

What book has influenced your college career most, and why?

On the sunny first mid-August day of my college career, I was quietly relieved to be venturing out, not exactly on my own, but at least out of the domain of my parents. I was especially relieved to be liberated from the overbearing Catholicism of my father. His religion is a prism through which he views all things. Coupled with a tendency to be a bit obstinate on both our parts, living at home was, at times, fraught. As a skeptical and somewhat bitter ex-Catholic, my thoughts on religion and religious devotees lay somewhere between a scoff and a sneer. The absolute totality of my father's religious paradigm left no room to be a halfway committed, Easter and Christmas believer, so my secularism became dogmatic, as well. Forced to pick a side, I enthusiastically subscribed to the cosmological and biological scientific theories that challenged biblical ontology and, in history class, I eagerly cached away all of the instances of intrigue, genocide, and sexual abuse in the Church's history that validated my budding secularism. I quickly developed a deep discomfort with organized religion, believing such groups existed to exploit peons with promises of a fictional paradisiacal afterlife for the benefit of willingly nefarious higher echelons, at least to some extent.

So, during my freshman year, when the opportunity arose to write a research paper on Guibert de Nogent, a 12th century French monk who exposed extensive ecclesiastical corruption in his autobiography, I jumped at the chance. I believed he would validate my views on the Church and reinforce my personal monologue as a newly liberated secularist. To my surprise, Guibert's autobiography, *Monodies*, challenged my preconceptions of secular exceptionalism, my belief in the absolute superiority of my own paradigm. It's not that I failed to find plenty of outrageous frauds and crimes committed by the Church in his accounts. I did. However, I also found surprising similarities between Guibert's and my own experiences as young students that interrupted my self-righteous stupor; instead of establishing a clear, vindicating contrast between my secular identity and his religiosity, I found myself relating to Guibert—the exact opposite of what I had set out to do. In his memoirs, I saw the same self-directed learning that serves as a cornerstone of my identity, a mission for personal understanding of “Truth.” By forcing me to question the exceptionalism I attributed to my own secular rationalism, parallels in our educations led me to reconsider my offhand contempt for religious devotees and their organizations. In this way, Guibert's monodies have not only broadened my horizons, but they have also profoundly impacted my relationship with my father.

Guibert and I traced similar trajectories in our early studies; faced with spectacularly incompetent instruction, we struck out on our own quests for understanding. Reading Guibert's accounts of surmounting those hurdles to buckle down on studying Latin, works of classical prose, and theology brought back memories, at the time very fresh, of what I viewed as my crowning intellectual achievement—Advanced Placement Chemistry. In *Monodies*, Guibert complains extensively about the incompetence and negligence of his unqualified Latin tutor. Guibert writes on the tutor,

But everyone's hopes came crashing down—he was completely ignorant of prose and verse composition... You will find nothing more difficult than teaching what you do not know—it will be obscure to the speaker, and more obscure to the listener; they might as well be talking to a stone.¹

Although I was not, as a student of AP Chemistry, subject to the regular beatings that Guibert endured at the hands of his tutor, I was subject to the incredible apathy of my instructor, Mr. J. We once took an exam that he had accidentally copied the key onto. On the days he chose to lecture, he simply read off the textbook's slides—verbatim. Over the course of the year, we completed only one lab activity; it was a “choose your own adventure” experience where Mr. J laid out half of the chemistry stockroom (including a bottle of thermite) on our desks and left us alone in the classroom to experiment without guidance or, for that matter, supervision.

My instructor's incompetence, although frustrating and—at times—disappointing, stirred in me a bitter desire to succeed, a sentiment I encountered in Guibert's memoirs. I found the adversity I encountered exhilarating because it enabled me to take full credit for my achievements and, in the absence of a viable alternative, it instilled an urgency to truly understand the material for myself. Guibert felt similarly invested in his self-made education. While under the rough tutelage of his incompetent tutor, Guibert's mother implored him to give up his studies for his own wellbeing and, instead, pursue a career as a knight. He objected violently to the idea, “I replied, ‘Even if I were to die from it first, I will not stop studying Latin, or trying to be a cleric!’... I absorbed Latin, poorly taught though it was, all the more rapidly...”² Reading those comments in *Monodies*, just half a year after completing that chemistry course, I felt as if I was seeing my own words on the page. At this point, reading *Monodies* felt more like commiserating with a kindred soul over the challenges we had faced and, in his words, the “overexertion”³ we had endured. However different our philosophies, Guibert and I experienced parallel challenges and motivations in our studies. This personal connection threw my secular exceptionalism off balance. It was similar approaches to scholarship, however, that threw it out the window.

