

Wednesday, July 21, 2010

The Storybook Worldview

Presuppositionalists prefer to deploy their apologetic devices in terms of an *antithesis* between Christians and non-Christians. Much of the way in which they conceive of this antithesis is imaginary in nature, as it is framed in terms of their theology, and their theology is informed by elements culled from a book of stories which only take life in the imagination of the reader. The presuppositionalist concept of antithesis consists of deliberately filtering their understandings and inferences in terms of an us-versus-them perspective, as the pitting of one collective locked in a death match against an opposed collective. In the end, on the Christian's faith-based presuppositions, one's ethical import is determined by which collective he belongs to. Like giddy high-schoolers anxious to be part of the clique, it's all about belonging to a group, because validation is attainable for such persons only by being accepted by the group. (Notice how many Christian blogs have a team of contributors who have found it necessary to join forces, apparently unable to stand alone.)

But there is a hint of truth to the claim that an antithesis exists, at least between the Christian on the one hand, and the one who adheres to an *objective* understanding of the world on the other. Unlike the rational human being, who recognizes the fact that reality sets its own terms independent of human inventions, the Christian intentionally views everything through the prism of a collection of stories, stories which even on the his own premises the Christian could not genuinely *know* to be true, regardless of how strongly he *believes* them to be true. Indeed, it is one thing to *believe* that something is true, and another to *know* that it is true. This distinction is lost on most presuppositionalists, since they tend to construe knowledge in terms of *belief* in the first place (I have already criticized this view [here](#)).

Christians tend to portray themselves as a collective bound together by a *story*, a story which they insist is true, even when facts are brought against it. In actuality it is their *acceptance* of this story - which is a volitional action on each adherent's part - which gives them this shared sense of mutual connection and commonality. Just accept the story, and *Presto!* you're immediately part of the beloved clique, the 'happnen' in-crowd.

Not only does this acceptance of a story give Christians a sense of unity (mind you, a unity which crumbles into splinters very easily), it also shapes in the way they understand the world. As Cornelius Van Til puts it in the *Mein Kampf* of presuppositionalism:

Christians interpret every fact in the light of the same story. For them the nature of every fact in this world is determined by the place it occupies in the story. The story they cannot get from any other source than supernatural revelation. The Christian finds that his conscience agrees to the truth of the story. He holds that those who deny the truth of the story have an axe to grind. They do not want the story to be true; they do not want the facts to be what the story says they are. (*The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., quoted in Hubner, Jamin, *The Portable Presuppositionalist*, p. 239).

It is a *story*, then, which serves as the believer's *filter* in "interpret[ing] every fact" that he encounters and is willing to consider. The believer presumes, as an inherent consequence of his acceptance of the story as a fundamental truth about the world and as a non-negotiable premise of his worldview, that "every fact in this world is determined by the place it occupies in the story" which he has accepted as the ultimate standard of his waking cognition. Thus an implicit circularity installs itself in his outlook as the self-attesting reassurance that what he has accepted is true, in spite of its stark departure from the reality with which he interacts on a daily basis. On the Christian's premise, the story as such supersedes facts as such, for any facts which the believer finds himself dealing with are to be "interpreted" in terms of the story's dictates. The story provides an imaginative backdrop, an artificial overlay, which the believer actively projects onto the sum of his experiences in order to bring his mind into conformity with the prescribed devotional program of the bible.

Those who do not accept the story are characterized as willfully resisting what the believer considers an incontestable truth: "They do not want the story to be true; they do not want the facts to be what the story says they are." Non-believers are represented in the literature as slaves to their nefarious, truth-denying desires: they don't *want* the story to be true; they do not *want* the facts to be what the story says they are. Acceptance of the story somehow provides the believer with intimate familiarity of non-believers' motivations. The believer is not at the same time encouraged to consider the possibilities that non-believers honestly do not believe the story is true, and that believers

are the ones who are held captive by their desires in *wanting* the story to be true. Such proposals are kept safely out of sight, as they are not to be considered, for the believer has no rational defense against them.

