

Christian Insecurity: A Case Study

In [his latest fit of insecurity](#), Paul Manata again expresses his dislike for me. Instead of tackling criticisms of apologetic treatments that I have posted on my site, Paul aims for the author of those criticisms himself, hoping to discredit me by means of personal attack. Indeed, if one takes Paul's word for it (apparently this is what he expects of his readers), I come across as someone who's really bad, all apparently because I don't believe in Paul's invisible magic beings. Like an adult who explains the truth about Santa Claus to a child, an atheist can be the ultimate of spoilsports.

Ever one to exaggerate his own reactionary angst well beyond the limits of the credible, Paul makes it clear that he's sore at me. For instance, he tells us that

atheologians like Bethrick do not really care about truth. If their side makes a mistake we do not see them lambasting their side.

Notice the us-against-them presupposition here, the tendency to view our differences in terms of rival groups populated by unspecified numbers. This is symptomatic of the religious mind's preoccupation with dividing men into two opposing collectives, the chosen vs. the damned. Paul of course numbers himself among the chosen, and yours truly among the damned. (Perhaps if Paul Manata were god, I'd already be in hell.) The mentality of the desert primitive is indeed alive and well in the 21st century. Apparently Paul thinks that atheists are like Christians - members of a sheeplike herd who are led about by seductive, self-appointed apostles who pretend to be spokesmen for the supernatural. But this is simply unexamined projection. Paul apparently does not appreciate the fact that many atheists think of themselves as *individuals*, not as members of a "team" looking to score petty points in some inconsequential contest. ("Christianity: 1, John Loftus: 0.") In my case, I have no obligation to support, encourage, correct, or ridicule someone else simply because he does not believe in invisible magic beings. Meanwhile, someone should explain to Paul that non-believers tend not to pretend to have access to invisible omniscient and infallible beings which pre-chew their thoughts for them; I've tried, but he won't hear it from me. The religious mind fears error for this indicates separation from their perfect deity, a blemish unbecoming the chosen status believers want to claim for themselves. Meanwhile, the man who is free of the bondage of religious insecurity, is happy to learn from mistakes - both his own as well as those occasioned by others.

As for my blog, I make its purpose quite clear in the headstock banner, which states:

In this blog, I will post my criticisms of presuppositionalism as it is informed and defended by apologists such as Greg Bahnsen, John Frame, Cornelius Van Til, Richard Pratt, and their latter-day followers.

This should be clear enough to inform Paul that the purpose of my blog is not for "lambasting" other non-believers, since non-believers typically do not promote presuppositionalism. (An expert at logic that should be able to figure this much out on his own.) This of course does not in any way support the would-be conclusion that I therefore affirm everything that other non-believers hold to be true. My time is quite limited, so I have to choose my focus carefully. Other non-believers are free to consider my model, or ignore it. The choice is theirs, and the choice is mine as well.

Paul writes:

When it comes to Christianity we see them claim that they are on the side of reason and truth. They defend "reason." But constantly, we see atheists refusing to lay down their own strict rules on fellow atheists (or, unbelievers).

What does Paul "see" which serves as evidence suggesting that "atheists [are] refusing" to do anything? Does he not understand that I presume no authority over others such that I should "lay down... strict rules on fellow atheists"? Certainly he cannot point to any position that I have affirmed which pretends otherwise. I'm quite live and let live about things: adult atheists are free to govern themselves according to their own chosen yardsticks, and I acknowledge their right to do so. Apparently Paul finds this unsatisfying for some reason. Perhaps he wants me to divert my light away from presuppositionalism and onto something else. What else could "account for" his complaining?

So Paul needs to do more than merely assert things like

Atheists, like Bethrick, are about the group first, reason next.

What "group" is he talking about? In fact, I've been invited on numerous occasions to join other blogs. To date, I have politely declined this invitation (though I am free to reconsider this), primarily due to limitations on my time and the areas of my writings' focus. Furthermore, unlike Christians who prefer the safety of the affirming huddle and network of support ministries, I do not go out looking for other non-believers to "hang out" with. In fact, I rarely discuss my atheism with casual acquaintances. My experience is that the very thought of atheism very much disturbs many people; I have found that the concept of atheism tends to bring a lot of people's insecurities out into the open (especially in the case of lifelong believers), and as adults who suckle on imaginative stories of miracle-workers and fortune-tellers, many are visibly ashamed of their religious confession. Again, I prefer a live and let live approach in this regard, as mystics are an unpredictable and potentially violent bunch (many would love to be able to cast people like me into an eternal hell).

