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Three Little Pigs in the Age of Dynamite: the Role of Imagery in the Journey Beyond Foundationalism

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Once upon a time in the woods, there lived three little pigs. Their race was persecuted by a representative of a canine species, so that the pigs had to look constantly for new and better ways to make an artificial habitat that would insure their safety. Through a series of technological changes, adopted from a superior human race, they were successfully escaping the natural pneumatic conquering device of the Hateful Carnivore. The final construction was a house made out of stone, which could withstand the huffing and puffing of the Wolf. Well, we know how the story goes.

Forgive me this frivolity, but I thought that this fairy tale serves as a good illustration for what is happening to Christian theologians as they struggle to develop an epistemology to withstand the blows of the world. The optimistic plot of the story offers an ultimate hope that it is possible to find a final antidote for the forces that rack stability. We can clearly see that this story is not true but a mere fairy tale because while the pigs were progressing in their usage of technology, the wolf remained limited to the conservative ways of pork-hunting. It's not like that in the world. Antagonistic forces of this world constantly progress in their ways of dealing with the new technological inventions of their opponents. The question arises: What would happen if the Wolf adopted explosive devices to blow up the last habitat of the little pigs? Where would a XXI-century pig find the peace and quiet of a stable lifestyle? The question is obviously rhetorical. The answer is: NOWHERE! However, the pigs must not die, but should continue incorporating new technologies, shouldn't they?

Now on a slightly more serious note. . . For those of us who don't feel comfortable taking a journey without a map, I should now sketch a pseudo-structure of my paper. After a brief introduction to the history of the epistemological terms in view, I will discuss how architectural images of foundationalism were fairly compatible with the biblical and medieval cultures, but became rather awkward in the contemporary setting. And finally I will attempt to bring up some implications of my observations.

As I said, my introduction to the history of epistemological terms will be brief, mainly to define terms and to call names. Foundationalism, as any other long-lived term, does not define a group of identical clones but is represented by a whole spectrum of philosophers and theologians.¹ In the search for certainty, they attempted to incorporate in their own epistemic systems the rationalistic ideas of enlightenment in many different ways.²

It would seem proper now to give a string of quotes from various foundationalists to define their movement in their own terms. However, I decided not to. Pulling out various quotes that will prove to be a complete nonsense outside of their maternal systems does not seem to be a helpful exercise. In order to give justice to the complexity of the movement I will refer to the research of Grenz and Frank as a backup to the description of foundationalism that they propose.

The goal of the foundationalist agenda is the discovery of an approach to knowledge that will provide rational human beings with absolute, incontestable certainty regarding the truthfulness of their beliefs. According to foundationalists, the acquisition of knowledge ought to proceed in a manner somewhat similar to the construction of a building. Knowledge must be built on a sure foundation. The Enlightenment epistemological foundation consists of a set of incontestable beliefs or unassailable first principles on the basis of which the pursuit of knowledge can proceed. These basic beliefs or first principles must be universal, objective, and discernible to any rational person.³

Let me highlight major tenets of this epistemological system. First is the *fixed* nature of primary beliefs. Second, *cognitive* nature of the adopted premises. Third, *objective* and *absolute* nature of the foundation, which insures that the whole construction is true.

Foundationalism takes its philosophical roots in the Cartesian search for certainty, was developed in terms of empirical scientific research by Locke and then conveniently packaged by Kant. In theology, the flag of foundationalism in the Protestant camp was picked up by Hodge and carried on successfully by evangelicals of all stripes until our day and age. (Most of us, if not all, sitting in this room are foundationalists. Certainty in the matters of faith became a trademark of evangelicalism under the banner of foundationalism.)

Now in the postmodern context, which is at the moment characterized, more by what it strives NOT to be (i.e. modernity) rather than by what it is, philosophers rebelled against foundationalism. The coherentism and pragmatism of the beginning of the twentieth century inspired W.V. Quine to introduce a new image and form for a new epistemological system. He compared the sum of knowledge to a web of beliefs connected with the neighboring beliefs and limited only by the boundaries of experience.⁴ This new model is a holistic way of seeing beliefs as non-universal, equal in value and ever-fluctuating in the constant process of learning. Thus any theory is a “research program” and any belief is a valid unit only as a part of the whole web of experience. Objectivity and certainty quest of modernity was abandoned. Another individual worth mentioning in this discussion is Alasdair MacIntyre, who emphasized historical continuum of research programs as they flow one into the other together creating one whole.⁵

I chose Quine and MacIntyre out of the sea of philosophers who took part in the dismantling of foundationalism because of their special influence on the theology of Nancey Murphy. For the purposes of this paper, she and Stanley Grenz will represent the part of the evangelical community that is striving to overcome the shortcomings of modernity by developing a better theological method.