As with other specimens of fiction, the bible-believer's story takes its residence in the believer's imagination. However, it is not a story which the believer's own imagination *creates*, but which his own imagination *informs* as he tries to digest its contents into the sum of his cognition, whose inner workings are situated beyond his own understanding (for he does not endeavor to understand the nature of his imaginative indulgences when it comes to his theism), given his focus on seeking to enshrine the elements of the story as a guide to his understanding of the world. The more concrete elements of the story are unavoidably open to being imagined differently from believer to believer, but certain stereotypes have as a matter of tradition inserted themselves into the images which believers cultivate as they recreate biblical scenes in their minds. When Jesus commanded the water pots to be full of wine at the marriage in Cana (cf. John 2:1-11), for instance, the believer may imagine that he wore a white robe and had a long beard, was he taller than most of the other guests, had an austere sense of omniscient awareness and wisdom, spoke softly and compassionately, that he radiated with a holy glow visible to "the chosen," etc. These images have worked their way into the believer's imagination courtesy of earlier believers who concretized their imaginings of the same story in media such as paintings and the silver screen. But they are all imaginary just the same.

In the passage by Van Til quoted above, the Christian is explicitly encouraged to believe that "those who deny the truth of the story have an axe to grind," which is not intended to be complimentary. The believer's experience of the world is carefully managed by those who watch over him, who oversee the constant surveillance over his devotion to the program, as he is told specifically how to view all outsiders to the faith, given the fact that they are outsiders to the faith. The us-versus-them collectivism inherent in the religious allegiance to the Christian worldview is affirmed explicitly in the substance of the narrative itself (cf. Mt. 12:30: "He that is not with me is against me"). To put it bluntly, those who have not chosen, as the Christian believer has chosen, to accept "the story" as some incontestable cosmic truth about reality, are to be seen as stubbornly resisting truth in an irresistible fit of contempt, a product of their depravity, as a result of some fundamental choice they have made in opposition to the ethical path which only the story can offer.

So acceptance of the story as truth, regardless of actual truth value, its content and its meaning under examination, is of paramount importance to the devotional program of Christianity. The believer is expected to adopt the disposition that the story is worth dying for. And even though it is never explained how the story can benefit from the believer's self-sacrifice, he is told explicitly that "religious faith is something to die for and something to live every moment" (Kreeft and Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, p. 14). The believer is to give priority, just as in Kreeft and Tacelli's statement, to being willing to die for the story. The believer is not to consider the fact that differing interpretations of the same story are what has caused Christianity to implode on itself since its very inception, resulting in hundreds if not thousands of schisms, sects, denominations, factions and cultic offshoots. He is not to consider the fact that each believer's imagination plays an essential role in his reading of the story and in his overall religious experience, a role which governs his interpretation of the story. What is important is that the believer do his best not to fall prey to the "false prophets" of other religions, and other interpretations of the same story. There is only one story, he is taught, and only one interpretation of that story. Anything else is heresy and depravity.

As Van Til states:

Scripture presents itself as being the only light in terms of which the truth about facts and their relations can be discovered. (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 108)

In other words, for the Christian believer, the *story* comes first, and *then* the facts, which are admitted only *after* the story has been accepted as true, and which are "interpreted" in terms of the story *as the believer comes to understand it*. The facts themselves do nothing to inform or confirm the story. Rather, they are to be placed, by a selective process performed by the believer, into their proper role as the story is held to govern them. The story does not need to conform to facts that are independently discovered and integrated according to a rational system of cognition; rather, the facts are to be made to conform to the story. And the story is to be found in a storybook, which is to be revered as a sacred artifact having supernatural origins and supernatural content, and therefore unquestionably true no matter what it says. The storybook's contents are to be accepted as true even before the believer has read what it says.

Christianity, then, is a worldview based on a storybook, and which requires that its adherents view the world through the prism of a storybook. For those who do interpret the world in terms of what the storybook would have them believe,

those who do not take the storybook seriously and similarly look at the world in terms of what the storybook says, are to be scorned, despised, held in contempt and considered to be a threat. It is for this reason that believers always reserve for themselves the option of simply ignoring what critics of Christian philosophy have to say: since they do not accept the story, non-Christians are considered to be darkened in their understanding, given over to demonic influences, and beyond the reach of the “reasoning” which believers themselves find so persuasive and enticing.

