

Sunday, March 27, 2005

John Frame vs. the Human Thinker

In his book *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction*, Christian apologist John Frame writes (p. 169):

Unbelievers should surely not be allowed to take their own autonomy for granted in defining moral concepts. They must not be allowed to assume that they are the ultimate judges of what is right and wrong. Indeed, they should be warned that that sort of assumption rules out the biblical God from the outset and thus shows its character as a faith-presupposition. The unbeliever must know that we reject his presupposition altogether and insist upon subjecting our moral standards to God's. And if the unbeliever insists on his autonomy, we may get nasty and require him to show how an autonomous self can come to moral conclusions in a godless universe.

I found this one paragraph to serve as a fitting summary of the Christian's basic mentality. It hits several key points that distinguish a Christian from other men. Those key points are as follows:

1. Willingness to initiate the use of force against those who don't agree with the Christian.
2. Resentment for those who think with their own minds.
3. Reliance on threats instead of argument to defend his viewpoint.
4. Fear of other minds.
5. Insistence on surrendering man's mind to the mind of another.

All of these points of course just underscore Christianity's antithesis with reason and rationality, which are the ultimate target of the Christian's animosity and resentment. Let's look at Frame's statement to see how these points are expressed in it.

In the first sentence of this paragraph, Frame tells his readers that "unbelievers should surely not be allowed to" do something. This could only imply that believers are to presume authority over non-believers, and that believers have the prerogative to exercise that authority over non-believers such that they can disallow certain behavior. Essentially, this is the claim to having a right to take away another's rights, which means: the right to initiate force against others. Apologists will likely object to this interpretation of Frame's remarks, saying that he doesn't mean this at all, but rather that the believer, in the context of a debate, for instance, should challenge the non-believer on certain issues. If that's the case, then apologists should see the hazards implied by Frame's language and object to it instead of to non-believers who interpret his remarks in this manner. Supremacy and authorization to the use of force are clearly implied here, and it will become clearer that this is the only thing that Frame could really have in mind.

What is it that Frame wants believers to stop non-believers from doing? He wants to disallow non-believers from "[taking] their own autonomy for granted in defining moral concepts." What does Frame mean by "autonomy" here? In a footnote on page 5 of *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, Frame gives us a clue to what he means by "autonomy." He writes: "To encourage the unbeliever to think autonomously is to encourage him to think without the correction of revelation - that is, to think 'neutrally' (which is actually to think disobediendly, replacing God's standards with the unbeliever's own)." On page 42 of the same book, Frame equates "thinking autonomously" with "recognizing no absolute standard outside [oneself]," and on page 55 he equates "claiming autonomy" with "denying God's sovereignty." In another book, Frame defines 'autonomous' to mean "subject only to [one's own] law," and holds that "the autonomy of the human mind" means that "the human mind... is to be its own supreme authority, its own criterion of truth and right." (*Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, p. 45.)

It's hard to see how a practitioner of any religious view could not adopt this same kind of terminology and recast it to favor his religious views while excoriating any rival view. In such a case, the Muslim could easily accuse the Christian of the sin of "autonomy" for not thinking according to Allah's "revelation," and the believer in Geusha, the supreme being of the Lahu tribe of northern Thailand, can accuse both the Christian and the Muslim of "autonomy" for failing to guide their reasoning according to the will of Geusha. So the essential here, then, is not which deity is being held as the ultimate standard. Rather, the essential here is the rejection of one's own

mind in obeisance to some other mind, either real or imaginary. Frame's ideal, then, is to think, as it were, not with his own mind, but with the mind of his god. Autonomous reasoning, then, is, in terms of rational essentials, simply thinking with one's own mind. And it is this which Christians resent in non-believers: non-believers do not void out the content of their own minds and replace it with what believers tell them to accept in place of what non-believers can discover and verify firsthand. That is, Christians resent those who think with their own minds, especially when it comes to matters on which Christians have historically claimed exclusive authority, such as morality. As Frame himself puts it, non-believers "must not be allowed to assume that they are the ultimate judges of what is right and wrong."

But of course, non-believers are going to do what they do no matter how much Christians and other religionists disapprove. This of course will only give increase to the Christian's contempt for non-believers, a contempt that is part resentment and part envy (indeed, according to Ex. 20:5, the Judeo-Christian god is said to be jealous, having all perfections, and in Matt. 5:48 Jesus commands his followers "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.")

What, then, is Frame's advice in such circumstances? In the spirit of his religious ancestors who sought to keep frightened believers in order by means of bloody public example, he resorts to threats. As often may be the case, such threats initially take the form of seemingly benign warnings. As Frame writes, "[unbelievers] should be warned that that sort of assumption [i.e., thinking with one's own mind] rules out the biblical God from the outset and thus shows its character as a faith-presupposition." Of course, people who don't believe in that which does not exist, are typically not afraid of what the non-existent might do when such warnings are not heeded; non-believers don't believe that the non-existent can hurt them. But to be sure, even though the recognition that we think with our own minds is by no means a recognition one acquires or verifies on the basis of faith, those who fear the consequences of thinking with one's own mind will do what they can to stop others from doing likewise. Frame issues his threat a second time: "if the unbeliever insists on his autonomy, we may get nasty..." And since John Frame at this time has no political power over anyone, this should not cause any heightened alarm. But should persons of this mentality acquire public standing whereby they have access to instruments of force, we should all beware and be vigilant.

