

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

### *POSTMODERNISM AND NATURAL THEOLOGY*

One of the ongoing themes of *Issues in Perspective* is coming to terms with Postmodernism. My goal is to keep you informed and help you to deepen your understanding of the times in which we live. As we understand the times, we can more effectively represent the Lord Jesus to this culture. Postmodernism embraces personal autonomy and relativism in the extreme. In fact, the core value of the Postmodern world is personal autonomy! However, in many ways this claim is a myth. The Postmodern person is not autonomous and does not embrace relativism when it comes to science, or technology or medicine. Further, spiritual things are important in the Postmodern world; it is just that spirituality is what works for me as an autonomous person. William Craig has written: “. . . tailoring our gospel to a postmodern culture is self-defeating. By laying aside our best apologetic weapons of logic and evidence, we ensure modernism’s triumph over us. If the church adopts this course of action, the consequences in the next generation will be catastrophic. Christianity will be reduced to but another voice in a cacophony of competing voices, each sharing its own narrative and none commending itself as the objective truth about reality. Meanwhile, scientific naturalism will continue to shape our culture’s view of how the world really is.” It is instructive therefore that several major best sellers have been recently published that defend atheism. The works of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens immediately come to mind. But this “new atheism” lacks intellectual muscle. Each of these works merely rehashes old arguments and dresses them up for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thankfully, as William Craig reports in a recent issue of *Christianity Today*, there is a resurgence of Christian philosophy that focuses on arguments dealing with natural theology.

For this reason, Craig believes that today a robust natural theology is necessary for the church. It is relevant and compelling to counter the growing shallowness and superficiality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. Following Craig, allow me to summarize the five major arguments of natural theology:

#### 1. **The cosmological argument.**

- Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause.
- If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God.
- The universe exists.
- Therefore, the explanation of the universe’s existence is God.

#### 2. **The kalam cosmological argument.**

- Everything that begins to exist has a cause.

- The universe began to exist.
- Therefore, the universe has a cause.

### 3. **The teleological argument.**

- The fine-tuning of the universe is due either to physical necessity, chance, or design.
- It is not due to physical necessity or chance.
- Therefore, it is due to design.

### 4. **The moral argument.**

- If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist.
- Objective moral values and duties do exist.
- Therefore, God exists.

### 5. **The ontological argument.**

- It is possible that a maximally great being (God) exists.
- If it is possible that a maximally great being exists, then a maximally great being exists in some possible world.
- If a maximally great being exists in some possible world, then it exists in every possible world.
- If a maximally great being exists in every possible world, then it exists in the actual world.
- Therefore, a maximally great being exists in the actual world.
- Therefore, a maximally great being exists.
- Therefore, God exists.

This has no doubt been a difficult *Perspective* for many, because it encapsulates in summary fashion some most sophisticated arguments. However, to discuss God is not easy and to make a case for natural theology is not easy. But Jesus states that we are to love the Lord our God with our heart, soul, mind and strength. We do not place our minds on the shelf in our faith. Our minds are central to our faith. Making a reasonable case for God's existence is part of that stewardship. However, it is imperative to also remember that the case for theism (that there is a God) is only the first step. Next, is the case that Jesus Christ is the Godman, who is the world's Savior. Postmodernism as a worldview is a dismal failure. People simply cannot live with its implications. Naturalism is not an acceptable worldview either. We do not live in a mechanistic, materialistic universe. There is a God and He has revealed Himself—both in His creation and in His Word. We had better do our homework and be ready to present this case before this intellectually bankrupt world in which we live (see 1 Peter 3:15).

See William Lane Craig's most helpful article in *Christianity Today* (July 2008), pp. 22-27.

## **PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO**

### **HUMANAE VITAE AT 40 YEARS**

Forty years ago Pope Paul VI issued his now famous papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, establishing the inseparability of the bonding and procreating aspects of human sexuality that need honor and respect throughout the course of marriage. The encyclical also endorsed the principle of “responsible parenthood,” but largely frowned upon all forms of contraception for Catholics. It is probably true that few Roman Catholics have actually read Pope Paul VI’s encyclical, but it remains a key, guiding light for how the Church thinks about human sexuality and birth control.

Perhaps more relevant today on how to apply this encyclical is Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s (now Pope Benedict XVI) reflections on *Humanae Vitae*. He cites three major objectives that the Church has in applying this encyclical:

1. To insist on the value of the child.
2. Not to lose sight of the inner connection between sexuality and procreation that keeps children from becoming “products” rather than the outcome of a relationship.
3. To resist the illusion that humanity can resolve “great moral problems simply with techniques” rather than “morally, with a lifestyle.”

