

## Is the Contrary to Christianity Truly Impossible?

Presuppositionalist apologists are fond of saying that they defend the claim that Christian mythology is true "because of the impossibility of the contrary." This slogan seems to have first been used by Cornelius Van Til, who incorporated it into his apologetic scheme. The implication is that any worldview which is not identical to that of Reformed Christianity, is in one way or another impossible. In apologetic practice, this line of defense ultimately amounts to the claim that "unless you presuppose the existence of my imaginary being, you can't reason at all."

Apologists who seek to defend their faith in this manner have apparently lost sight of what their own worldview explicitly affirms. Within the context of the Christian worldview, the attempt to "argue from the impossibility of the contrary" would ultimately be self-refuting. And here's why.

Christianity's positions are based on what is written in the bible, and the bible claims that "with God *all things* are possible" (Mt. 19:26; emphasis added). Now, that's what the 'good book' says. I didn't write it, so don't get sore at me for what it says. The point here is that, if the believer claims that some particular thing is *impossible*, then he is blatantly disagreeing with what is explicitly stated in the bible. Since the presuppositionalist wants to defend his Christian faith-beliefs on the basis of what he calls "the impossibility of the contrary," he's clearly assuming that something is impossible, *and this does not square with what the bible explicitly teaches*. So this aspect of the "presuppositional method" of apologetics is in its entirety inconsistent with the worldview that it is intended to defend. For this apologetic strategy to have any force, it must *borrow* from a rival worldview which does not teach that "all things are impossible," and yet it is precisely such a worldview which the "presuppositional method" claims is impossible. Thus, such a strategy is, within the context of the worldview it hopes to protect, completely self-refuting.

The problem gets even worse for the presuppositionalist. Given what is clearly and unmistakably affirmed in Matt. 19:26, the believer must accept as a possibility any worldview which rejects primitive worldviews like Christianity. If one accepts the view that "with God all things are possible," then he would have to accept along with this the supposition that it is possible that this god has created viable worldviews which do not acknowledge his existence. Indeed, if this god is both omnipotent and infallible, who's to say it could not create in such a manner? All this is to say that, on Christianity's premises, there is no such thing as an "impossibility of the contrary." Thus for the presuppositionalist to want to "argue from the impossibility of the contrary," he must abandon his Christian presuppositions and seek a compatible theory of possibility in some worldview which he has already said is impossible.

Now surely the apologist is going to want to squirm out of this agonizing pinch somehow. To do this, he'll probably want to say that I'm taking Matthew 19:26 out of context. After all, this is the verse that he's going to have to deal with one way or another. So if he takes this course, we must ask: what is the context that I'm leaving out of my interpretation? The verse does say what it says, does it not? Reading through the passage will quickly show that the context here is rather thin to begin with. The statement in Matt. 19:26 is the answer that the gospel writer puts into Jesus' mouth in response to a question asked by the disciples in the previous verse: "Who then can be saved?" As is typical of the Jesus of the gospels, no specific answer is given. (I'm reminded of Luke 23:3, where Pilate asks "Art thou the King of the Jews?" and Jesus' very informative answer was "Thou sayest it.") Rather, the question, which I would think is of great importance to believers interested in who gets to be "saved," is answered as vaguely as possible. So again, what context is being overlooked here? Blank out.

The apologist might say something like, "Jesus didn't mean that everything is possible. That would be absurd!" Well, who's disagreeing with the fact that Christianity is absurd? The Christian apologist apparently is, and yet he has to adopt a rival worldview's premises in constructing an apologetic method which says that rival worldviews are impossible.

To settle the matter, the apologist merely needs to state whether or not he agrees with the statement that "all things are possible," and then we can see whether or not he is willing to argue in a manner that is consistent with what the bible explicitly states. If he says "yes, I agree with Matthew 19:26 in that 'all things are possible'," then he concedes that "arguing from the impossibility of the contrary" is anathema to Christianity's own premises. If he says "no, I don't think it's true that 'all things are possible'," then he simply disagrees with what the bible explicitly states and concedes that he borrows his conception of what is and is not possible from a non-Christian worldview in order to assemble his defense of the Christian worldview, thus refuting himself.

