

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

## IN THE NICK OF TIME

Occasional Essays and Other Stuff for Christian Students Presented by the President of  
Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs Christian leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

"...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine."

September 18, 2009

Fundamentalism: Whence? Where? Whither? Part 6

Digression One: Really?

Kevin T. Bauder

Over several essays I have been attempting to describe the intellectual and social influences that were operating within the early fundamentalist movement. One of the earliest essays offered an overview of Scottish Common Sense Realism in which I suggested that most early Fundamentalists (among others) absorbed this philosophy from their intellectual milieu. Furthermore, I argued that Common Sense Realism had a definite and rather negative effect upon Fundamentalism.

Numbers of people have written to inform me of my several mistakes. The first is supposed to be that Common Sense Realism isn't really anything new because people have always made their real decisions on the basis of common sense. The second is that Common Sense Realism could not have affected early Fundamentalists all that much because they were Biblicists and not philosophers. The third is that the effects of Common Sense Realism cannot be as dire as I hinted.

In the present essay I wish to respond only to the first objection. The second really requires no response except to refer the reader to the rather substantial literature on the subject.<sup>1</sup> The third merits a separate discussion.

Is it true ordinary people (as opposed to philosophers) have always acted on the basis of common sense? One fellow in particular was quite definite. "If you see a cow in a field," he said, "You can just point to it and say, 'That's a cow.'" As far as he was concerned, this is just common sense, and it describes the way that people have always thought and acted.

No.

As it happens, I have some experience with this very question. I can recall standing beside a pasture with a city boy, who pointed to the large bovine and said, "That's a big cow." Actually, it was not. It was a bull.

When I pointed out the disparity, his retort was, "You know what I mean!" No, I did not. The only thing that I knew was what he actually said. I could guess that perhaps his vocabulary was so limited that the word *cow* was the only term he possessed to denote a bovine. Or I could speculate (and this was more likely) that he either did not know how to tell the difference between a cow and a bull or that the details had escaped his attention. I did *not* know what he meant, and it is quite possible—likely, even—that he didn't either. It is quite possible that his remark was thoughtless.

The declaration, "That's a cow," seems like a simple and straightforward act, but it is nothing of the kind. It is an elaborate act of interpretation and predication. Interpretation involves identifying several points on one's mental grid (existence, quantity, definiteness, identity, etc.) with external realities. The act of predication connects and communicates these points in a particular way.

If the last paragraph lost you, let me restate: we never perceive reality without interpreting it. More precisely, we never perceive reality until we have already interpreted it. The only reality that we notice and the only reality that we know is always and already interpreted. In short, there are no brute facts.

Reality is always and already interpreted. The ancients understood this. It was an axiom for the Greeks and Romans. It was part of the "discarded image" of the medieval world. Prior to modernity people assumed that what we perceive is not what is, but what we have understood it to be.

Because of this assumption, people were aware that real or ultimate reality might not match their perceptions. A Greek, looking at a swan or a pile of gold, was keenly conscious that he just might be looking at Zeus. A Hebrew, encountering a stranger at his door, knew that such a visitor might be an angel, or even God Himself. A man with a sword might turn out to be Jehovah, come as captain of the Lord's host. A hillside might *appear* to be empty, but who knew what chariots of fire might occupy it unseen?

For premoderns, the universe was numinous. The transcendent and supernatural were always just around the corner. The seams of reality were straining with the unperceived, and you had best be prepared.

Indeed, premoderns perceived some element of transcendence in ordinary objects. They habitually looked beyond what they saw, because every object signified something beyond itself. The perceived object was rarely or never considered as an ultimate (real) reality, but normally as a shadow or image of a greater reality. Right perception always looked through and beyond the thing to the reality that it shadowed. So, to perceive water truly was to perceive something about purity. To perceive gold truly was to perceive something about heaven. To perceive fire truly was to perceive something about hell.<sup>2</sup>

The chief characteristic of the premodern mind was its humility. Premoderns understood that the world as they perceived it was always and already interpreted. They knew that the scope of actual reality was so vast as to lie beyond their ability to grasp. Without such a grasp of the whole, they recognized that their perceptions of the particulars were so limited and local as inevitably to be misleading. They realized that particulars were meaningful only within the context of the whole, and they knew that they themselves lacked access to any immediate perception of the whole.

