Common Ground Part 7: Consequences of Division

This is the final post in my series addressing questions about 'common ground' from the perspective of a rational (and therefore non-theistic) worldview. The original questions were:

1. What do believers and unbelievers, if they share anything at all, have in common?

2. How is this common ground to be evaluated?

3. What is shared/unshared metaphysically?

4. What is shared/unshared epistemologically?

5. What is shared/unshared ethically?

6. In what ways can believers and unbelievers cooperate with one another intellectually/socially/politically?

7. **What consequences do those matters that divide Christian and non-Christian have for how Christians are to do philosophy?**

In this post I will give my reaction to the seventh and final question. The previous questions have already been answered here: first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth.

Question 7: What consequences do those matters that divide Christian and non-Christian have for how Christians are to do philosophy?

Answer: It's never been clear to me what people mean when they say "do philosophy." So since my response to this question will largely follow from my own interpretation of what is being asked in it, my answer might not fully satisfy the questioner. But that's okay by me. My answer then will assume that by "do philosophy" the questioner means explore, develop and exchange ideas of philosophical import for the goal of broadening one's own understanding of the world and the workings of his own mind.

One of the consequences of being a Christian is being on the wrong side of truth, reason and reality. As for "doing philosophy," what contribution could a Christian make to this field of inquiry? The believer could have nothing of his own to contribute to philosophy, for this would smack of "autonomous reasoning." Whatever is "not of God" is "of the devil," and given the lack of any sure way to tell which is which, one way or another, a conscientious believer will simply be tormented by any issue or topic he encounters. To the extent that a Christian supposes he is contributing to the field of philosophy, he could very well be venturing out on his own, spiritually speaking, and stranding himself in a wilderness of self-worship. This will not bother those believers who are less than conscientious, especially if they are so deluded that they have acquired the habit of confusing themselves with the god they claim to worship. But we should never lose sight of the teaching that the Christian is commanded to "deny himself" (Mt. 16:24), while having one's *own* say about things could hardly be in compliance with this commandment.

Meanwhile, a non-Christian, who is not under such commandments, can develop his own conceptions without worrying about such commandments. Moreover, he can show how his conceptions can be applied to living his life. On the other hand, the Christian does not apply Christian "principles" in *living* his life; rather, he applies them in *ending* his life. As a bumper sticker I recently saw puts it: "Jesus: Don't leave earth without him." But for those of us who are not leaving earth, such advice is as useless as it is ridiculous.

One consequence of being on the wrong side of truth, reason and reality, is (and this is not restricted only to Christians) the resistance to make one's fundamentals explicit. This is a common ailment throughout Christian apologetic literature, which means that criticizing apologetic writings requires a good degree of philosophical detection. Positions are often stated only in a roundabout, shrouded manner, as if the author realizes that taking a stand would make his position too vulnerable. An unclear position is easier to defend than one held in plain sight. Defenses of mysticism always need to be flexible enough to argue two sides of a contradiction. So implicit, circuitous routes are preferred over coming out and simply declaring one's primaries. This is why apologists in

debate prefer to overwhelm their opponents with a barrage of questions rather than assemble actual arguments establishing a position or refuting another. A strong sense of context is almost never achieved in much apologetic literature because the defender of the faith needs to keep the reader on a wild goose chase. Topics are abandoned almost as quickly as they are raised, and the reader typically does not get a very good understanding of where the apologist is trying to go or what his position on any topic may finally be.

All thinkers, Christians included (to the extent that they think at all), need to recognize that, just as they face a fundamental metaphysical alternative: to live or die, they also face a fundamental epistemological alternative: to think, or to evade thinking. To "believe" a set of claims while renouncing your right to judge the truth value of those claims (cf. "analogical reasoning") is an example of double evasion. It evades the facts that truth is contextual in nature and that reality does not conform itself to what a man accepts in place of truth. It evades the fact that knowledge is not acquired by merely assenting to what one is *expected* to accept on the basis of fears and threats. Instead it is acquired by means of an objective process which begins with the evidence of the senses and develops in accordance with conceptual hierarchy, for conceptual hierarchy is the essence of logical structure. Christians who truly intend to build trusting and cooperative relationships with non-believers, for example, should take a close look at what their worldview teaches as opposed to what we can learn about reality through our own faculties. So it should be clear that all human beings, whether or not they believe in some "higher power," share many basic things in common, and the implications of those things do not bode well for any form of mysticism, including Christianity.

The Christian worldview grants metaphysical primacy to consciousness. This is certainly one of the chief issues which divide Christians from non-believers like myself, who recognize the metaphysical primacy of existence. The consequences of their metaphysical commitment are that they contradict themselves on a daily basis, they cannot cooperate with others unless they at least performatively abandon their worldview's teachings, and they cripple themselves conceptually by divorcing what they call "knowledge" from the reality in which they actually exist. Most importantly, they incapacitate their potential to live an *honest life*, which cannot be compensated by belief in invisible magic beings, no matter how desperately one wishes to believe they are real.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: Common Ground

posted by Bahnsen Burner at 5:00 AM