No doubt apologists confronted with these points will spit and stammer in their desperation to protect their commitment to a faith-based worldview from internal critiques of this sort. But basically the only hope for escape is essentially to claim "that's what it says, but that's not what it means" and hope it succeeds in snowing people. And though he may succeed in convincing himself that there's no problem here, others will not be so easily fooled.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [12:00 PM](#)

#### 17 Comments:

[VanTilsGhost](#) said...

BB stated:

"Christianity's positions are based on what is written in the bible, and the bible claims that "with God all things are possible" (Mt. 19:26; emphasis added). Now, that's what the 'good book' says. I didn't write it, so don't get sore at me for what it says. The point here is that, if the believer claims that some particular thing is impossible, then he is blatantly disagreeing with what is explicitly stated in the bible."

You just need to read the verses the RIGHT way BB...duh! Context! And you need to consult a few commentaries...and make sure they are the right ones, because sometimes they contradict each other...and ask your pastor...and pray...then it will all make sense!

:)

Excellent point...and since Van Tillians are so fond of complaining about non-believers needing to do an internal critique, you've given them one to chew on.

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That's not what Jesus REALLY meant by all things are possible...its just what he said! You need to learn Greek, and Hebrew, and consult the WCF, and buy some commentaries, and get Greg Bahnsen's tape #46...and then it will be clear...just as God intended. :)

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"No doubt apologists confronted with these points will spit and stammer in their desperation to protect their commitment to a faith-based worldview from internal critiques of this sort. But basically the only hope for escape is essentially to claim "that's what it says, but that's not what it means" and hope it succeeds in snowing people. And though he may succeed in convincing himself that there's no problem here, others will not be so easily fooled."

The apologists are strangely silent....

[September 19, 2005 9:24 AM](#)

[Paul Manata](#) said...

*The apologists are strangely silent....*

I guess you'd need to prove that apologists need to answer every stupid arguments?

In order to "give a \*reason\* that implies we're both playing the "reason" game.

[September 19, 2005 5:14 PM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

Clown-prince mumbled:

"I guess you'd need to prove that apologists need to answer every stupid arguments?"

Your grammar is almost as poor as your spelling! LOL!

Seriously...all VTG said was "The apologists are strangely silent."

That was a true statement at the time, was it not? I didn't read any comments above his from apologists, or perhaps they are invisible apologists, like your beloved jehovah?

[September 19, 2005 5:30 PM](#)

[VanTilsGhost](#) said...

Apparently the apologists are still remaining silent as to the topic of this post.

Don't worry, Mr Manata, I don't include you in the group I call "apologists," so don't feel slighted. Dawson has handled you on many an occasion, and I can understand your nervousness in taking him on again.

[September 20, 2005 3:44 AM](#)

[Christian Theist](#) said...

Ok, I'll bite.

Part of Dawson's problem, is that he keeps reasoning about the Christian worldview in terms of his own atheist worldview. Nor does he reason about the Bible on its own terms. So when Dawson rejects God or the Bible, the reaction from the peanut gallery is, "Wow. What a big surprise." Dawson precludes even the possibility that God exists or that His self-revelation in the Bible is true. He's not neutral or objective. Now, you may say, "Neither are you!" I'll grant that. So how can the conflict between the two opposing worldviews be resolved?

Let's place them side by side and reason about them on their own terms. I think Dawson is trying to do that, but he has failed.

When Dawson argues against the Christian worldview in terms of Matt. 19:26, he imports his own precommitment to the belief that there is no Creator-creature distinction. For Dawson, both God and man are subject to possibility. However, in the Christian worldview, God Himself is the creator and determiner of that which is possible. God is not subject to possibility, but Himself determines what is possible.

What is possible? What is not possible? God has determined this.

The atheist however, finds himself in a sea of irrationality. In the atheist worldview, he does not know what's possible because he does not know "all things." In fact, anything could be possible because he can't prove that nature is uniform. There are no certainties in the atheist worldview. Things just are the way they are even though he can't be certain about the way they are. What's possible in an atheist worldview? Could be nothing. Could be everything. He simply can't be certain.

[September 20, 2005 9:36 AM](#)

[Aaron Kinney](#) said...

Christian theist said:

*What is possible? What is not possible? God has determined this.*

Yes, and according to Gods word, ALL things are possible. So why are you trying to show that something, anything, is impossible?

