

Tuesday, June 22, 2010

### Was I Ever a Presuppositionalist Myself?

I tend not to write about myself or my life on my blog, since I prefer to keep my posts focused on ideas, and also because I doubt anyone would find aspects of my personal life particularly interesting. So I naturally tend to keep my autobiographical writings private.

But I'll make an exception in this case to respond to a question I recently received by a visitor to my blog (see [here](#)).

Jay asked:

When you were a professing Christian, were you involved with presuppositionalism?

The answer is: Not at all.

When I was a professing Christian (and believe me, I was quite terrible at it), I had never heard of presuppositionalism. (There was also no internet at the time.) The sect to which I belonged would have condemned presuppositionalism as haughty men's wisdom, as an extravagant form of vanity to be shunned for the sake of preserving one's salvation, and as an overt attempt to lean upon one's own understanding as opposed to "trusting the Lord" (cf. Prov. 3:5). The sect to which I belonged was heavy into street evangelism, but so far as I could tell it did not indulge in constructing and/or defending arguments for the existence of any god.

Apologetics as it is known in print and on the net was, from what I could tell, a non-existent part of the Christian program with these people. The Christian god's existence was taken for granted, just as it is in the bible. You don't find arguments for the existence of the Christian god in the bible, so the Christians I knew saw such argumentation as folly. The bible didn't model theistic apologetics, so as practitioners of Christianity the sect I was associated with did not take up the task. Rather, preaching *at* people, telling them that they were damned if they did not repent and "confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus" (cf. Rom. 10:9), insisting that this could be their last chance before perishing in sin to accept the grace of salvation made possible by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, these were the "tools" of witnessing that were emphasized in the sect that suckered me.

According to these believers, the whole idea of trying to prove the existence of the Christian god by means of argumentation would be entirely counter to what they would consider "the fruits" of genuine faith. Their view was more, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." They would often rephrase it to say, "God said it, that settles it," to remove any implication that one's belief had anything to do with "settling it."

So, instead of arguments which seek to validate belief in a god, the preferred method was simply to presume that such belief was unquestionably true and scoff at the idea that such belief needed to be validated by means of men's thinking. If anyone questioned the existence of the Christian god, they were dismissed as being infected with devils, as under the spell of Satan, and the only remedy was prayer rather than argument. We were compelled by our pastor and other church authorities to "Let go, and let God." Shame and psychological sanctions rather than ten-gallon words and syllogisms, were the preferred tools of their trade. The net affect was that, once the underlying premises were accepted, one was positively terrified of even considering the question, "Does God exist?" To consider this question could only imply that it was a question worth considering, and such a values statement was intolerably disobedient. A servant does not question the existence of the master he seeks to faithfully serve.

So there were no arguments to be found, especially the kind which presuppositionalists claim to have. A mind which can prove its own verdicts is a mind which is empowered by its own hard-won content. But such a situation is anathema to the mindset demanded of the Christian by the Christian devotional program. A mind which can prove its own verdicts is a mind which has confidence in its own inner workings. But this amounts only in confidence in self, and if anything could be considered the property of the enemy with any consistency among these believers, it was "the self." That was the meaning behind "Let go, and let God": to allow God to work in one's life, you had to get out of God's way. To be a good believer, one had to get his *self* out of the way, to "deny

himself” as Mt. 16:24 instructs, and subordinate his affections, desires, values, judgments, and every move of cognitive muscle he makes, to the being he fears in the realm of his imagination.

I remember one occasion quite vividly, when the pastor explicitly denounced the very notion of self-esteem. And to be consistent with the demands of his devotional program, the pastor was right to do this. For self-esteem is incompatible with the mindset expected of the believer by the devotional program. Such denunciations were no accident. No one in the congregation was allowed to have any self-esteem, and following an inference successfully to its conclusion is a form of success, and as such it is at enmity with the carefully managed dismantling of the human mind which the devotional program of Christianity executes on converts.

The fear here is that the believer might hinge his beliefs on an argument, which could only mean that his own understanding, rather than “trust in the Lord” was the bedrock of his faith, and faith and understanding are entirely opposed to one another. Since the mindset required of the believer by the devotional program of Christianity is one of complete submission, the habit of relying on one’s own understanding needs to be broken indefinitely. This is why various forms of pressure are used to manipulate converts in such sects as the one I was a part of nearly 20 years ago.

This requires that the witness pretend that he is speaking for the god in question. Attempted manipulations of prospective proselytes are executed in the form of statements given on behalf of the ruling consciousness, both in terms of expectation and affection for the would-be convert. For instance, the witness would say to the man on the street a mixture of “God wants you to...” and “God wants for you...” formulae delivered against the backdrop of the illusion of divine omniscience: “God knows your situation...” “God knows why you have a broken heart...” “God knows why you’re troubled...” “God has the solution...”