For the Christian, the atheist is the most despicable of spoilsports. He’s a spoilsport because his very existence, given the fact that he is a non-believer, serves as a constant reminder to the believer that the storybook is actually a cauldron of deception. This is not only why non-believers are so despised, but why they are also the target of so much Christian animosity and resentment. Defeating the non-believer is of utmost priority to defenders of the Christian faith, as his very existence constitutes a lethal threat to the sanctity which they want their storybook to possess. Defeating the non-believer on his own terms is unnecessary and even to be discouraged, for it could end up in failure. Discrediting by means of insult is ultimately the only way out for believers, and they know this, which is why many internet apologists have learned to head directly for this path when they encounter criticism.

Philosophically, the storybook leads the believer into a pit of internal conundrums and contradictions, mental snares which are acknowledged to exist but characterized as “paradoxes” so as to construe them as evidence of the supernatural genius and mysteriousness of its alleged author, for “God must always remain mysterious to man” (Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 14). It portrays its god as a father which allows his only begotten son to be tortured and murdered by vicious villains, and equates this same god with “love” (I Jn. 4:8). It claims that its god is uncreated and equates it with light (I Jn. 1:5), and it tells us that light was created (Gen. 1:3). It tells us that “whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23) and that “the law is not of faith” (Gal. 3:12), but insists that the law is not sin (Rom. 7:7). It tells us that things which are invisible are “clearly seen” (Rom. 1:20).

The story which Christians accept as truth, characterizes man as inherently defective. And yet his creator is supposedly “perfect” (Mt. 5:48), whose “work is perfect” (Deut. 32:4), whose “way is perfect” (2 Sam. 22:31). This perfect creator created imperfection (see [here](#)). The perfect creator’s greatest creation - which is man - turns out to be one of the biggest bumbles of all history, according to Christian doctrine itself.

Left alone, man will - according to the storybook-informed Christian worldview - automatically deviate from “the truth,” for “the truth” is not something that he can discover on his own. According to Christianity, truth is something that must be “revealed” to man from some supernatural source. Once the priests’ underlying premises are accepted, the believer has no basis to question their propagandistic influence and manipulation, and is thus prone to sacrificing himself to their lead, believing that such sacrifice is good, moral, noble. As for the problem that results from supposing that man is inherently defective on the one hand, and created by a perfect creator on the other, the priests have an explanation for this: man *chose* to depart from the true path. That is, *one man* chose to depart, and *all men* were thus infected with this defect as a result. Not only does this clue us in on the collectivistic conception of guilt which Christianity fosters in the believer’s psyche, it is also an example of blaming the product rather than the producer for the product’s faults. Not only are all the products vulnerable to the defects of one, but the producer continues to produce more products after its first product has proved defective, allowing the defect to propagate throughout the general population. The storybook would have us believe that this is the choice of a perfect creator. And responsibility for the summary deficiencies resulting from the choices on the part of the producer, is laid at the feet of every product. It’s the lemon’s fault that it is a lemon.

But this distortion of justice is all part of the story which the believer is supposed to swallow hook, line and sinker. Christian apologist John Frame puts it as follows:

As Calvin said, the Christian should look at nature with the “spectacles of Scripture.” If even unfallen Adam needed to interpret the world according to God’s verbal utterance, how much more do we!... To allow Scripture this corrective work, we must accept the principle that our settled belief as to Scripture’s teaching must take precedence over what we would believe from natural revelation alone. (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 23)

So while, according to the story, the entire creation is saturated with defects (cf. “sin”), the creator itself is to be revered as incapable of doing wrong, and “the creature” (i.e., the believer) is to take on “the spectacles of Scripture” and “interpret the world according to” the “verbal utterance” of the one who created the mess in the first place. And rather than correcting the problem in the product, the Christian god has chosen instead to offer a patch - namely the storybook - which the believer is required to apply to himself by accepting its contents as unquestionable truth and

joining a group of people seeking to do the same.