*The atheist however, finds himself in a sea of irrationality. In the atheist worldview, he does not know what's possible because he does not know "all things." In fact, anything could be possible because he can't prove that nature is uniform. There are no certainties in the atheist worldview. Things just are the way they are even though he can't be certain about the way they are. What's possible in an atheist worldview? Could be nothing. Could be everything. He simply can't be certain.*

Non sequitor. If we were to assume that the rest of that paragraph were true, then the atheist doesn't find himself in a sea of irrationality, but uncertainty.

Irrationality comes from you holding fast to an ancient book that claims to have ultimate truth, promotes human sacrifice as a virtue, and was written by human beings in a time when they thought the earth was flat. There is your irrationality, Christian.

[September 20, 2005 10:21 AM](#)

[Aaron Kinney](#) said...

*Don't worry, Mr Manata, I don't include you in the group I call "apologists,"*

Manata is most certainly not an apologist. He is a cheerleader waving pom-poms and handing out gatorade to the real fighters. LOL

[September 20, 2005 10:23 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

CT: "What is possible? What is not possible? God has determined this."

Aaron: "Yes, and according to God's word, ALL things are possible."

Exactly. According to what we read in the buy-bull, "God has determined... [that] all things are possible."

So, the charge that I "import [my] own precommitments" into the matter is baseless. The issue is the conflict between what Christianity teaches and the apologetic methodology used by presuppositionalists. Since it is clearly incompatible with what Christianity teaches, presuppositionalists need to abandon that methodology. QED

[September 20, 2005 11:16 AM](#)

[Christian Theist](#) said...

Aaron writes: "Yes, and according to God's word, ALL things are possible."

BB writes: "Exactly. According to what we read in the buy-bull, 'God has determined... [that] all things are possible.'"

Unfortunately, you're assuming that certain things are possible that, in fact, are not possible. God determines what's possible and impossible. He's not subject to possibility. I know I'm repeating myself here, but I am doing this because you're suggesting that God might possibly do things that He won't do. You should be thankful that God isn't arbitrary.

Is it possible that God will do something that He doesn't want to do? No, because God Himself determines what is possible; He's not subject to possibility.

Your definition of what "all things" are is unfortunately informed by your belief that God is subject to possibility.

All things are possible, then, that God has determined to be possible. God determines what "all things" are. Not you.

[September 20, 2005 11:45 AM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

CT said:

"All things are possible, then, that God has determined to be possible. God determines what "all things" are."

Chapter and verse please? It appears you're just pulling this out of your butt, not from the Bible, which is the only place you will be able to find out about your God, correct?

[September 20, 2005 12:18 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

CT: "Unfortunately, you're assuming that certain things are possible that, in fact, are not possible."

No, we're assuming no such thing. We're just going by what the bible says.

CT: "God determines what's possible and impossible."

We have several options here, CT. One of them is to go by what the bible says. According to Mt. 19:26, "all things are possible." That's option 1. Another option is to go by what CT says. But why do that if we want to find out what the Christian god has determined? According to the bible, its god has determined that "all things are possible." This has nothing to do with what I or anyone else assumes. It's just reading what it says.

CT: "He's not subject to possibility."

I have no idea what this is supposed to mean, or what relevance it has. I suspect it's just a red herring.

CT: "I know I'm repeating myself here,"

You are, and you don't seem to be very prepared to interact with the points that have been presented.

CT: "but I am doing this because you're suggesting that God might possibly do things that He won't do."

Who has? I haven't done this. Aaron hasn't either. What do you think is being suggested that your god won't do? And how would you know what your god won't do (unless you're god)?

CT: "You should be thankful that God isn't arbitrary."

There's nothing more arbitrary than a god.

CT: "Is it possible that God will do something that He doesn't want to do? No, because God Himself determines what is possible; He's not subject to possibility."

So, it's not possible that your god will do what it wants to do? You're not stating things very clearly here.

CT: "Your definition of what 'all things' are is unfortunately informed by your belief that God is subject to possibility."

You've not shown this, nor have you shown that this would be illicit even if it were the case. What's clear is that you want to limit what "all things" can mean. Indeed, it says "all things are possible," so your points die on the vine.

CT: "All things are possible, then, that God has determined to be possible."

And according to Matthew's Jesus, that's "all things." But you want to say it's not all things. So you simply disagree with what the bible says. Got it.

