



**Michael
Hirsley**
Religion writer

Scholars gather to toast a legend

Once upon a time, there was a newspaper religion writer who was bombarded by letters, notes, calls and other expressions from those who knew the Truth.

Actually, it was just last week. One claimant's inerrant religion was another's cult of falsehood. One's "interesting document" was another's "lost gospel." One prophesied an imminent end of the world, while another insisted the end is nowhere in sight. Everyone cited Scripture.

Comforted by similar selective uses of Scriptures, others offered the Absolute Truth about when life begins, when and what kind of sexual expression is acceptable, and a host of other virtues and sins. A few claimed to speak for, or to actually be, the Messiah.

Discomfited by all the pious truths, the religion writer muttered to no one in particular, "What part of absolute don't you understand?"

He quickly realized that such an unsympathetic reaction was symptomatic of a larger disease: He had spring fever.

And, as in springtimes past, it was time to visit his favorite theologian.

Franz Bibfeldt has been elusive over the years. But it's a good bet you can catch up with the storied theologian if you just hang around the University of Chicago Divinity School awhile in the first few weeks of spring.

The religion writer parked his car at one of the many "who-knows-if-it's illegal?" curbs on campus, and followed a line of students cutting across a lawn. Near his feet, he noticed a small yellow diamond-shaped sign that read "Holy Martyrs Crossing Only." He gave it due respect as more erudite, but no more effective, than "Keep Off the Grass."

Entering Swift Hall, he checked the religion-related announcements and circulars. There was no immediate sign of Bibfeldt. But clues soon emerged.

A motley line of men and women, young and old, was being hustled into a dining hall, apparently in hopes of not attracting too much attention. But before the door could be shut, out wafted the aroma of sausage and kraut, the unmistakable scent of Sage-Hast bei Groszenknetten, Oldenburg, Niedersachsen, Germany ... the birthplace of Bibfeldt!

The religion writer slipped inside before the assemblage shut itself off from the outside world. And no sooner was he settled at one of the wooden tables decorated with quart bottles of beer than the luncheon speaker's words reassured him that his quest was realized:

Chicago Tribune
16 April 1993

"... Bibfeldt was conceived in the back seat of an old Volkswagen on Feb. 2 after a Candlemas Party in which his father, Friedrich, and his mother, Brunhilda, had apparently thrown all caution, along with their fin-de-siecle prophylactics, to the winds. ..."

As is customary in Bibfeldt lectures, the theologian's early years and initial scholarship were recounted at length while dozens of devotees noshed and imbibed, priming their bodies and minds for this ritual update, known as Bibfeldtian Bullsgeschichte.

Appropriately chosen for this spring's lecture on "The Politically Correct Fundamentalism of Franz Bibfeldt," was R. Scott Appleby, co-director of the Fundamentalism Project at the University of Chicago. Appleby was fresh from making a bunch of TV appearances, including "Nightline," to discuss religious fundamentalism.

He and co-director Martin Marty, professor of modern Christian history at the U. of C., are editing the Project's series of books on religious fundamentalism. Their scholarly subject has become current news, entwined with headlines from Eastern Europe to New York City.

Appleby reminded luncheon guests that timing is everything while fame, particularly media infatuation, is fleeting. What better example, he noted, than Bibfeldt.

Suffering from a rare condition known as calendar-impairment, Bibfeldt habitually wrote about trends, new ideas and other "scholarstuck" observations a year or so after they had been documented elsewhere.

When Bibfeldt chose to slow down more than a decade ago, Appleby said, "references to 'the late Franz Bibfeldt' began to appear in the previously favorable smut press" and his whereabouts became "shrouded less in a veil of secrecy than in a fog of apathy about his comings and goings."

But Appleby and Marty have picked up Bibfeldt's trail and found it remarkably similar, albeit several years behind, their own: Bibfeldt aspires to become an expert on global fundamentalism.

He has been hampered but undaunted in this endeavor, Appleby said, by his lifelong commitment to "a sliding scale of inerrancy" and to "dance to the tune that is played;" and by his admission that "he didn't know a Shiite from a Levite, a Rig-Veda from a Chevy Vega, the Koran from the Koresh. ..."

What sort of man is this revered theologian? Well, put it this way: Reports of Bibfeldt's death are no more exaggerated than those of his existence.

He's a figment of the imaginations of a couple of seminarians who created him 46 years ago as a hoax. One of them was Marty, and he's kept Bibfeldt alive in legend and lectures ever since, to poke fun at both academe and theology. This year, the challenge was accepted by Appleby, perhaps with the knowledge that he's leaving for the University of Notre Dame next year.

Absolute Truth may set you free, but it doesn't always turn you loose.