**SCIENCE AND SKEPTICISM**

My take on how to think about questions about the “paranormal” as a Christian.

I do not really like this title. Oh wait…. I chose this title!

We have already seen a talk on the biblical basis for thinking about these things.

We have already seen a possible psychological explanation for much if not all of what we label as paranormal experiences.

We have already heard a number of compelling testimonials.

It kind of reminds me of my experience on the jury last week.

As the prosecutor summed his case….

As the defense attorney summed his case…..

Three approaches to acquiring knowledge and truth used by Christians:

1. Rationalism. What is true must be logical—it must make sense. If it is not reasonable it is not true.

2. Empiricism. What is true is what can be demonstrated to be true by observation and experience.

3. Biblicism. What is true is decided by the Bible alone. Reason and experience are not significantly valid in order to decide what is true.

I see these very much on display and argued over in our church and in Christianity today.

1. Rationalism. What is true must be logical—it must make sense.

Descartes, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas: If it is true, then it must be reasonable.

Extreme example: disbelief in the reality of evil, disbelief in hell, disbelief in demons.

I hear people say, “I don’t believe in that.” I can’t accept that. It simply doesn’t make sense to me. It does not compute.

Is that a good argument?

I say yes it is, but it should not be the only story. I Cor 1: Greeks look for wisdom….

There is the problem of presuppositions in any rational system.

Logical/Rational Christianity…. Early church heretical movements, Calvinism.

2. Empiricism. What is true is what can be demonstrated to be true by observation.

William of Ockham, Francis Bacon, David Hume, Augustine

Extreme: To completely deny the existence of anything which has not been demonstrated. To give the benefit of the doubt to science, not to the Bible.

To reject ghosts, demons, etc a-priori on the grounds that they cannot be shown to be real.

Argument: Demon possession is no longer observed in the Western world today. This is because people no longer believe in such superstitions.

Is this a good argument?

I say yes, but it is not and should not be the whole story. 1 Cor 1: Jews look for signs.

Experiential Christianity.

3. Biblicism. What is true is decided by the Bible alone.

Extreme example: If the Bible said Jonah swallowed the whale, I would believe that!

In other words, I believe against reason.

I definitely disagree with this. This requires that I believe what I know is not true. Example: Augustine, Manichaeism and Faustus.

Argument:

It says this in the Bible (according to my interpretation). Whether or not I can “prove it” empirically or whether or not it is reasonable/makes sense is beside the point.

Is this a good argument?

I say yes, but it should not be the whole story. But we preach Christ crucified (and raised from the dead).

Overemphasis on this approach can lead to irrational Christianity.

Biblical Christianity.

My suggestion:

Eclectic, skeptical no-particular-ism.

One thing I can guarantee, my name for this will never be picked up.

The problem of philosophy/the problem of epistemology.

The problem of the philosopher: They must find the one true, correct means to discover what is true.

Example: Augustine. We know in order to believe. To the philosopher, if he or she takes this position, this is the end of the story.

Knowledge of God is the foundation of all belief. He is not against logic or philosophy, but he completely distrusts human intellect as a way to acquire fundamental knowledge of God. We acquire true free will only after we are saved. Completely distrusts rational thought as a basis for belief. Rational thought and argument are legitimate tools of the believer, but not for arriving at knowledge of God.

Problem:

This philosophy cannot be sustained in real Christianity.

This is why, for practical reasons, the Roman Church eventually discarded Augustinianism.

If it had not been rejected, we would not have science today.

It provided no motivation for righteous behavior or to the masses to try to be spiritual.

Example: Thomas Aquinas. We believe in order to know God. Buys the ontological argument and the cosmological argument. This is the basis for belief. If something is true, it must be reasonable.

Problem: This is not true. (example: the trinity is not rational.)

Why do we need to choose? Who said?

Side point: The truth is never irrational, but it is not always rational. The trinity is not rational. Human reason will not take us there. The biblical balance between justice and grace is not reasonable. Knowledge of God is not uniquely and only obtainable by rational thought. Experience is certainly one legitimate means of knowing God.

Example: William of Ockham and Nominalism. There are no absolute abstract thing such as a tree or…. This is extreme empiricism. I like this for science, but not for God. In a sense, it is a kind of Augustinianism.

God is love. What is love? God is just. What is justice?

A case study: Augustine and Manichaeism.

Augustine:

Augustine had serious question raised by the cosmology of Manichaeism.

For example, the waxing and waning of the moon was literally was caused by the influx and loss of fragments of “Light” flowing back and forth between the earth and the moon.

This is a reason to reject Hinduism and Buddhism, both of which insist that time is eternal, there is no “creation.”

“I compared their [the natural philosophers and astronomers] views with those of Manes who, drawing on a rich vein of pure fantasy, has had a lot to say on these subjects. I found in him no reason given for the solstices and the equinoxes or the eclipses of the sun and moon or anything else of this kind which I had learned in the books of secular philosophy. I was told to believe in these views of Manes; but they did not correspond with what had been established by mathematics and my own eyesight; in fact they were widely divergent.” (Book 5 Ch 3 Confessions of Augustine)

About Manes: “he was shown up by people who had an accurate knowledge of them, and it was thus made perfectly plain how much reliance could be placed on his understanding of other more abstruse matters….. when he was caught out making false statements about the heavens and the stars and the movements of the sun and moon, even though these things are not an integral part of religious doctrine, yet it was clear enough that his presumption was sacrilegious: he was talking about things he did not know; he was making false statements about them, and so mad was the vanity of his pride, that he attempted to have these statements attributed to him as though he were a divine person.”