What they needed was help from outside. They needed an overall grasp of the structure of the whole, but this grasp could not be derived from their immediate perception of finite particulars. Ancient

thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle hoped to gain some glimpse of the whole through the methods of philosophical enquiry. Christians, however, believed that only God enjoyed a comprehensive view of reality. Consequently, they looked to God for a revelation of the whole. Only in view of that revelation could the particulars be placed within a context that would make the true interpretation apparent. So Christians humbled themselves, bent their minds before revelation, and accepted God and His communication as a starting point for true knowledge of the world.<sup>3</sup>

For premoderns, reality was not only ordered but also transcendent. It could not be understood from inside. It had to be viewed from above. Without the context provided by a transcendent overview, no particular could be known as it really ought to be. This transcendent overview was the Truth, and it had to be apprehended by faith.

In other words, for premoderns, truth came before facts and faith was primary. Only through faith could the Truth be appropriated, and only in view of the Truth could facts be understood rightly. The Truth provided a context without which the right facts would never be noticed or, if noticed, would never be rightly construed. For premoderns, the Truth was *up there*.

Modernity, epitomized by Common Sense Realism, shifted the focus from the transcendent to the immanent and, correspondingly, from the primacy of faith to the primacy of doubt.<sup>4</sup> Moderns no longer believed that the Truth was *up there*; they now assumed that the truth was *out there*. If any transcendent reality existed, then it had to be accessed through and justified by factors within perceived reality. The priority of Truth was abandoned and facts took center stage. The priority of faith was discarded and doubt became the vehicle that drove the acquisition of knowledge. Nothing could be believed that was not a demonstrable fact, but if only enough facts could be gathered and if only they could be observed long enough, then the truth was sure to emerge.

Common Sense Realism, in particular, abandoned the priority of the transcendent. By equating perceptions with reality, Common Sense Realists did not necessarily deny the transcendent, but they did subordinate knowledge of the transcendent to the acquisition of facts. The facts were assumed to be self-interpreting. The Common Sense notion of reality was essentially “What You See Is What You Get.”

This massive intellectual shift was absorbed by American Christians during the Nineteenth Century. It was a primary component in the intellectual atmosphere out of which Fundamentalism emerged. How it affected Fundamentalism and other forms of evangelicalism is a topic worth discussing separately. To that subject we shall turn in the next essay. ✕

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<sup>1</sup> The influence of Scottish Common Sense Realism has been a commonplace of American intellectual history since at least the mid-to-late 1970s. Ernest R. Sandeen, writing in 1970, recognizes the influence of Common Sense Realism upon Princeton theology, but does not explore it deeply, in *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millennialism, 1800, 1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 115. Claude Welch traces the influence of Scottish Philosophy in both New England Theology (specifically Nathaniel Taylor) and Princeton theology (specifically Charles Hodge) in *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century: Volume I, 1799-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 131, 202, et al. John R. Fitzmier discusses the combination of Edwardsian theology and Common Sense Philosophy to be found in Edwards’s grandson, Timothy Dwight: *New England’s Moral Legislator: Timothy Dwight, 1752-1817* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). Paul F. Boller Jr. notes the interaction of Unitarians and Transcendentalists with Common Sense Realism, and their exposure to it in the educational mainstream, in *American Transcendentalism 1830-*