Frame insists that he is “not advocating dogmatic adherence to ideas based on half-baked exegesis and rejection of, say, scientific theories on the basis of such sloppy theologizing” (Ibid., p. 23n.26), though he does advocate the rejection of the scientific theory of evolution because of its damning threat to the biblical worldview (cf. pp. 103, 129, et al.). It is interesting that Frame characterizes evolution as a form of idolatry, saying,

Nobody can prove evolution. Evolution is a hypothesis held by faith, and all supposed facts must be made to fit into its framework. It is a “paradigm” in Thomas Kuhn’s sense, a criterion for judging other proposals, itself not subject to judgment. Indeed, evolution is necessary, once one rejects creation. For either the earth was produced supernaturally (i.e., created) or it was produced naturally, apart from God. Any naturalistic origin of the world will involve evolution, for it will be the result of natural laws operating upon primitive matter, producing complexity over time. Thus, the concept of evolution did not begin with Darwin. Rather, it has been characteristic of every non-Christian philosophy since that of Thales in the sixth century B.C. (Ibid., p. 197)

So, for Frame, and many other Christian believers, the theory of evolution is a story competing with the storybook of the Christian bible. As with the story line of the Christian bible, evolution requires its adherents to make “all... facts... fit into its framework.” It’s okay when the guiding story involves the supernatural beings of “Scripture,” but if it involves science which man can discover and validate by his own faculties, it is an unprovable “hypothesis held by faith,” and thus, apparently, to be abandoned, even condemned.

Are you following this?

Also, Frame tells us that he is not saying

that our settled beliefs concerning the teaching of Scripture are infallible... But I repeat: those settled beliefs must take precedence over our beliefs, settled or not, from other sources. Otherwise, we do not allow Scripture to be a true corrective to our understanding of natural revelation. (Ibid., pp. 23-24n.27).

Frame speaks of not allowing “Scripture to be a true corrective to our understanding” of nature, as if there were some dismal consequence to be worried about here. But what would be wrong in allowing nature to speak for itself? What is the danger here if not the fact that nature does not conform to what the storybook says? If nature did naturally confirm what the storybook says, would Frame have such concerns? I suspect not. If nature does not naturally confirm what the storybook says, what does this tell us about the value of the storybook?

I found the following statement from Frame most curious. He writes:

there are some who claim that proof is necessary *for them*... Scripture does more than simply rebuke them. It provides much persuasive testimony of God’s reality and also points us to sources outside itself where more testimony can be found. (Ibid., p. 66)

Note that the storybook’s content is characterized as “testimony.” And “testimony” for Christians, at least when it comes from a Christian source, is supposed to be taken as unimpeachably factual. If there is a non-circular argument for such a self-serving view, I’d like to see it.

What I find interesting about this statement is Frame’s view of *proof*. Presuppositionalists insist that their “transcendental argument” is “absolutely certain proof” of the Christian god’s existence and of “the truth of Christian theism” (cf. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed., p. 103), and that it is the only apologetic scheme compatible with the bible. So if there is a “proof” of the Christian god’s existence which is so compatible with what Christians call their god’s verbal revelation, why would that verbal revelation rebuke or condemn those who expect proof?

In regards to presuppositionalism proper, notice how it involves appeals to a storybook in order to settle age-old philosophical questions. The problem of universals, for instance, is “answered” by pointing to a triune god - i.e., to a character in a storybook which the believer has no alternative but to imagine in his own mind. It is supposedly in the mind of this supernatural triune god where “the one” and “the many” - “unity” and “plurality” - are fundamentally related. Thus, instead of understanding the relationship between the multitude of concrete objects which we perceive and the abstractions by which we unite them in a conceptual manner, the presuppositionalist approach prefers to attribute this relationship to the mind of a character found in a storybook which takes residence in the believer’s

imagination. Similarly with the so-called “problem of induction” raised by the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Instead of questioning the premises of Hume’s skeptical argument, presuppositionalists prefer to take Hume’s argument for granted and point to a character from their sacred storybook as the solution to the ill-conceived problem. On presuppositionalist grounds, the problem of induction is “solved” - not by recognizing the objective nature of reality and understanding the conceptual process by which the human mind performs inductive inferences - but by pointing to a storybook character which has allegedly “created the universe in which we live (Gen. 1:1, Col. 1:16), and who sovereignly maintains it as we find it to be (Heb. 1:3)” (Brian Knapp, “Induction and the Unbeliever,” *The Portable Presuppositionalist*, p. 132). Does this bring us any closer to a rational understanding of induction? Of course it doesn’t. But it conforms to the believer’s devotion to the view that the storybook is true, and that’s what’s important to the believer.