CT: "God determines what 'all things' are. Not you."

Nor you, right? I'm not saying I've determined this. Your god had every chance to qualify this remark when the bible was being written, if we follow the party line. But it doesn't limit it any way. You want to limit it, which just means you don't agree with the teaching that "all things are possible." Fine. We get that, CT. You don't agree with the bible. That's clear.

Thank you,  
Dawson

[September 20, 2005 12:20 PM](#)

[groundfighter76](#) said...

Oh my, I'm having flashbacks. I feel like I am listening to one of James White's debates on Calvinism vs. Arminianism.

[September 20, 2005 1:20 PM](#)

[Aaron Kinney](#) said...

*You should be thankful that God isn't arbitrary.*

Having a creator who sets all the rules according to nothing but his own desires is, by definition, arbitrary.

God has no outside objective standard by which he made his rules. If there was an outside standard, then God would not be God. But if there is no outside standard, then God is doing things arbitrarily.

[September 20, 2005 3:42 PM](#)

[Christian Theist](#) said...

AK: "But if there is no outside standard, then God is doing things arbitrarily."

Begging the question. Prove it.

[September 21, 2005 6:50 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

CT, I think what Aaron was saying was that, since there are no constraints which can serve as both motive and guide for your invisible magic being's actions (it's immortal, indestructible, knows no threats, faces no fundamental alternatives, etc.), then it doesn't matter what it does, period. Given what Christians claim about their god, it wouldn't need to act to begin with, since it has no needs of any sort. Its actions would be chosen purely out of any context assuming needs that must be fulfilled in order to continue existing (as in the case of man). Your invisible magic being could sit on its hands, metaphorically speaking, and do absolutely nothing for all eternity, and it would still be what believers imagine it to be: an eternally unchanging, completely inert being. Thus, any actions it is said to take, would be actions taken in a complete void, that is, they would be utterly without any real purpose, since purpose presupposes a need to act (such as man's actions in living his life). Thus, those actions would be, by definition, as Aaron rightly said, arbitrary. So, there's no question-begging going on here on the part of the non-believer. It's just applying rational principles to your primitive worldview.

Aaron, does that summarize what you were saying? Please add to or correct my comments as you see fit.

[September 21, 2005 7:41 AM](#)

[Christian Theist](#) said...

To say that there are no constraints on God is to misrepresent the Christian worldview. True, there are no external constraints on God. Yet, God is constrained by His own character. He acts in keeping with who He is. This is one of the reasons He revealed Himself to Moses as, "I am who I am." Neither are there any absolutes outside of God, nor is God arbitrary. If you want to assume that's false in order to prove that it's false, then that's your problem.

Besides, to charge God with being arbitrary is to assume some way of knowing or some standard by which to judge that God is being arbitrary. And if you're going to do that then I defy you to account for this standard.

C'mon, Dawson. I'm urging you to become a Christian. Pray for forgiveness. God renews His people noetically as well.

[September 23, 2005 11:48 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

CT: "To say that there are no constraints on God is to misrepresent the Christian worldview."

It is? How so? In your very next breath, you say:

CT: "True, there are no external constraints on God."

There you go, CT. Since you agree with me on a universal level ("there are *no* external constraints on God" - emph. added), you cannot get away with saying that I am misrepresenting Christianity. You just conceded my very point.

CT: "Yet, God is constrained by His own character."

Which is ultimately constrained only by the believer's imagination. This is evident because of the impossibility of the contrary: hundreds of thousands of theistic worldviews which in one way or another claim that their god is constrained by nothing external, that its only constraints are its own 'nature' (which cannot be discovered by any scientific application of rational principles). Since no two theists that I've ever met wholly agree on all points, it must be the case that they imagine differing gods. For how else do they have "knowledge" of their god if not by imagining them from the inputs supplied by texts they are taught to consider holy? Imagination at the expense of reality is religion's stock in trade. Why else are the gospel stories so prized by believers? The gospels offer graphic settings in which the supposedly incarnated deity lowers itself and visits earth and participates in earthly affairs by performing its deeds in the body of a human host. In those texts you read of a man pretending to be a god that performs miraculous deeds among other human beings (surprisingly, we don't find gospel details attested to by any contemporary historians; for instance, we don't find Josephus recording the unspecified number of "saints" who allegedly rose from their graves at the time of Jesus' crucifixion and "showed themselves unto many," as we find related in Matt. 27:52-53). Modern believers have no choice but to rely on their imaginations to envision these events. And it is in their imagination that their religious experience lives.