Needless to say, I learned chemistry by reading from the textbook. I spent a lot of time with that book. I recall, in particular, the calm sense of virtuous purpose I experienced while copying out of my chemistry textbook under a full moon. It was euphoric moments of this type that made what was otherwise a very ascetic endeavor worthwhile. Young Guibert also revered his texts and spent hours hunched over them, absorbing new knowledge, fitting it in with last week's lesson, and rationalizing through his own questions. The process of independent study nurtured in both of us a habit of thinking that emphasizes the connections between ideas over the memorization of facts. Guibert recalls to this effect, I now began to thirst for what good teachers had once instilled in me: to apply myself to commentary on scripture, to pore over the writings of Gregory more than anywhere else, the place to find the keys to this practice—and to grasp the meaning

¹ Guibert of Nogent, McAlhany, Joseph, and Jay Rubenstein. *Monodies and On the Relics of Saints*, 15-16.

² Ibid, 18.

³ Ibid, 15.

of the words of the prophets or the gospel, following the methods of earlier authors, in their allegorical, moral, and also anagogic senses.⁴

In his teenage years, Guibert wielded the same extremely active and analytical intellect that I prided myself in and, moreover, thought set myself apart from the religious ranks. I have always been resistant to rote memorization of formulas and rules in science and math; to me, the derivation of a technique is as important to providing a satisfying answer as understanding how to employ it. Similarly for Guibert, who emphasizes the importance of “grasping the meaning” and “following the methods,” it was not enough to parrot facts and teachings. My meditations on why the effect of entropy on Gibb’s free energy is proportional to temperature likely mirrored thoughts by Guibert on scripture reconciling spiritual purity with sexuality, a topic of great concern to him. Guibert and I both developed our world views through active and critical study of “capital T” Truth as presented, quite persuasively, by written authority. The self-made education and critical approach to scholarship that Guibert and I shared forced me to realize that maybe we aren’t that different—and that secularism doesn’t hold an exceptional monopoly on rational thought.

By helping me to understand and, more importantly, empathize with his point of view, Guibert strengthened my relationship with my father. I came out as gay to my father last summer over the phone. His second question, after “are you sure?”, was whether I would mind if he discussed the matter with his bible study group. The conversation continued for a few minutes, and then I was left—breathless—trying to make sense of what had just happened. Why, of all things, did he want so very much to bring me up in bible study? Was my sexuality so troublesome that he needed the group’s support to bear it? Although I was touched by the kindness he had shown me, I was alienated by the intrusion of Church into that moment. To me, it seemed like yet another instance of meddling by that tentacle-armed behemoth that I disdained so strongly, and that I had tried to understand by reading Guibert.

It wasn’t until a month later, when he was treating my boyfriend—who, poor guy, was a total deer in the headlights at this point—and I to a in-depth discussion of the stances of various contemporary bishops on homosexuality that I began to put the pieces together; I realized that like myself, I could see my father reflected in Guibert. Like both Guibert and myself, my father leads an active and inquisitive search for “Truth;” their searches just happen to take place through spiritual and allegorical lenses and in the context of the Church. My father’s scholarship in the realm of Catholicism is undeniable: he frequently cites tidbits from a staggering array of sources—opinion pieces in the parish newspaper, scripture, posts in blogs run by bishops around the world, and more. What I was seeing wasn’t a rejection of my identity, a retreat into the comforts of his faith, but an effort to fit me into his paradigm and, doubtlessly, to adjust his Catholic paradigm to fit me. Framed in light of *Monodies*, my father’s religious monologues began to feel loving instead of alienating. It is the least that I can do to return the favor and continue trying to reconcile him with my secular views to better understand and care for him, a goal towards which my chance introduction to Guibert proved a good first step.

⁴ Ibid, 55.