With all the vices and moral failings Paul attributes to me, it's quite extraordinary that the worst he can come up with is a charge like the following:

Bethrick did not blog on how poor Derek did.

Perhaps he is personally offended that I didn't take much notice of his debate with Derek (Paul makes it clear that Derek must have been mortally wounded by an apologetic prowess that I have yet to see). Does Paul really think that I have some obligation to "blog on how poor [sic] Derek did"? To hold it against me that I have not done so, it appears that Paul does in fact think this, but he does not give very clear reasons why. We get a glimpse of Paul's "logic" behind this assumption when he writes:

Bethrick blogs on how poor he thinks Bahnsen did (Bahnsen v. Stein)

Here Paul is apparently referring to my article [Bahnsen's Poof](#), in which I present an analysis of Greg Bahnsen's opening statement - the statement he should have been most prepared to present - in his [debate with Gordon Stein](#). (Incidentally, my conclusion that Bahnsen presents no actual argument for the existence of his god, remains unanswered to this day.) Does Paul suppose that my blog commenting on a statement made in one public debate, somehow obligates me to post another blog commenting on statements made in another debate? It's not clear, but it appears that this is what's turning round in Paul's mind. Well, there are a lot of debates out there, so Paul can wait patiently in line if he likes. It would help, however, if there were a written transcript of his debate with Derek; that way I could review it on my daily commute on the subway. In fact, while Bahnsen debated Stein in 1985, I did not write Bahnsen's Poof until 2004. So apparently Paul not only expects me to produce an analysis of his debate with Derek, he expects me to do it on his timeline. With so many expectations, is it any wonder why Paul is so dissatisfied?

Now Paul may complain that I have not posted a blog critiquing Gordon Stein's performance in his debate with Bahnsen. But again, such a complaint would miss the stated purpose of my blog. Why would I devote a blog to harping on Gordon Stein's mistakes when he's not a champion of Christian apologetics? Blank out.

Of course, there are things I can say about Stein, and two shall suffice for the time being. The first point is that a debate over the existence of the non-existent is typically a fruitless use of time for rational human beings; when a rational individual encounters someone who holds to belief in invisible magic beings on the basis of faith, the proper response is to be happy he's not one who is so deluded, not assume that such an individual is interested in rational discourse.

The other point I'd make about Stein's performance in his debate with Bahnsen is to point out that Stein said all he needed to in his response to Bahnsen's question at this point in [the debate](#):

Dr. Bahnsen

Okay Dr. Stein, you mentioned eleven basic proofs for the existence of God. Did you mention the transcendental proof for the existence of god?

Dr. Stein

No, I didn't mention it by name. I think it is not a proof. I would not call it a proof as I understand it the way you said it.

Here Stein rightly points out that the so-called "transcendental proof for the existence of god" is in fact "not a proof

” after all. Indeed, as [as my analysis of Bahnsen's opening statement](#) demonstrates, it is in fact “not a proof,” but a *poof*. Apologists today seem not to have grasped the difference between the two, for they are continually presenting variations of the latter while calling them the former.

Paul then writes:

I constantly see this religious attitude in the allegedly non-religious. "Get as many people to deny God first; truth, whatever that is, takes the hindmost" seems to be the motto of many of them.

Here Paul shows his proclivity to insert words into other people's mouths (which, we will see below, he does again later in his blog). But can he find any statement affirmed by me which suggests that I am trying to "get... people to deny God"? Such a construal indicates deep misunderstanding of my position, for I do not encourage people to deny something that does not exist. (Why would one need to do this?) As I mentioned above, I'm quite easy-going when it comes to other people; what they might believe or disbelieve really does not matter to me. They are free to examine my verdicts and the cases I present in their defense, or ignore them. Again, the choice is theirs. If they want to invest themselves in fantasies about supernatural beings, I will not stop them.

Paul then links to his blog [More on Moore](#) which in turn posts a link to [a posting of his on Triablogue](#). He asserts that Dr. Zachary Moore made some unpardonable blunder of logic, and after exposing this error those most loathsome of spoilsports - the atheists - "refused to tell him that he was wrong." (My, what gall they have!) Paul then says

Some, like Bethrick, implied that he didn't know who was right.