CT: "He acts in keeping with who He is."

Which is whatever the believer wants it to be. Here's the "consistency" you think your worldview enjoys. Not only do you ascribe to the subjective view of metaphysics (since you grant primacy ultimately to a form of consciousness - that is, the subject of experience rather than the object of consciousness), you also allow your wishing (via your imagination) to dictate how these subjective ideas are applied at the philosophical level (while ignoring the fact that you must borrow from a non-Christian worldview even to form your first concepts).

CT: "This is one of the reasons He revealed Himself to Moses as, 'I am who I am'."

You beg the question by assuming the truth of the bible's contents in an effort to validate your worldview. Because your case relies on fallacious reasoning, it must be rejected.

CT: "Neither are there any absolutes outside of God,"

This is a universally negative claim, and is in dire need of substantiation. I see that you haven't offered any. I'm not surprised by this silence. At minimum, to rescue yourself here you would have to explain in detail what you mean by "outside of God." But you don't do this, so it remains unclear as to what you might mean, and this only strengthens the suspicion that our leg is being pulled.

CT: "nor is God arbitrary."

Again, you beg the question, for this is one of the charges that has been leveled against your worldview, and it has been substantiated by references to your worldview's own teachings (see my last comment). Repeating a position of yours that is in dispute does nothing to resuscitate it.

CT: "If you want to assume that's false in order to prove that it's false, then that's your problem."

I don't have to "assume that's false in order to prove that it's false." If you cannot validate it, then the objections I've presented already remain unchallenged and thus are up to the task they were set out to achieve. All you offer is your own psychological denial. That only tells us about your personal condition; it does nothing to validate your views.

CT: "Besides, to charge God with being arbitrary is to assume some way of knowing or some standard by which to judge that God is being arbitrary."

In other words, "How dare you presume to use your mind to judge my claims in a manner that is unflattering to them!" Get over it, CT, your apologetic is washed up because your worldview is a washout. Indeed, it's completely washed

away any mind that you might have had. It's up to you to reverse the damage that has already taken place. But I'm willing to admit that you're beyond help at this point. I hope I'm wrong on this.

CT: "And if you're going to do that then I defy you to account for this standard."

The "standard" is the very basis you assume while denying it at the same time for the sake of expediency with respect to your worldview's confessional assertions. That basis is, the primacy of existence orientation of the subject-object relationship, which is fundamental to my worldview, and which you must assume to be true in order to attack it. It's unmistakable that the Christian worldview assumes the subjective orientation of the subject-object relationship. That's why it's not a surprise that apologists don't address this point - they can't. They know their worldview grants the subject primacy over its objects. That's what subjectivism is. Subjectivism is primacy of the subject over its objects in the subject-object relationship. There's not much else to say for the Christian worldview, for it offers nothing of value to begin with. Since its whole basis is a lie, it offers man only one thing: **death**. And that's why the New Testament's portrayal of Jesus going so willingly to his execution is the only Christian symbol we need to see to recognize its true nature. It's unlikely that Christian apologists would claim that their Jesus was *not* operating in a manner that is inconsistent with his worldview's presuppositions when he "took up the cross" and marched himself up Calvary Hill and allowed himself to be hammered to those heavy beams of wood that were hoisted high in the sky so that he would *die*. That is the end result that can be expected from any worldview premised on the primacy of consciousness metaphysics: the admired leader willingly embracing a premature death. In this very important worldview element, Jesus shares a basic essential with Islam's suicide bombers: both Jesus and the suicide bombers willingly embrace a premature death. And just as suicide bombers want to take innocent by-standers with them into death, so did the gospels' Jesus want to take the two malefactors with him into what the gospels call "Paradise" - that is, to the magic kingdom that believers imagine exists beyond the grave.

CT: "C'mon, Dawson. I'm urging you to become a Christian. Pray for forgiveness. God renews His people noetically as well."

It won't happen, CT. I value my honesty far too much to give it up for something so empty as your worldview.

Regards,  
Dawson

[September 23, 2005 8:45 PM](#)