

Monday, May 02, 2005

## Difficulty Keeping the Party Line Straight

I remember some years ago when an apologist used the expression "Christian epistemology," I was completely baffled. I knew what epistemology is, but what could possibly be meant by the term "*Christian* epistemology"? I thought it was self-evident to anyone who understood the basic project of epistemology, that such a notion as "Christian epistemology" was oxymoronic. Epistemology has to do, not only with the nature of knowledge of reality, but also with the means by which we discover and validate that knowledge. In reading the New Testament, however, the primary concern is about *belief* (specifically belief in things that are not observed in nature), not about *knowledge* and the way it is acquired and confirmed. Thereafter believers tend to confuse the two by ignoring their essential distinctions.

It is hard to see how the so-called "knowledge" that the bible claims for its believers could be characterized as anything other than *automatic*, even *magical* in nature. Some modern believers even go so far as to claim that this "knowledge" is *rational* in nature (a claim that even the bible doesn't make for itself!), but it's not hard to see that this could not be the case. Knowledge that is rational is knowledge that is acquired and validated on the basis of *reason*, not on the basis of "revelations" which are allegedly transmitted into a person's mind from a magical source.

Quite unlike rational individuals, the believer can supposedly "just know" his religious "truths," such as that there is a god, that this god is the god of the bible, that everything he reads in the bible is true, that this god sent a son to live as a man on the earth, and that this son died so that the believer can go to heaven. The believer is also supposed to "just know" that this god is an all-good, omniscient, omnipotent and perfect creator of the universe and everything within it, including the believer himself, but he is also supposed to "just know" that this same perfect creator created the believer imperfect and "totally depraved" (even though he is said to have been created in this perfect god's "image"). On top of all this, he is supposed to "just know" that this imperfection and depravity are the creature's fault, not the perfect creator's. And though all these claims are completely arbitrary, having no basis in reality, we are told not only that they are incontestable truths, but also that all our knowledge necessarily *presupposes* their alleged truth. This latter assertion has been popularized in recent times with the development and spread of presuppositional apologetics, a defense of Christian theism that attempts to hijack philosophical issues and recast them as if they could "make sense" *only* on the basis of Christian premises.

The prevailing tendency throughout the bible is that the reader is expected to believe whatever is written in its pages on its say so. When biblical authors do get around to devoting some attention - however superficial - to epistemological issues, it is only in the interest of wiping out any identifiable means by which religious "truths" are to be discovered and validated. This is typically accomplished by vaguely indicating only what the preferred means of knowledge is *not* (it's not whatever method the non-believer uses), and by diverting attention to the antithesis that the believer is supposed to assume toward the world of non-believers around him. The apostle Paul, for instance, in the opening chapters of his first epistle to the Corinthian church that he helped establish and nurture, makes it clear that the faith he was spreading was antagonistic to the epistemological methodology of those who were not initiated in the Christian faith. Referring to non-Christian epistemological norms of knowledge collectively as "the wisdom of the world" (I Cor. 1:20) and "the wisdom of men" (I Cor. 2:5), the apostle made it very difficult for modern believers, who unwittingly enjoy the benefits of the rational philosophy of non-believers on a daily basis, to distinguish between reason as such on the one hand, and what the apostle was trying to denounce on the other. If reason is not "the wisdom of the world," what is? If the apostle was not denouncing reason, what specifically was he denouncing? In his book *Always Ready*, Christian apologist Greg Bahnsen carries on the apostle's tradition of denouncing the man's means of knowledge, referring vaguely to it as "the thought patterns of worldly wisdom" (cf. pp. 16, 19, et al.). If the expression "the thought patterns of worldly wisdom" is intended to refer to something other than *reason*, why isn't more care taken to make this clear? Why leave such crucial matters so imprecise?

It is Christianity's inherent antagonism to *reason* that prompted Bahnsen's unwitting moment of candor when he admitted that "Christians are often befuddled about 'reason', not knowing whether it is something to embrace or to eschew." (Ibid., p. 113.) Such confusion is to be expected when, on the one hand, man cannot live in the universe without reason, while on the other hand he is told that it is virtuous to denounce and reject reason, just as the apostle Paul does in his letter to the Corinthian church.

So if "knowledge" is not to be acquired and confirmed by means of reason, what process enables the believer to "know" what he claims to "know"? To state the obvious, there is no clear and uniform answer to these questions. Theologians and apologists appeal to numerous cryptic channels through which magic knowledge is supernaturally transmitted into their minds, and this magic knowledge is

said to be incontestable and fundamental to any and all other knowledge. They make claim to vague and indefinite notions such as "grace," the "guidance" of the "Holy Spirit," "the image of God," the "sensus divinitatus" - any form of "just knowing" that will enable them to bluff their way through the moment. Notice that they do not appeal to *reason* when speaking about the "knowledge" they claim to have about an allegedly "higher reality" to which we're supposed to believe they have access. Apparently we're supposed to accept their claim to such knowledge on their say so (just as they did in the case of the bible's claims), for they give precious little else for us to go by. The apostle Paul, for instance, claimed that believers have what he called "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). And since Christ is supposed to be infallible, it must be hard for those who want to believe that they are endowed with such a mind to resist the temptation to suppose that their own thoughts are therefore likewise infallible. When we don't believe what they say, we're dismissed either as fools, or as too stupid to understand.