He waited 9 years for an answer, and hoped it would be satisfied by Faustus.

Augustine thought Faustus of Milevis could help him with the rational questions astronomy raised with Manichaeism.

He discovered that Faustus was not educated in the physical sciences, but only was a student of literature.

Concerning Christians who presume to make ignorant scientific statements from an authoritative stance: “But it does do him harm if he imagines that this scientific knowledge is an integral part of the structure of the doctrine of piety, and then has the audacity to make overconfident assertions on the subjects of which he knows nothing.”

Faustus was somewhat surprisingly humble and simply admitted that he never thought about it…. Augustine drifted away and finally left Manichaeism.

My response: We do not have to commit to a philosophy. We have to commit to faith in God and take a somewhat eclectic approach truth. We can learn from philosophy. We can use philosophical tools (example, Justin, Clement of Rome, Origen), but we should never be the tool of a philosophy.

How does this apply to the questions before us this weekend?

Do ghosts (defined as disembodied former actual persons) actually exist?

Do we go with Biblicism? If so, where do we end up?

What about rationalism?

What about empiricism?

Reproducible evidence has thus far been elusive.

Do demons (defined as actual beings/persons who have chosen to rebel against God and become is some sense evil) exist?

Does demon possession exist?

What about witchcraft? Do witches in country X have actual power?

(Exodus 7:10-13 Pharoah’s magicians appear to have real power) (2 Thess 2:9-12 counterfeit miracles and a powerful delusion. Is this a purely psychological thing?)

What about Ouija boards?

What about exorcisms?

What does the Biblicist say? What does the rationalist say? What does the empiricist say?

My proposal:

Eclectic, skeptical no-particular-ism.

My tendency (as my friends will testify) is to refuse to take positions on many issues. I do this for a reason. As a somewhat influential teacher, people tend to take my particular position as somehow having a certain weight of authority. This can push people into accepting as true things which they really do not believe is true. This is dangerous.

My belief is that I should present a range of ground within which I feel that a faithful Bible-believing, thoughtful Christian ought to find him or herself.

But not today. Today, I am going to flat-out state my opinions, tell you at what percentage I believe this particular thing and tell you why.

So, here we go.

1. I lean slightly toward Biblicism, partly because my closest friends lean toward rationalism, partly because it is the safest ground. Also because I do not trust my senses, I do not trust my reasoning, but I have learned to trust the Bible.

2. I am skeptical of skepticism. I believe skepticism should go both ways. I am skeptical of purely biblical arguments for young earth and even demon possession. But I am also highly skeptical of purely rational or empirical arguments against demon possession on philosophical, logical, practical or even theological grounds.

I believe in heaven. I believe that God is in control. I believe that God is love. Faith is belief in things unseen. I take the word unseen in a very broad sense.

Believe it or not, I even accept that the young-earthers might be right. We need to be cautious about human/rational/empirical arguments. We should not ever give them some sort of power to trump biblical statements.

Ghosts:

1. No strong biblical warrant. 1 Sam 28 Saul and the witch of Endor.

2. No rational warrant. (Not very helpful. Depends on your world view.)

3. No strong empirical warrant.

4. Another rational, biblical explanation, which is both psychological and perhaps the work of demons.

I say that ghosts are VERY likely not real.

Demons:

1. A very strong biblical warrant.

2. There exists a rational argument against it.

3. A somewhat weak empirical warrant. Anecdotal, rather than scientific.

I believe that demons, as defined above, are real.

Demon possession in existence today:

1. A weaker biblical warrant.

2. A slightly weaker rational warrant? (based on the weaker biblical warrant)

3. The empirical warrant for this is the same as above. My opinion is that it is rather weak. Almost certainly the majority of such claims are not valid.

I am agnostic on this, but I do not feel I am in a position to tell someone, authoritatively, that their experience is certainly psychological. The church should not take a stance on this.

Witchcraft, Ouija, etc.

1. An even weaker but non-zero biblical warrant. The Bible seems to give at least some credence to the belief that demonic powers can have a real, physical effect on reality.

2. Belief in such things certainly will be argued by some to be irrational, but I believe such arguments tend to be presuppositional. Could go either way. To be honest, I have not pursued this or thought about it very carefully.

3. Empirical argument for all of these varies from rather weak to extremely weak.

I am going to remain EXTREMELY skeptical of all of these things.

UFOs, aliens, astrology, homeopathy, leprechauns, tooth fairy.

1. No biblical warrant.

2. No rational warrant.

3. No empirical warrant.

These are not true.

Another issue:

What should we, as a fellowship, do about such potentially divisive questions which are, arguably, important but almost certainly not essential doctrines?

We need to learn how to disagree on this.

Early Restoration Movement is a good example on this.

Later CoC and to a much lesser extent, ICOC is a bad example here.

The role of the teacher is to lay the groundwork for this to happen.