

Presuppositionalism Is Not The Way To Go. Quanhua Liu

I want to thank Mr. Collender for his presentation, which provides us an opportunity to discuss an important issue: how to adjudicate conflicting worldviews such as the Christian worldview and the Buddhist worldview. Mr. Collender told us that it is not easy to find a criterion to get the job done. The good news is that he has found one, namely, the TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENT though his paper does not explicitly tell us the original source of his approach or its reference. When we put “worldview”, “presupposition”, “transcendental argument” and the like together, it is clear that Mr. Collender’s appeal is called “PRESUPPOSITIONALISM”. It can be helpful to understand Presuppositionalism before we get into other issues concerning his paper.

I. Presuppositionalism

Presuppositionalism is a theological school of Christian apologetics. In general, Christian apologetics has a threefold task: It attempts to lay down a rational ground for the Christian faith, defends the faith against objections, and most noticeably criticizes the alleged flaws of other worldviews. Starting in the early 20th century, presuppositional apologetics or Presuppositionalism is a relatively new approach and favored by certain groups of Protestants, i.e. the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. The major proponents that I am familiar with are Cornelius Van Til and Gordon Clark.

Presuppositionalism differs from other groups of Christian apologetics by accusing them of attempting to find neutral grounds (some facts or laws) to establish the Christian worldview. Van Til’s claims that the Christian must from the very beginning presuppose the supernatural revelation of the Bible as the criterion

of truth in order to know anything else because all human knowledge presupposes the existence of the Christian God. Borrowing Kant's **transcendental method** or argument, which I will discuss later, Van Til argues "The only proof for the existence of God is that without God you could not prove anything". While criticizing non-Christian worldviews, Van Tilians usually argue they are incoherent in and of themselves and intelligible only because they borrow capital from the Christian worldview. The concept of **coherence or consistence** plays a crucial role in their defense of their views and in their attacks to their opponents' as well. Clark puts even more emphasis on coherence. He views the truth of the Bible as an axiom which as the presupposition cannot be proved or disproved. However it must be tested for logical consistency with other presuppositions or axioms within the worldview. The Christian worldview is analogous to an axiom or formal system. Clark defends the Christian worldview by arguing for its consistency and rejects non-Christian worldviews by accusing their presuppositions of logical inconsistency. Nonetheless, Van Til and Clark disagree with each other on the nature of coherence. Van Tilians believe the concept of coherence itself must be defined in terms of the Christian presuppositions whereas Clark treats coherence as a "neutral principle for discerning the truth of any proposition".

It seems to me that this disagreement indicates a problem in Presuppositionalism. On the one hand, it is questionable define the concept of coherence or consistence (a syntactical one) exclusively in terms of the Christian presuppositions (a semantic one) without changing its meaning in some way. The semantic definition of consistence also makes Presuppositionalism vulnerable to the attack of relativism. On the other hand, if coherence is "a neutral principle", the presuppositionalist is not consistent because it accuses other apologists of putting the Christian worldview on some neutral grounds.

The critics of Presuppositionalism usually accuse it of committing a circular reasoning: Presuppositionalism rests on a belief in the Bible as the source of truth because it is inspired by God. Meanwhile we believe in God because the Bible affirms it and the Bible is the source of truth. There are many articles on this topic, and hence I will not discuss it today.

II. If you are not a Presuppositionalist...

If my brief introduction has explicated Presuppositionalism implicitly adopted in Mr. Collender's paper, then I want to raise some questions about it. First, let us imagine what an "outsider" who does not advocate Presuppositionalism would say about it. There are several possibilities:

*If you are an evidentialist apologist not a presuppositional apologist, you may find a non-presuppositional approach like Thomas Aquinas' has its appeal simply because it can utilize many disciplines in support of the existence of God, not merely a presupposition.

*If you are a realist, for example you believe in the correspondence theory of truth instead of the coherence theory of truth, you would say true propositions are true because they tell what things really are, not because they are coherent with other propositions. Furthermore, you may think the coherence theory can point out the conjunction of two statements A and not-A is inconsistent, and one of them must be true and the other false, but the theory cannot tell which is true and which is false without appealing to some realist criterion.

*If you believe in pluralism and the coherence theory of truth at the same time, you can logically hold there are more than one coherent systems, Christian or not. Logic teaches us any consistent axiom system will have infinitely many models. The attempt to

characterize a model uniquely by giving axioms will be doomed to fail. Clark treats the presuppositions in the Christian worldview as a consistent set of axioms in the hope to characterize it uniquely. He does not realize that if the CW were such a system, this set of consistent presuppositions or axioms could logically produce not one but infinitely many models of Christian worldviews.

*If you are a Christian and realize there are conflicting views and logically problematic problems in the Christian worldview (for example, the problem of evil or Van Tilians claim there is no neutral ground for Christian faith while they criticize Thoms Aquinas holds the opposite), you of course do not reject the Christian faith because of the contradictory claims. Thus, you might wonder whether or not Presuppositionalism actually puts the Christian worldview in jeopardy when it rejects inconsistent worldviews without considering complicated history of the CW.