All of this points to an attitude which betrays the believer's profound fear of other minds, which is key to the psychology of his own religious commitment. Why else would John Frame want to disallow other men from the free use of their own minds? In fact, it is because believers fear other minds that they want others to do what they themselves have done: Surrender them. And this is biblical, for in the bible, especially in the New Testament, we read many passages endorsing the virtue of unanimous agreement among confessing believers. In the book of Acts, for instance, we frequently read that the apostles were of "one accord" with each other (e.g., 1:14; 2:1, 46; 4:24; 5:12; 8:6), ignoring the many conflicts between them that Paul mentions in his many letters (as GA Wells aptly recounts, "when Acts was written, Paul, Peter, and James will all have been dead, and it must have been hard then to think that they had ever been bitterly divided" - *Can We Trust the New Testament?*, pp. 78-79). And even though the ideal of having everyone agree in unanimous accord with each other is something that has never been achieved by the Christian church (quite the opposite was the case even among the earliest Christians), it's not even a reasonable goal to expect, given that each thinker acquires his own unique inputs from his own experiences which give him a completely unique context from which to draw conclusions on any given matter. It's as if Frame and other believers could just wish away the need for contextual relations which support a man's understanding of the world and the knowledge he acquires of it.

Philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand eloquently captured the essence of this mindset with arresting penetration in the following statement from her novel *Atlas Shrugged*:

A mystic is a man who surrendered his mind at its first encounter with the minds of others. Somewhere in the distant reaches of his childhood, when his own understanding of reality clashed with the assertions of others, with their arbitrary orders and contradictory demands, he gave in to so craven a fear of independence that he renounced his rational faculty. At the crossroads of the choice between "I know" and "They say," he chose the authority of others, he chose to submit rather to understand, to *believe* rather than to think. Faith in the supernatural begins as faith in the superiority of others.

Men have the choice, either to think, or to evade thinking. In social contexts, this alternative translates into the choice to think for oneself, or to believe what others say on their say so. Christian apologists who attempt to assemble arguments for their god-belief are caught in the contradiction of performatively operating on the assumption that those who consider their arguments have a mind to do so while positionally affirming the view those same persons should sacrifice the use of their minds and pretend to have a different mind in place of their own, "the mind of Christ" as I Cor. 2:16 puts it (cf. also Phil. 2:5). And since such ideals are not based on reason, but

rather on faith, there is nothing to keep believers from seeking to bend others to their will. As Rand pointed out, “Faith and force... are corollaries: every period of history dominated by mysticism, was a period of statism, of dictatorship, of tyranny.” (*Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 66.)

So Frame’s statement ultimately translates to the following:

People who don’t agree with me should not be allowed to think with their own mind when defining moral concepts. They must not be allowed to think that their minds are for judging anything, and should be forced to agree with whatever I say is true. Indeed, they should be warned that if they dare to think with their own minds, then they risk pissing off my God. People who don’t agree with me should know that I resent his audacity for daring to think with his own mind and that I insist that they subject their minds to my will. If people insist on thinking with their own minds, I just might get nasty and require them to prove that he can think with his own mind when my God says they don’t have any minds to begin with.

It boils down to: we won’t let non-believers think, because if they think, then they will guide their own choices and actions by their own thinking and not ours. We want to have final say over their choices and actions, since we are the holy spokesmen for the divine, so it is by divine right that we have final say over their choices and actions, and this gives us a right to carry out our holy orders at any and all costs. This of course is a corollary of their faith: they say that their god exists because they *want* their god to exist.

Reason and rationality require that men think for themselves, that they think freely, that they be independent of others, that they think without coercion or duress. Just as one cannot force a person to understand algebra or music theory, threatening a person with eternal torment does not prove one’s claims or authority. As the most philosophically developed religious system in the world, Christianity represents the fullest assault on man’s reason that has ever been devised, and it is for this reason that its antagonism to the human thinker must be exposed.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [11:56 AM](#)

2 Comments:

[Zachary Moore](#) said...

Great post, Dawson. I’m reminded of George Smith’s thesis: the survival of faith requires a dismantling of reason.

[April 11, 2005 5:18 AM Aaron Kinney](#) said...

A long but very good post. I like how you were able to take Frames argument against nonbelievers and substitute Muslims and Hindus instead. This clearly illustrates the true meaning behind Frames argument.

Frame wasnt arguing against man thinking for himself, but instead he was arguing against man attributing thought to anything other than HIS PARTICULAR FLAVOR of God.

[April 11, 2005 9:18 AM](#)