Overall, I am not an advocate of Roman Catholic theology per se. But the fact is often true that the Church has consistently been a strong advocate for life, even life in the mother’s womb. Some of the most significant critiques of abortion, euthanasia or doctor-assisted suicide have come from Catholic theologians. For that, we Protestants can be most thankful.

For that reason, on this 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, allow me to summarize a Christian ethic of life as it relates to the fetus:

1. **Is the fetus a human being?** At conception, all aspects of humanness, as defined by DNA, are present. Genetically, it is quite difficult to argue otherwise.
2. **Is the human fetus a person?** This is an increasingly pressing question today. The biological term, “life,” has been exchanged for the legal term, “person.” This is a critical switch in terms because only “persons” have rights, including the right to life. Paul and John Feinberg argue in their book, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, that at conception the DNA strands of the embryo are species-specific. Furthermore, although the fetus is dependent upon the mother, he or she is an independent individual. Finally, there is substantial identity between the embryo, the viable fetus, the infant, the child, the adult and the elderly person (p. 58 ff.). The fetus is a “person.”
3. **How do the rights of the fetus relate to the rights of the mother?** American culture has so totally focused on the rights of the mother that it gives no credence to the rights of the fetus. This is wrong. There must be a balance of rights. Somehow Christians must make the case for protecting the rights of the unborn child. Paul and John Feinberg have suggested a starting point:  
“While it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to convince a pro-abortionist of the personhood of the fetus, nevertheless from a purely ethical point of view it still makes sense to demand that human life should not be arbitrarily terminated, particularly when less dramatic solutions exist. Such solutions should be sought on the side of both the fetus and the mother. Having once been conceived, the fetus has no choice but to grow,

just as it had no choice in its conception or its blond hair or blue eyes. Hence, the fetus is without recourse or remedy. The same is not true of the mother, who has at least three alternatives other than abortion. She can exercise initial will power by abstinence, which is grossly out of fashion today. She has the option to use contraceptives to prevent the unwanted child. And finally, given the birth of the child, the mother can allow the living but unwanted infant to be put up for adoption (p. 71).”

Fundamentally, human life is valuable and significant because it bears the image of God, the governing proposition when it comes to all life issues.

See Peter Seinfelds, *New York Times* (2 August 2008) and James P. Eckman, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 30-31.

## **PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE**

### ***THE BATTLE OF TOURS, 732 AD***

In the 100 years from the death of Muhammad in 632 AD until 732 AD, Islam spread rapidly to the East, going to the Indus River Valley, and to the West, conquering all of northern Africa. In 711 an army of Berber converts to Islam crossed the Straits of Gibraltar and soon took control of southern Iberia (Spain). The final advance of Islam into the Christian west came when Muslim armies crossed over the Pyrenees into the south of France in 718. Near Poitiers, France (near Tours), the Muslim armies met those of the Frankish ruler, Charles Martel (the Hammer). Charles defeated the Muslims at this history-changing battle, for Poitiers (Tours) marks the high water mark of Islam in Western Europe. Charles arranged his army at the top of a steep, wooded hill to deal in a defensive way with the invading Muslim cavalry. He had his men huddle together to form a large square, holding up their shields as a “shield wall,” while creating a row of spears to fend off the Muslim cavalry. Wave after wave of Muslim cavalrymen came, but the shield wall held!

But what if Charles Martel’s army had not held; what if the shield wall had collapsed? Gene Edward Veith comments on five major consequences if all of Europe had fallen to Islam:

1. We would have no legislatures, for Islam does not recognize the creation of new laws. Shari’a is sufficient for all time. An absolute ruler, or caliph would govern. Political liberty as now exists in the West is impossible in an Islamic society.
2. Islam does not approve of representative art, for it is a sin to try and picture another human being in art. The only acceptable forms of art are elaborate designs for their mosques and tapestries. Islam has no drama and only limited fiction.
3. In the history of Islam, science was abstract and theoretical, “missing the way Western engineers turned scientific discovery into applied technology.”
4. The church would be marginalized and restricted. As long as they pay deference to Islam, Christians can remain in small groups to propagate their faith in their families, but no larger than that.
5. Muslims would control all aspects of the culture and their goal would be to bring everything under the authority of Shari’a.

The point is that Christianity shaped and indirectly affected almost all aspects of western civilization. If that shield wall had not held in 732 AD, we would still be stuck in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The Battle of Tours (Poitiers) was indeed a watershed in human history. The world was totally different because of that strategic battle. God, in His mercy, preserved western civilization to develop all its unique characteristics, centered on human liberty, freedom and individualism. Even those who reject Christianity should be thankful that the Muslims did not win the Battle of Tours in 732 AD.

See *The Oxford History of Islam*, pp. 313-315 and Gene Edward Veith, *Tabletalk* (July 2008), pp. 82-84.