We cannot expect a storybook which departs from reality so radically as the bible does, to provide rational answers to such important questions. Instead, we are expected to simply don “spectacles of Scripture” and ignore its discrepancies with reality as if they did not exist, as if they would disappear if we ignore them long enough. Such is the presuppositionalist’s last resort, one which he takes more often than he’d like to admit.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Evolution](#), [John Frame](#), [The Storybook](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [10:00 AM](#)

4 Comments:

[Dan Doel](#) said...

This sort of thing leads to one of the most hollow-ringing arguments used by (internet) presuppositionalists (as I recall, at least; I've stopped frequenting the places you might find them). That is, they frequently accuse opponents of presupposing that their story is false. This is sort of understandable, because they commit to the truth of the story at a foundational level, so they take the position that *any* judgment of the story must be foundational.

But, "presupposing" the falsity of the Bible is just (roughly) as silly as presupposing its truth. The factual accuracy of a particular book isn't something that belongs at the core of your understanding of reality at all. So the accusation sounds like nonsense to the non-believer. People don't presuppose the non-existence of leprechauns. That is a conclusion based on examination of reality. And almost necessarily so, because you don't even get to an idea of what leprechauns (or books) are without already having investigated the world quite a bit already. It's quite a stretch to assert that one requires a foundational belief in the existence of leprechauns before one can even proceed to figure out what leprechauns are.

[July 21, 2010 8:30 PM](#)

[Yog Sothoth](#) said...

One of the most ridiculous things I have ever read in an internet discussion on religion is the following (somewhat paraphrased) exchange:

Presupper: It is a part of my worldview that all people believe in God, some just choose to deny Him.

Atheist: So people choose to deny God and go to Hell?

Presupper: Yes.

Atheist: So people want to go to Hell? People want to be tortured?

Presupper: Yes.

Christian Apologists do and say a lot of batshit insane things, but the bald-faced assertion that EVERYONE knows their

God is real, and anyone professing to be an atheist must be evil, delusional, and willfully ignorant is their most annoying tact.

I've always wondered if the view that Atheists "just don't want the Bible to be true" is some sort of subconscious projection on the part of Christians. They are all too familiar with the process of "just wanting something to be true" or "just wanting something to not be true", and so assume that is the basis upon which others make decisions on what to believe about reality.

[July 21, 2010 10:09 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Dan,

You make some very good points.

You're exactly right: presupposing the falsity of the bible is as silly as presupposing its truth. The bible's truth or falsity must be *inferred* - i.e., arrived at as a conclusion given whatever premises are factored into deriving that conclusion. One cannot simply assume one way or another and try to get away with it by calling it a "presupposition." I don't know of any non-Christian critic who does this, but critics are routinely dismissed for having biased "presuppositions." I think this tells us more about the apologist making such a claim than anything else. It tells us that he thinks biased presuppositions, one way or another, is key to the whole debate.

As you rightly point out, whether or not a specific book's contents are true is not something that one can know at the base of one's knowledge. We do not begin our cognition by affirming or denying the alleged truth of the contents of some book. To affirm such a view only bastardizes the nature of human consciousness, and consequently tells us that those taking such a position do not really understand how their own consciousness operates. On the contrary, it is, as you rightly indicate, a conclusion to reasoning which takes a whole constellation of facts into account (or, in the case of the Christian who claims that the bible's contents are true, a constellation of imaginations as if they were factual).

I'm reminded of how one apologist characterized one horn of the presuppositional method. He characterized it as follows:

"begin with the negation of God's existence, and then show that human knowledge is not possible on that basis."