Such formulae put the witness in a position of authority while simultaneously letting him off the hook: he implies that he knows the things which his words touch on (which, if believed, is powerfully invasive), while conveying that he is just a messenger, detached from it all and merely sent as a servant (which is powerfully palliative, since it purports to provide a sympathetic peer). The goal here is to build in the imagination of the would-be convert the fantasy that a supernatural being is concerned and cares for him, that the creator of the universe and ruler of reality has taken an interest in him, for no stated reason, and that all he needs to do is respond positively to the overtures made manifest by the witness’s efforts to convey the message from beyond the universe.

There’s no use of argument in any of this, because there’s no inferring going on. It’s not intellectual, it is strictly *anti-intellectual*. That’s the real ground roots Christianity that takes the bible seriously as a guide to one’s worldview. The Apostle Paul wasn’t sitting there bickering with people over who could best account for logic, or which worldview could provide a rational basis for universality, or how numbers could have meaning in a “material only universe.” Paul was not debating people on things like how one could make sense of “invariant abstract entities,” provide a sound basis for assuming nature is uniform, or which worldview best comports with objective norms of morality. These were not issues that Paul ever takes up in his letters. From what we can put together from the New Testament, Paul simply preached and grew his churches. And he did so with the skill of a master campaigner, using every conflict as an opportunity to promote his religious agenda. There’s no record of him assembling arguments for the existence of the Christian god, whether cosmological, teleological, or “transcendental.” Paul’s topics were different from this, such as reconciling “the law” as it was understood in the Old Testament with the new covenant of grace, preaching “Christ crucified,” addressing the problem of evil, defining the fruits of discipleship, etc. In each concern, Paul’s case assumes the existence of the Christian god, thereby relieving him from needing to argue for it.

That’s why the presuppositionalists’ appeal to the tales found in Acts 17 as vindication for their apologetic pretenses is itself a pretense: when the story has Paul address the people at the Areopagus, he knew that he didn’t have to present an argument proving the existence of any god. He could tell that the people at the Areopagus had already accepted the notion of a god, and Paul simply sought to fill in the blank on its identity. If the account in Acts is at all accurate (and believers tell us it is, even though they were not there), this was the opportunistic parasitism of Paul on display at its best.

Probably what struck me the most about presuppositionalism when I first encountered it a dozen or so years ago, is its hallmark presumptuousness. Apologists in this camp are essentially programmed to assume that they know in advance what their opponent’s positions on various issues are, and then proceed to tear them down with

pre-fabricated refutations which probably even they themselves do not fully understand (if they did, it's hard to see how they would repeat them while keeping a straight face). They essentially regurgitate whatever they've read in apologetics books, and thus have no clue how to handle positions which those books do not specifically address. Objectivism comes into mind here.

The presuppositionalist treatment of the problem of induction is a perfect example of this. Primers on presuppositionalism which model the apologetic attack on induction are geared toward critiquing Hume's view of induction. But what do these apologists do when Hume's understanding of induction is not the view of a particular non-believer? Presuppositionalists don't know what to do in such a case. All atheists are supposed to automatically align themselves with Hume's views. That's what the apologetics books imply to the field apologist. Since these books do not actually teach apologists to think critically about the issues which they purport to address, they're frozen solid against a position which happens to take a critical look at the underlying issues of the matter, such as the conception of causality, the integrating role of concepts, the open-ended nature of universality, etc. The presuppositional apologetic crumbles into mudpies when faced with such a situation.

The presumptuousness that is so characteristic of presuppositional apologetics is an expression of the very arrogance inherent in Christianity that I called out in [my previous post](#). As I started to examine what presuppositionalist authors were saying more deeply, I readily saw how effectually Objectivism answers its assertions. I realized that Objectivism has the kind of arguments that presuppositionalists wish they had but can never handle, given their ignorance of the issue of metaphysical primacy. They are done in by their own blind spots. One needs only to point this out to deflate their petulant presumptuousness.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: ["Arrogance"](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#)

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

#### 1 Comments:

[Jason](#) said...

Thanks for the response, I didn't expect the question to provoke such a detailed reply. I know that you publish very little autobiographical type stuff here. I'm glad I asked!

Regarding Acts 17, and Paul speaking about the altar to an "unknown god", I heard this put forward as an example of presuppositionalism in action. This was years ago, on Gene Cook's radio show. He asserted that Paul's intention was *not* to establish some common ground between himself and the Athenians. It was actually to mock the pagan polytheists, to expose their worldview as superstitious foolishness.

I had a quick read of the passages. In Acts 17:22, Depending on the translation, Paul calls the Athenians religious (a good thing, right?), superstitious, or "given up to demon worship" (presumably a bad thing). I don't know if this line was antagonistic or friendly or something in between (or even written down accurately).

Anyway, It's clear that he's appealing to the pagans' pre-Christian theism. He presents his own monotheistic god as a bigger, stronger, better thing in the same category.

I saw another Christian trying to evangelise online in a mysterious way, using Paul's reference to the altar to the "unknown god". This was years ago on the old IIDB.org, a board full of atheists. No idea what he thought he was trying to pull off there.

regards,

Jay

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