Murphy attempts to incorporate the web of Quine and the historical trajectory of MacIntyre and suggests a new postfoundationalist epistemology.⁶ As the Christian community studies tradition in the context of contemporary experience it is capable of constant process of reshaping and formulating the web of beliefs about God - hopefully avoiding arrogant pharisaic certainty and keeping the faith at the same time.

Stanley Grenz⁷ also acknowledges Quine’s imagery of the web. He incorporates some theories of modern sociology in his theological method. His emphasis on the communal nature of theology necessarily demands a definition of what characterizes Christian community. He is faced with the problem of the boundaries of orthodoxy and tries to resolve the tension by taking the emphasis off the boundaries and placing it on the center of community. Thus church becomes a “centered set” rather than “bounded set.”

This is an extremely sketchy introduction to make sure we are on the same page (we are on page 3). I do not feel that I am capable of interacting with these giants of theological scholarship, just yet. It would be arrogant of me to try to make a critical study of the epistemic systems proposed by Murphy, Grenz or Plantinga. However, I will dare to do a simple exposition on the images of foundationalism in an attempt to emphasize the connection between the culture and the language that shapes our mentality.

The theologians of whom we have talked just now showed explicitly that the way we think should not be compared to the construction of a building on its foundation. That is - the image that was used did not fit reality as observed, and thus had to be changed. I want to show that, through the changes in society (technological, political, sociological and such), the image itself changes its meaning and significance. Simultaneously, the value of artifacts used to construct images change as well. Our epistemology, though imperfect, was in a way consistent with the life of the era immediately after the Enlightenment, but so were the functions of the artifacts that represent the mindset of a woman and man living in modernity.

As good evangelicals we ought to have gone to the Bible long before now to see what it has to say about all this. In the agricultural society of Israel, allusions to foundations and walls represent strength and safety. The psalms use an allegory of a foundation to express the primary qualities of God’s reign. In Psalm 89:14 we read: “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne” (NRSV). In Isaiah 28:16, this image communicates assurance and strength in the promise given by God to his people, “I’m laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: “One who trusts will not panic” (NRSV). These are just a few instances to show that referring to the image of foundations is “biblical.”

The theology of the Old Testament as a whole seems to portray a transition from a nomadic life where even God preferred a camping lifestyle to the Temple-centered, Law-based community living in the Promised Land, carefully divided between the tribes and allotted to families. I suggest that the value of stability is the longing that appear to drives the narrative of the history of Israel.

The New Testament also employs architectural images to convey the ideas of stability, wisdom and safety. Consider, for example, the parable of the wise man who built his house on the foundation of the rock in Luke 6. In Ephesians 2:20, the apostles are called the foundation of the church. Even the city walls of the heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation have twelve foundations. Again, foundation is used as a positive image.

Boundaries are also mentioned in the context of safety and stability. Restoration of the walls of Jerusalem symbolized the returning strength of the nation. Destruction of the walls of Jericho is a sign of overpowering God’s enemy and complete victory of his people. Several times in the New Testament, the destruction of boundaries symbolizes an end of separation, like the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles of Ephesians 2 and the veil of the Temple in the gospels.

The faith and trust in foundations is a biblical metaphor. It is based on the cultural meaning of what foundations and boundaries meant in the biblical times. And yet, we need to remember that the “nomadic” God returns in the New Testament and breaks the separating walls of tradition. This tenet needs a much deeper exploration and I will leave it as it is perhaps to trigger a further discussion after the paper.

Now I would like to draw a contrast between postmodern society and a medieval society. I take it as an example that will represent the most vivid contrast of the cultural differences between our present reality and life before space travel. Foundationalism developed in a culture that was still in close proximity to the medieval environment of city walls and castles. The European medieval city was centered and at first even contained within the walls of the city. The entire feudal system was perpetuated by the constant war over the boundaries, when certain clans were retrieving or protecting family land. The greed for new territories controlled marriages and industry as well as mentality of medieval people.

Stability was one of the main values of the medieval community. A son’s vocation was determined by his father’s vocation in which he would be trained from the early childhood and stay in till his death. He was to marry within his caste of society and live on the property that belonged to many generations of his relatives. Though the feudals would change, the peasants that served them would stay with the land, though it passed to yet another landlord.