My response to this was as follows:

*You could do this, but I think you would only wind up battling a straw man. The human mind does not begin by negating or denying a premise. It begins by perceiving and affirming a positive, and goes on from there. Only then would it have any content to work with in order for negating or denying to be possible. Sure, the atheist, for instance, has no god-belief. But it does not follow from this that he *begins* by denying the existence of gods. Similarly, Christians do not begin by denying the existence of Allah, Geusha or Avalokuthara. There are in philosophy issues that are more fundamental than the question of the existence of a god, Christian or otherwise, and they involve positive affirmations based on fundamental recognitions.*

The real issue of contention, which apologists are typically unable to contest, is the fact that the question of a particular god's existence is not a fundamental issue in philosophy. Christians of course do not want this to be the case. They want their god's existence to be absolutely fundamental. But they lack the epistemological goods to substantiate such a position. But notice how every argument for the existence of a god requires that the one considering it exists, is conscious, and can discern between A and non-A. In other words, the Objectivist axioms must be true even in order to consider such arguments (let alone develop them and ensure their formal validity).

I've tried my best to explain this to theists, but they typically find it convenient to ignore what I have to say (notice how few attempt to interact with my arguments). They don't want to listen, they don't want to learn. They just want their imaginary deity, and to denounce the minds of everyone who does not bow to it.

Regards,
Dawson

[July 23, 2010 10:10 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

In response to Yog's comment, I agree that the presuppositionalist's course of debate is absurd and ultimately reduces to personal projection.

The presupper claims to know what everyone wants, even though there's no possible way that he's even met everyone, let alone had a chance to investigate everyone's wants and motivations. But this does not stop him from blanket generalizations of the masses.

Presuppers are constantly demanding that non-Christians answer the question "how do you know?" such as when they point to self-evident facts. But do presuppers themselves explain how they know the hearts of all men?

Instead of explaining how they could know such things by some rational process, they point to the bible, which essentially means they point to the source that they are simply repeating. They don't "know," they *repeat* what they've read in a storybook that they *want* to be true, and act as if they "know" it were true. But can they make good on such claims?

Not only does the presupper say that people want to go to hell, he says that people *knowingly* want to go to hell. The presupper claims to know that people knowingly want to spend an eternity in torment and suffering. And it is because they want this eternal torment and suffering that they allegedly "suppress the truth in unrighteousness." And non-believers allegedly "suppress the truth" because they don't want it to be true (even though, according to the presuppositionalist, they secretly know it to be true - another claim that they can never make good on).

It is demonstrably false that people generally (and willfully) "suppress" what they learn to be true. Non-believers exhibit the ability to accept facts that are uncomfortable all the time. When my grandmother was dying from cancer, I did not want to accept the fact that she was going to die as it made me very unhappy. But I did. When a friend of mine was diagnosed with cancer and given only 8 months to live, I did not want to accept this as it made me very unhappy. But I did. When I was summoned as a witness against someone I admired very deeply in a civil trial that had no rational basis, I did not like this, but I understood its reality. When my phone bill increases because of some arbitrary state tax that's been imposed by some appointed bureaucrat, do I deny the new sum on my bill because I don't like it? Of course not. I end up paying it all the same.

If a non-Christian is willfully "suppressing" what he has learned to be the case in reality, I would agree that it is possible that he is borrowing from the Christian worldview. For the Christian worldview models precisely this orientation to facts. Observe how Christians deny evolution and natural selection in order to further their religious agenda.

Now if I'm willing to accept facts which impact my values on a daily basis, why wouldn't I accept facts which impact my values on an eternal basis? No Christian has been able to explain how such a feat is even possible, let alone desirable, as they clearly claim it is.

On the contrary, the presupper is telling us about himself: he's telling us that, on his view, acceptance of the content of claims ultimately reduces to what one *wants* to be true. Since he projects his own orientation to "truth" to everyone else, he believes he can *know* what motivates everyone else's decisions. That is why he frames the issue in terms of what one wants or doesn't want to be the case, and that is why he resorts to pointing to some ancient text as the "means" by which he allegedly knows something about everyone else's desires and motivations. He has no facts to back up his case, he only has his "presuppositions" which have no factual basis from the very beginning. And as Yog rightly points out, it's simply a matter of projection at this point.

Regards,
Dawson

[July 23, 2010 10:47 AM](#)

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