I checked the comments sections of both these blogs, and did not see where I had posted any comments myself. At any rate, Paul does not quote me saying what he says I have implied, nor does he link to where I might have implied this. But in spite of this undocumented accusation (as if reserving judgment were some grave vice), Paul announces:

This just shows how serious he (and his ilk) should be taken.

Apparently I'm not to be taken seriously - at least, no more than writing an entire series of blog articles with the ambition of smearing me.

Continuing to air his own dirty laundry (apparently his frustrations have been accumulating for several months now), Paul turns his attention to a question that I posed in response to assertions that he made in his blog titled (no, I'm not making this up) [Your Post Stunk When The Christian You Tried to Debunk With Your Awful Junk](#) - a title which, as an incomplete sentence, leaves the reader wondering where its author finishes his point. In this blog, Paul responds to questions posed to Christians on [another blog](#).

One of these questions has to do with the myth of Cain and Abel, and apparently the question gets some little detail of the myth wrong by placing the two legendary figures in "the Garden" at some point. (Were Paul a little more careful in his ambitions to rival Oxford scholars, he might have made it clear that I was not the author of the questions he sought to tackle.) Such oversights are simply an open invitation to the "aren't you stupid!" scoldings of Mighty Manata. In his response to this question, Paul asserts that

Cain was afraid that the other people who lived on the planet would kill him.

When I read this, it appeared that he knew something that I had not read in my version of Genesis, so I asked him if he could indicate how many people were allegedly on earth at the time in question, and if he knew any of their names. In other words, I was looking for him to authenticate the statement he was attributing to the Genesis myth. He says that the point of my question "eludes" him, but he did manage to eke out an answer nonetheless, stating that

there were approximately 890 of them,

but that he could not name them all, adding that

some are: Bob, Nick, Dan, Pete, Frank, Eddie, and Arnold.

Naturally, Paul did not give any sources to authenticate this response. Apparently Paul's faith is so insecure that minor questions, such as I had asked him, make him bristle, and so he found it necessary to berate his questioner (namely me) by inserting words into his mouth. Paul writes:

The only way it can be charitably read in a way other than making Dawson look like a stooge is to read it as

Bethrick offering a rhetorical question with the implied conclusion: "If you don't know their names and how many there were, how do you know there were any? Since the Bible doesn't say there were others, then there were no others." This is the best way to read Bethrick. We see, though, that the best way to read Bethrick is to read him as committing the fallacy of *argumentum ad ignorantium*!

In Paul's narrow universe the options are always few and torn between miserable alternatives: either Dawson makes himself "look like a stooge" merely by posing a question (that'll teach me to go to Paul for answers!), or Paul can make Dawson "look like a stooge" by attributing to him an argument he never made. For nowhere do I make the argument that, if Paul does not know the names or how many people there were at the time, then there couldn't have been any people on the earth besides Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel. (I do realize that the imagination needed by the religious mind is free to invent details not revealed to it from above.) Nonetheless, Paul tells his readers that "this is the best way to read Bethrick" - that is, by attributing to me obviously weak arguments that I have never made in the first place. And though he nowhere presents a conclusive case to support his accusation that I have committed any fallacy here, Paul tells his readers that "the best way to read Bethrick" is to presuppose that I am "committing the fallacy of *argumentum ad ignorantium*." And Paul says people like me "do not really care about truth."

Continuing to complain about my comments, Paul writes:

I had pointed out that the purpose of the Bible was not to give an answer (or a detailed and precise answer) to everything there is. For example, the Bible doesn't tell us how to change a flat tire. Bethrick said, "I agree, the Bible doesn't give us knowledge of anything."

What I had actually written was:

I agree that it would be naive to expect anything approaching useful or precise knowledge from the primitive writings collected in the bible.

Paul himself seems to agree that the bible does not serve as a source for knowledge on "many, many things" - for he writes:

There are many, many things the Bible gives us knowledge on.

In response to this, I asked:

Such as how the mind forms abstractions?

But I have not seen where Paul answered this question.

Paul then writes:

His [sic] tried to imply that he was agreeing with me but I pointed out that I never said the Bible doesn't give us knowledge of anything

But nowhere did I indicate that I was agreeing with Paul. I even pointed out to him that "I did not specify that I agree *with you*." So how does Paul now think that I was expressing agreement with him? Does the universe truly revolve around this man, Paul Manata?

Paul then made my point for me, writing:

I pointed out to Bethrick that it gives us knowledge on how to escape the wrath to come.

