

# Learning in a Time of (Cultural) War: Indoctrination in Focus on the Family's *The Truth Project*<sup>TM</sup>

By Randal Rauser

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In a world of religious marketing, a growing number of evangelicals have branded themselves as truth defenders.<sup>1</sup> While one may think that “truth defender” is poor branding in a postmodern culture, there are some signs that concern for truth may actually be coming back in vogue. Consider for instance the runaway success of philosopher Harry Frankfurt’s little monograph *On Bullshit*.<sup>2</sup> One can hardly attribute that book’s appearance on the *New York Times* bestseller list simply to the slick marketing of Princeton University Press or the novelty of an analytic philosopher analyzing the concept of bullshit. Rather, I would propose that the main reason for the interest arises from a growing cultural weariness of the spin, half-truths, and outright lies that seem to pervade our culture.<sup>3</sup> But if truth is becoming a hot commodity once again, why does evangelical truth branding remain more likely to repel than attract the wider culture? The most basic reason may be that the wider culture does not believe evangelicals are especially interested in the truth. Joel Kilpatrick captures this sentiment in his satirical book *A Field Guide to Evangelicals and Their Habitat* when he writes: “The purpose of evangelical education, like the purpose of Fox News, is to dispense with contradictory ideas with as little thought as possible, resulting in eighteen-year-old biblically literate virgins who vote Republican.”<sup>4</sup>

As Kilpatrick’s quip suggests, there is a widespread suspicion that evangelicals are more concerned with furthering a particular political, social agenda than with the truth *per se*. Consider for instance the analysis in Chris Hedges’ entertaining, if simplistic anti-evangelical screed *American Fascists*. Hedges warns that

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**Randal Rauser** argues that Focus on the Family’s popular lay-worldview curriculum entitled *The Truth Project*<sup>TM</sup> fails to provide a true Christian worldview education, and instead evinces the marks of indoctrination. He begins with the core problem that that the curriculum encourages simplistic binary categories which distort the issues and inhibit the student from developing skills of critical evaluation. As a result of this binary opposition, the curriculum distorts the complexity of issues, fails to understand and fairly evaluate alternative positions, and misrepresents the complexities of and difficulties with the Christian worldview. He closes by considering how the rhetoric of a culture war is used to justify simplistic binary categories. Mr. Rauser is Associate Professor of Historical Theology at Taylor Seminary (Edmonton).

homeschooled evangelical children “are taught, in short, to obey. They are discouraged from critical analysis, questioning and independent thought. And they believe, by the time they are done, a host of myths designed to destroy the open, pluralist society.”<sup>5</sup> This doctrinaire approach to education seeks “an abolition of uncertainty and doubt”<sup>6</sup> which leaves the conservative Christian unable “to cope with ambiguity, doubt, and uncertainty.”<sup>7</sup> As a result, the conservative has been trained to view the world in terms of a simplistic truth/error binary opposition such that any qualification of these absolutes is viewed as inherently subversive: “They see criticism of their belief system, whether from scientists or judges, as vicious attempts by Satan to lure them back into the morass.”<sup>8</sup>

There is no doubt that *American Fascists* has serious shortcomings, not least of which is its dependence upon simplistic binary oppositions surprisingly like those of the fundamentalists it decries! Nonetheless, Hedges is correct that many Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals continue to forgo the truth pursuit at the heart of education for simplistic indoctrination. While this is a strong claim, I will seek to defend it by presenting a case study in Focus on the Family’s comprehensive worldview curriculum *The Truth Project*<sup>TM</sup> (henceforth the TP). While the TP presents a particularly bold, even aggressive instance of evangelical truth-branding, examination of the curriculum illustrates that it bears the classic hallmarks of indoctrination. But even if this is true, one might ask reasonably why the TP should be taken to be a bellwether for the evangelical community. In response we might

<sup>1</sup>See for instance John MacArthur, *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007); Albert Mohler, *Culture Shift: Engaging Current Issues with Timeless Truth* (Multnomah Books, 2008); Nancy R. Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity From Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004); Douglas R. Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup>For further evidence of this trend see Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch, eds, *Bullshit and Philosophy: Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006); Laura Penny, *Your Call is Important to Us: The Truth About Bullshit* (New York: Crown, 2005).

<sup>4</sup>Joel Kilpatrick, *A Field Guide to Evangelicals and Their Habitat* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2006), 131.

<sup>5</sup>Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 26.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 36. While Hedges is right to challenge an overly confident alethic aptitude, we must be careful not to fall, as Hedges does, into the opposite error of dogmatic skepticism. In Hedges’ view, “Faith presupposes that we cannot know. We can never know. Those who claim to know what life means play God” (9). It hardly need be noted that Hedges provides no argument here but simply assumes (knows?) that nobody can know and, even more bizarrely, that any claim to knowledge is idolatrous by definition. But surely there is a viable middle ground between “I know the truth perfectly” and “Nobody can know the truth at all.” Also, Paul Numrich observes that fundamentalists are “fighters”: “The battle is typically portrayed in starkly dualistic terms—between good and evil, elect and damned, faithful and secular.” “Fundamentalists and American Pluralism,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42.1 (2007): 10.

