of the course is mythology. The big question of the first unit is: What is my mythology and how does it shape my life? In order to gain some tools for answering it, we have to understand that our faith does function like a myth; we consider Job as poetry, we compare Genesis and the Babylonian creation stories, we wonder at the justice in Oedipus, and we look at the overlap with other myths. It just happens to be, as Tolkien said, a true myth. But never mind that Tolkien and C.S. Lewis (and others who were contemporary with the peak of structuralism), being heroes of the faith, freely talk about Christianity this way — it still scares students from more dogmatic backgrounds and, perhaps more dangerously, entices students who are open to questioning their faith in the first place. Two students refused to engage in the conversation at all in any assignment and only wrote variations of "My faith is not a myth. It's God's truth." I knew that I could expect some low "Teacher demonstrates faith" scores on the final course surveys. Another very bright and fair-minded student confessed on the exam that he was still wrestling with whether he should consider his faith in the light of mythology. This is the kind of inquiry that, if we get "cut short" or misunderstood or present too many temptations, makes us risk becoming the next serpent prompting students to question what God really said.

But I think it's essential to raise these questions. First of all, if we don't, we fail to develop our students' critical thinking. Second, we ourselves might think we have all the answers. One piece of media we add in that unit is *L'enfant sauvage*, Truffaut's film about Victor d'Aveyron and his semi-integration into civilized life, compared with the innocence and freedom he knew in the wild. We talk about all the ways in which the structures of such a life forces us into unnatural behaviour, robs us of independent thinking, and so on, and I invite them to consider school in this light. Why on Earth are you here, twenty-five of you sitting in rows indoors during the best working part of the day, hearing me ramble on about things you strongly believe you don't need to know to be happy in life? Even though this question undermines my own authority and all the motivation I'm trying to carefully build in the course, I have to ask it to be authentic, to avoid getting a big head, and to plant any possibility of change for a better system in the future.

P.S. This response is already much too long, but I also enjoyed Mullins' article and its practical advice for reading well. It reminds me of what David I. Smith says about reading for enjoyment vs. reading for answers in *On Christian Teaching*, which is well worth reading.