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*If you are a Buddhist, your ultimate goal is to get rid of the cause of all kinds of sufferings, that is to eliminate “craving for...” You do not desire for money, glory, power and the like including any presuppositions or coherent systems.

If you are a Presuppositionalist, well, you rejects Buddhism as Mr. Collender does in his paper. Let us see how well this job is done.

III. If you are Presuppositionalist...

I would like to play a presuppositionalist’s role, that is an insider’s role in evaluation of how Mr. Collender did in his criticism of the Buddhist worldview. Although I have found a quite few ambiguous expressions, questionable definitions (i.e. line 2), invalid arguments (from line 12 to line 16) and the like, I prefer to focus on two tougher things.

In the first place, I have found Mr. Collender has not mastered the Presuppositionalist's favorite method – Kant's transcendental argument. This method or argument in its complete form has three steps: (1) Admit that a given claim of empirical knowledge is true; (2) explore what cognitive presupposition makes the true claim possible; and (3) establish and justify the discovered transcendental ground for the empirical truth. In Kant's essay *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763), he applies this method to argue for the existence of God. According to him, logic, science, ethics and all human knowledge are not meaningful apart from a preconditioning belief in the existence of God. The major presuppositional apologists all use this argument for their own purpose. Note that unlike what Mr. Collender did, the transcendental method is not the same as proceeding from a certain unwarranted claim or belief to its unexamined presupposition and finally rejecting it. Instead, it proceeds from an admitted (empirical) truth to its transcendental ground and therefore lays down the ground for the truth. Had Mr. Collender used the transcendental argument properly, he should have argued certain truth in the BW is grounded in some view of the CW.

Secondly, a presuppositionalist depends upon the concept of coherence or consistency (1) to invalidate non-Christian worldviews or (2) to show some intelligible components of these worldviews borrow capital from the Christian worldview. These two aspects have a logical relation that Mr. Collender is not aware of. He attempts to show the Buddhist worldview is inconsistent in line 14 without realizing its logical implication – some claims in the inconsistent BW is consistent with the CW. Rejecting an inconsistent system of presuppositions is not the same as rejecting all the presuppositions constituting the inconsistent system. For the sake of the argument, let suppose that the CW consists of a set of presuppositions that are all consistent with the ultimate presupposition. Suppose again that the BW consists of an

inconsistent set of presuppositions, namely, both A and not-A are the members of the set. No doubt, a Presuppositionalist endorses the former and rejects the latter. However, in his rejection of the inconsistent BW, he must admit that either A or not-A is true and that there is at least one true presupposition in the BW. At the same time, the Presuppositionalist accepts the presupposition as truth only because it is consistent with the presuppositions in the CW. It follows some presupposition in the BW must be consistent with those in the CW. This logical relation forces Van Tilians to say some intelligible components of these non-Christian worldviews borrow capital from the Christian worldview. For those who know the independent histories of Buddhism and Christianity, this claim is plainly false. Without following the standard path of Presuppositionalism to the end, Mr. Collender luckily avoids this difficulty, but he certainly does not realize that inconsistent worldviews can be at least partly compatible according to the Presuppositionalist own logic.

VI. If there a better way to adjudicate conflicting worldviews?

Probably, you have figured out I do not care much about Presuppositionalism. You are right. My first reason for the disagreement is Presuppositionalism misrepresents the Christian worldview as one that is logically incompatible with other worldviews and therefore rejects and excludes them. This view is factually false and practically harmful. The other reason is there are much better ways to solve conflicting worldviews than Mr. Collender's paper suggests. Since our time is limited, let me briefly describe an Aristotelian approach. In Nicomachean Ethics VII 1, we find the following sentences; "We must, as in all other cases [Here Aristotle is talking about continence and endurance. Liu's note], set the observed facts before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the common opinions about these affections of the mind, or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both refute the

objections and leave the common opinions undisturbed, we shall have proved the case sufficiently". Aristotle takes a similar approach in his other works. Let me take the liberty of explaining his approach in the following way: When facing a given controversial issue, we first collect the observed facts about it and identify the difficulties concerning them. Then with the intention to prove the truth of all the common opinions, we resolve difficulties by both dialectical (deductive) argument and appeal to concrete evidence. Finally, we save the truth contained in all the reputable opinions and order them into a system. Clearly, Aristotle's "criteria" are multiple and complicated, but for the complicated issue that deals with conflicting worldviews, a simple solution like "consistency" cannot get the job done. Anyone labors in this approach will find the fruit is sweet. History (i.e. the conflicts between Confucianism and Buddhism in China) has proved the vitality or strength of a worldview depends on whether or not it can encompass the wisdom of all other worldviews not on how hard it tries to exclude them.