As I had stated, we "would be naive to expect anything approaching *useful* or precise knowledge from the primitive writings collected in the bible." As evidence, I pointed out to Paul the laborious confusion in the bible on the issue of salvation. Apparently Paul, like so many Christians, is in the habit of presuming that the books of the New Testament are wholly uniform with one another, and yet this is the very point that's been brought into question. But instead of recognizing the pervasive disharmony within the New Testament, apologists prefer to gloss over this, merrily swallowing the party line and uncritically accepting what their shepherders order them to believe. As a mild introductory piece, I pointed Paul to B. Steven Matthies' [Christian Salvation?](#) I had suggested to Paul that, "if it worries you, perhaps you can devote a blog entry to sorting out the mess." Apparently it did worry him, because Paul sat down and picked through Matthies' article.

Paul writes:

Bethrick claims he was a Christian, but if he agrees with Matthies article then one must wonder if he ever was a believer. Maybe he was in the youth group of some touchy-feely church and now just uses his past childhood (leaving out the details) to give him some credibility when talking about Christianity. One thing is clear, though, as a believer he never studied his faith.

Yes, it is true that at one time I was a Christian, and no, this is not something I'm at all proud of. Quite the opposite in fact, it is painfully embarrassing. I look back on that time in my life and shudder at what I had allowed to happen to me. But now that I have recovered from the experience, I can appreciate how deep the delusion of Christian god-belief can run. It does not surprise me when believers want to deny a non-believer's past sojourn as a Christian, but the ways in which they try to convince themselves that Christianity's critics were never themselves "real Christians," are typically not as inventive as their doctrinal teachings. Nevertheless, I don't think that someone needs to have been a Christian in order to have credibility on the topic of Christianity, any more than I would think that a psychologist trained in counseling those diagnosed with suicidal tendencies needs to have committed suicide himself.

Paul also writes:

We hardly ever find a Christian, who was intellectually satisfied, becoming an atheist. Indeed, in most cases (actually, all) the reason people leave the faith is for moral reasons (i.e., cheating on their wife), not intellectual ones. The intellectual ones always come after, as a way to justify their moral rebellion.

Indeed, someone who is "intellectually satisfied" with Christianity, has in fact sold short his cognitive potential. And it is most telling that Paul segregates the moral from the intellectual here, as he does in fact do so openly, treating morality as if it were not intellectual. On the contrary, morality requires a mature and confident intellect, one which requires the conscious choice to be honest to oneself, whereas religion implores the believer to "deny himself" (cf. Mt. 16:24). One cannot be honest to himself, and deny himself, at the same time. And just as Paul openly divorces the moral from the intellectual, so Christianity divides a mind against itself. I realize that Paul resents atheists, not only because he feels threatened by them, but also because he worries that one day he too will renounce his faith. Only then will it be possible to embrace reason.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by *Bahnsen Burner* at [7:30 PM](#)

4 Comments:

[Simon](#) said...

Good post. But I think all those wise words may be wasted on the believer.

I've been trying to explain that atheism is not a philosophy. They will not have it.

You have to remember, it's like believers have been sold a car which they're told goes faster than any other.

Part of their delusion is that they're going faster in their special car than the rest.

In other words, they are better/happier than us.

That was the promise. If it's false, they wasted their money.

[May 03, 2006 4:53 AM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

I can't speak for Paul Manata, obviously, but I do think you pointed out a very important bit at the end:

"I realize that Paul resents atheists, not only because he feels threatened by them, but also because he worries that one day he too will renounce his faith."

I think this terrifies Christians, though most would not admit it. How can I say this? It used to terrify me when I was

a believer! I never was 100% invested in the entire idea...even though it had been pounded into my head since a young age. And so I sought to read apologetics to answer the tough questions that atheists and non-believers posed. And eventually those questions opened my eyes. I was afraid that it would happen...and it did.

[May 03, 2006 3:06 PM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

Hmm, it sounds like this whole blogsite is filled with insecurities. Typical.

[May 03, 2006 10:51 PM](#)

[mathyoo](#) said...

I can't imagine the cognitive dissonance required to believe that there's any insecurity in any of Dawson's posts. Quite the contrary, his writing is always filled quiet confidence. Frank's comment is just another typical ad hominen attack in the hopes of discrediting Dawson, which is the best he and Manata seem to be capable of.

[May 06, 2006 6:01 AM](#)