1860: *An Intellectual Inquiry* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 42-44, 181. George M. Marsden first articulated the importance of Common Sense Realism for understanding Fundamentalism; his summary statement may be found in *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 14-16. Mark Noll exhibits primary sources that illustrate the influence of Common Sense Realism in Princeton theology in *The Princeton Theology 1812-1921* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983, 2001), *passim*. David B. Calhoun notes, "At Princeton—as in much of early Nineteenth Century Protestantism—Scottish Common Sense Philosophy reigned. Congregationalists at Yale and Unitarians at Harvard embraced it nearly as enthusiastically as did Presbyterian Princeton." He insists that the Princetonians "saw Scottish Common Sense Philosophy as setting forth the universal and permanent truths," *Princeton Seminary: The Magnificent Testimony 1869-1929* (Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 413. For an evaluation of the relationship between Common Sense Realism and Reformed theology at Princeton, consult Tim McConnel in "The Old Princeton Apologetics: Common Sense or Reformed?" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (December 2003), 647-671. While nearly everyone acknowledges the influence of Common Sense Realism upon American theology (and especially Princeton) during the Nineteenth Century, the exact nature of the influence is a subject of debate. See Peter Hicks, *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge: A 19<sup>th</sup> Century Evangelical Approach to Reason, Knowledge, and Truth* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1997). Many of Hicks's insights are incorporated into Paul Kjos Helseth, "'Re-Imagining' the Princeton Mind: Postconservative Evangelicalism, Old Princeton, and the Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism," in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (September 2002), 427-450. To see how Common Sense influenced a significant Fundamentalist leader through the Princeton tradition, see Darryl G. Hart, "The Princeton Mind in the Modern World and the Common Sense of J. Gresham Machen" in *Westminster Theological Journal* (Spring 1984), 1-25. James E. Bradley revisits the theme of Common Sense Realism, setting it in a broader context of influences, in "The Nineteenth Century," in D. G. Hart and R. Albert Mohler Jr., eds., *Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 148ff. Joel Carpenter notes the influence of Scottish Common Sense Realism on the Fundamentalism of the 1920s through the 1940s in *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 36, 72. Mark Noll traces the influence of Common Sense Philosophy into contemporary evangelicalism and Fundamentalism in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), *passim*. He also has an article devoted exclusively to the subject, "Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought," *American Quarterly* 37 (Summer 1985), 216-238. A recent recitation of the effects of Common Sense Realism upon evangelical theology can be found in Lindon J. DeBie, *Speculative Theology and Common Sense Religion: Mercersburg and the Conservative Roots of American Religion* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock / Pickwick Publications, 2008). For an evangelical scholar who believes that the embracing of Common Sense categories was a good thing, see Robert L. Thomas, "The Nature of Truth: Postmodern or Propositional?" in *Masters Seminary Journal* (Spring 2007), 3-21.

<sup>2</sup>Please note that these descriptions—and indeed, this entire discussion—are an almost inexcusable simplification of the premodern metaphysical dream. Those who are interested in understanding it more comprehensively might begin with C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1964). Among medievalists, Lewis's work is regarded as a bit dated today, but it remains a very accessible introduction to the medieval mind.

<sup>3</sup>Readers may believe that they recognize in my description the characteristics of Dutch Neo-Reformed thinking as advocated by Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, and their followers. I confess that I find much in Presuppositionalism that rings true. What I am describing in this essay, however, is a way of thinking about reality that antedates the Reformation and that was once shared

by virtually all Christians. Van Til did not invent this perspective.

<sup>4</sup>Students of philosophy might wonder about the relationship of Immanuel Kant to the intellectual environment of the period. Kant did revert to the distinction between reality and perception (noumenon and phenomenon), but he continued to reject the priority of the transcendent and the primacy of faith. Rather than allowing faith to stand as the basis of knowing, Kant effectively divided faith from knowing and put the two in airtight compartments. Most of subsequent Western philosophy (and theology!) is a long series of attempts to resolve this division. Once Kant's structures were in place, however, more and more of what used to be considered knowledge was redefined as faith, and faith was re-imagined as assumption. The philosophical structures proposed by Kant fostered the discipline of phenomenology and eventually opened the door for postmodernism. Kant may be regarded as the first modern to critique modernity (though some have understood Hume to be doing the same thing). The main difference between Kant and the later postmoderns is that Kant had not yet abandoned his optimism.

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This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of [Central Baptist Theological Seminary](#). Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses. New subscriptions to this electronic newsletter can be requested at [inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu](mailto:inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu).

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## A Hymn to my God in a Night of my Late Sicknesse

Sir Henry Wotton (1568-1639)

Oh thou great Power, in whom I move,  
For whom I live, to whom I die,  
Behold me through thy beams of love,  
Whilst on this couch of fears I lye;  
And Cleanse my sordid soul within,  
By thy Christs Blood, the bath of sin.

No hallowed Oyls, no grains I need,  
No rags of Saints, no purging fire,  
One rosie drop from David's Seed  
Was worlds of Seas, to quench thine Ire.  
O precious Ransome! which once paid,  
That Consummatum est was said.

And said by him, that said no more,  
But seal'd it with his sacred Breath.  
Thou then, that hast dispung'd my score,  
And dying, wast the death of Death;  
Be to me now, on thee I call,  
My Life, my Strength, my Joy, my All. ✠

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