Now let us look at the forms and meanings of boundaries in our own age. Borders between administrative regions are more of an abstract concept than visible reality. When we cross the border of one state to another, we do not even notice that. Even when coming to another country you only pass through another door having waved with a blue little book. (Although, because my little book is red, I have a much higher respect for borders and custom officers). The closest to visible boundary you experience would be the end of your property around the house in which you live and which your bank owns. Quite possibly, you will move out of that house in a couple of years and will live several hundred miles away from your recent dwelling.

Your house is probably made of some light and fluffy material, which will last for a few decades and will be replaced by a new disposable temporary construction. And your ability to stay in the same area for the rest of your life would not be regarded as an achievement. Besides, mobility seems to have replaced the value of stability. We now have motor homes, laptops and cell-phones. We travel to work with the speed of a hurricane and defy gravity on a regular basis when taking a plane. Besides, we carry an understanding that most of the Universe is an open space where absence of gravity makes any foundation an absurd symbol for stability or safety.

Now the question I pose is this: how can a mind capable of imagining the physical conditions of open space be satisfied with a foundationalist epistemology? The old images that presented stability and separation as positive qualities now carry a different, nuanced meaning in the context of a new technological era. Foundations both literal and metaphorical were strong because they were insured by the culture in which they were serving. When steady medieval concepts are applied in a world able to conceive of open space, we end up on the edge of ridiculous. I do not suggest that we live in the vacuum and have no sense of gravity. We still fall off the roof and still close the door to our room. However, it seems that when we do theology we need to choose whether we will agree to stay with Euclid or find a way to acknowledge both Euclid and Lobachevsky.⁸ Is theology about star traveling or about building furniture, or perhaps both?

I want to leave you with a yet another mental image. Besides, you deserve to know why I spent all this time sharing my fascination with the topic of the cultural elements of epistemology with you. As we all know we study what we do not understand the most. I have switched several worldviews in my lifetime and from a contradictory psuedo-atheistic background leaped all the way to fundamentalism hitting several destinations on the way. I moved from Russia to America and back several times studying in a variety of educational institutions. Jews, Charismatics, Atheists and Catholics are among my closest friends. I am a citizen of the world and at times it seems like gravity lost its grip on me.

I struggle to reconcile the past with the necessary search for a different future. I lose hope to protect tradition as I adopt a new invention. I certainly have a problem with finding my identity and belonging. As I was listening to Rebecca Chopp at the AAR conference this year, right after the long and painful discussion of the boundaries for the ETS, I thought of an old city. Say, like Moscow. There are 12 million people living in the city. Moscow was founded in 1147 and started within the walls of the Kremlin. The main cathedrals and most of the main government buildings are still in the boundaries of the city walls. During the day the place is busy. Tourists pay respect to the rarities of the historical center of the city. Even in your minds the towers of the fortress come up as I talk about the city. The image and identity of it is conserved within the old city walls. However at night it is empty. Life, real life goes on outside of the city walls. People do not live in the center although they identify their city with the structures that remind of the rich history of their community.

I wonder, if when we try to exemplify a centered set around Christ and still end up having to use method as the boundaries for entering our community, were we holding on to those boundaries more out of loyal reverence than

real practical affirmation? Or perhaps we should think of it more like that? If we are trying to stuff within the boundaries of the city walls more than they were ever intended to hold, will we ever start living or shall we spend our energy roaming through the dusty halls of empty museums?

¹On the “strong” and “soft” foundationalism cf. W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1998) 77-104.

²Foundationalist epistemology was adopted by the majority of main line evangelical theologians of the twentieth century. Any standard volume of systematic theology from that period (Grudem, Erikson, Lewis and Demarest et al.) would exemplify that practice. For criticism of foundationalism see Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000) 184-217; Stanley Grenz and John Frank, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) 18-27; Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics* (Westview Press, 1997) 87-112.

³Stanley Grenz and John Frank, *Beyond Foundationalism* 23.

⁴W.V. Quine, *The Web of Beliefs* (New York: Random House, 1978).

⁵Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1988).

⁶Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity. Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics*.

⁷Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*.

⁸Both Euclid and Lobachevsky propose theoretical systems of geometry based on different sets of axioms. Though these systems significantly conflict with one another, each has practical application in its own domain of observed reality. We use Euclidean geometry to build furniture, but benefit from the insights of Lobachevsky in space exploration. Two contradicting theories are compatible because they reflect different domains of reality.