Presuppositionalist apologists like to draw a distinction between what they call "general revelation" and "special revelation." The former is used to refer to

God's revelation of His person, glory, and attributes to all men in all ages through nature, conscience, and history, so that they are without excuse for not worshipping Him correctly and leading righteous lives; unlike special revelation, it is not verbal in character or redemptive in content. (Greg Bahnsen, *By This Standard*, p. 355.)

Notice that Bahnsen specifies *only* what this "revelation" is *not* - "it is not verbal in character." This tells us nothing about how this "revelation" is made known, or *how it can be confirmed*. Perhaps these issues were not a concern for Bahnsen. This "knowledge" is apparently beamed into man's mind somehow (no how?), and we're expected not to question it. (Which just makes one wonder: If such "knowledge" cannot endure questioning, why accept it as knowledge?) At any rate, such "revelation" is supposedly not something we learn by reading from a book. Rather, "all men in all ages" are said to have knowledge of the Christian god's "person, glory, and attributes" from sources that are more or less equally available to all: "through nature, conscience, and history." The biblical impetus for creating this category of "revelation" is found in the first chapter of the apostle Paul's epistle to the Romans. Romans 1:19-20, a passage fondly recited by presuppositionalist apologists, reads as follows:

Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

This passage clearly seats this alleged knowledge on firsthand empiricism. But since we don't see these "truths" directly, it would have to be the case that they be *inferred* from what is seen, and this of course would invite ample potential for error and uncertainty, and at best provide for conclusions which could at best only hope for a *probable* truth status, something presuppositionalists dogmatically reject out of hand when it comes to their faith claims. (Van Til wrote "The argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity is objectively valid. We should not tone down this argument to the probability level" - *Common Grace and the Gospel*, p. 62.) And even though it is not explained how something that is said to be "invisible" can also be "clearly seen," this type of "revelation" is contrasted with "special revelation," which is said to refer to

God's verbal and (usual) redemptive revelation of Himself to specific people at specific times; special revelation is communicated to us today through its inscription in the Bible. (Greg Bahnsen, *By This Standard*, p. 360.)

In other words, the "knowledge" that is made available through this type of "revelation" must be acquired by reading a book. And yet we must read a book ("special revelation") to learn of what is supposedly available to all men *without* reading the book ("general revelation").

The easily spotted conflicts in these views and the biblical passages that gave birth to them often lead to rather embarrassing consequences in the writings of modern apologists. They certainly make it very difficult for Christianity's spokesmen to present a uniform account of these things. For instance, on page 78 of his book *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, Christian apologist John Frame writes:

General revelation is so plain and clear that it obligates belief and obedience - leaving us without excuse (Rom. 1:19-20). John speaks of Jesus' miracles ("signs") warranting belief (John 20:31), and Luke speaks of the "convincing proofs" (Acts 1:3) which Jesus presented to the disciples after the Resurrection. The evidence for Christian theism, therefore, is "absolutely certain." Or, to put it in moral terms, there is no excuse for disbelief. The evidence obligates belief.

Compare Frame's statement with Christian apologist Greg Bahnsen's statements on p. 181 of his book *Always Ready*:

Empirical experience merely gives us an appearance of things; empirical experience cannot *in itself* correct illusions or get us beyond appearance to any world or realm of reality lying beyond.

Like the apostle Paul, Frame holds that the evidence for the Christian god "is so plain and clear" as to be unmistakable, and thus non-belief is inexcusable. But Bahnsen in effect tells us that we cannot rely on the evidence of our sense. Bahnsen needs this skeptical position in order to support his points against those who do not readily accept claims about "the supernatural." So, contrary to what we read in Romans 1, Bahnsen takes the position that empirical experience is not sufficient to "get us beyond appearance to any world or realm of reality lying beyond." If we take Bahnsen's statement as truth, however, we would at the very least have to question the passage from Romans. So here we have two authorities representing the same school of apologetics who have a deep difficulty keeping the party line straight. The one holds to the position stipulated in the primitive New Testament account, while the other departs from it in order to defend it.

As a non-believer, these are certainly not my problems. But as a defender of reason and man's right to exist for his own sake, I think it is important to point out such problems, and to clarify why these problems arise in the first place - because of the believer's rejection of reason and a reality-based worldview. To be sure, there are answers to the religionist's quandaries. But those answers spell death to his religion.

by Dawson Bethrick

*posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:00 PM](#)*

### 6 Comments:

[Aaron Kinney](#) said...

Yo BB!

Paul Manata removed his comments section at Press the Antithesis. Do you know why?

I was having such a good time over there, I feel like he took away my favorite toy! :(

[May 04, 2005 8:46 AM](#)

[groundfighter76](#) said...

Aaron,

I bet paul got tired of reading your 45 to 50 paragraph comment postings. :)

[May 04, 2005 9:33 AM](#)

[Aaron Kinney](#) said...

groundfighter76,

Maybe so, but I wasn't the only one making such huge posts. I guess it seems wierd when a guy who is going to school for Christian Apologetics removes the ability to interact with infidels on his website.

[May 04, 2005 2:10 PM](#)

[groundfighter76](#) said...

well paul explicitly stated in one of his first blog entries that his purpose for the comment section was not to debate everyone. read the entry from March 17.

[May 04, 2005 9:04 PM](#)

[groundfighter76](#) said...

This post has been removed by the author.

[May 04, 2005 9:04 PM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

another excellent article Dawson...you have a great skill for cutting through the TAG nonsense.

[May 04, 2005 9:40 PM](#)