note first that the TP is arguably the single most ambitious and sophisticated attempt to produce a worldview curriculum for evangelicals. When it was launched in 2006, Focus on the Family promoted it as "one of the most ambitious and powerful projects in the history of our ministry."<sup>9</sup> What is more, it is comprehensive: the course consists of thirteen one-hour sessions in which Del Tackett, head of the Focus on the Family Institute, seeks to provide the Christian perspective on a range of topics encompassing truth, ethics, God, science, humanity, and society.<sup>10</sup> The lessons are presented within a classroom setting of approximately thirty-six adult students, and while apparently the TP is aimed primarily at adults, many churches also sponsor the course for families and youth groups. The course is available in a pack of seven DVDs and is currently being promoted in regional seminars which are intended to train leaders to run the course in various small group settings. Finally, the TP has been widely embraced by the evangelical community. In the last three years, the TP has hosted two-day training events in cities across the United States and internationally.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, they have hosted national simulcasts and an international one-day satellite broadcast on September 27, 2008. When one considers that the thousands that attend these various events are being trained as leaders to run TP courses, there is every reason to believe Focus on the Family's prediction of "exponential change within the body of Christ, as we expect that thousands will be transformed by this curriculum."<sup>12</sup>

In order to defend the view that the TP constitutes indoctrination, I will begin with an analysis of the hallmarks of indoctrination. Next, I shall identify the prominence within the TP of a common mark of indoctrination that is evidenced widely among evangelicals: the simplistic binary opposition. Finally, I will note three adverse effects of this binary opposition that are evident within the TP curriculum: first, the inability to develop appropriately nuanced assessments of multiple issues; second, the failure to understand (and critically evaluate) the positions held by one's intellectual opponents; third, and perhaps most importantly, the inability to assess one's own beliefs critically. Insofar as these problems are evident within the TP, it provides for evangelicals not the promise of educational transformation but rather a salutary warning against the dangers of insular indoctrination and a challenge to embrace the risk of true education.

<sup>9</sup>"What is Focus on the Family's The Truth Project?," <<http://www.thetruthproject.org/whatistruthproject/>>.

<sup>10</sup>All quotes of Del Tackett within this paper are drawn from *The Truth Project*<sup>TM</sup>, Focus on the Family, 2006.

<sup>11</sup>For example, Minneapolis, Fresno, Chattanooga, San Antonio, Louisville, Kansas City, Phoenix, Colorado Springs, Toronto, Edmonton, Vancouver, Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town.

<sup>12</sup>"What is Focus on the Family's The Truth Project?," <<http://www.thetruthproject.org/whatistruthproject/>>.

## Education and Indoctrination

There is an old debate among philosophers of education concerning whether it is possible to educate apart from ideology and whether ideologically framed education constitutes indoctrination.<sup>13</sup> For the sake of time I will simply state my position: all education is from a particular ideological and worldview perspective. As such, the notion of a value-free, "view from nowhere" education is a chimera. Indeed, education is not only formed by ideology but with the intent that the student will adopt that ideology: properly speaking the pedagogue is, as Elmer Thiessen puts it tersely, "teaching for commitment."<sup>14</sup> Education does not differ from indoctrination because it lacks ideological commitments, but rather because it communicates to the student both an awareness of its ideology *qua* ideology whilst equipping the student to assess the ideological assumptions critically. This critical task is captured in the familiar pedagogical refrain "but don't take my word for it!" Children, however, are typically not at a sufficient level of cognitive maturation to evaluate the ideological framework of their education critically.<sup>15</sup> (Given that the TP is directed primarily at training adults, the utter lack of nuanced categories and critical thinking becomes even more egregious.)

By contrast, the indoctrinator is unwilling to yield critical autonomy to the student; indeed, if anything he is likely to provide a skewed picture of the data to support and protect his ideological presuppositions. As Tasos Kazepides observes, "The indoctrinator, because he is inculcating doctrines, must resort to some educationally questionable methods such as failing to provide relevant evidence and argument or misapplying them."<sup>16</sup> Consequently, indoctrination leaves the student unable to assess the ideological form of education critically. As Thiessen observes: "Indoctrination...is thought to involve the failure to produce minds that are open and critical."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, indoctrination seeks to suppress critical thinking skills in order to protect the ideology from introspective analysis rather like a foreign

<sup>13</sup>Many people believe that the ideological character of education is unavoidable.... All societies inculcate customs and beliefs they maintain; the question is not whether but what to inculcate.... Others find this uncritical acquiescence to ideology profoundly troubling. Students should be taught to evaluate beliefs and practices rationally, they contend, and to embrace only those that can withstand criticism.... Uncritical ideological inculcation is indoctrination, not education...." Hanan A. Alexander, "Education in Ideology," *Journal of Moral Education* 34.1 (2005): 1.

<sup>14</sup>Elmer Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination & Christian Nurture* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup>As Harvey Siegel observes: "Very young students cannot evaluate their teachers' pronouncements for epistemic probity; they do not yet have the language, concepts, or cognitive capacity to do so." Harvey Siegel, "Epistemology and Education: An Incomplete Guide to the Social-Epistemological Issues," *Episteme* 1.2 (2004): 131.

<sup>16</sup>Cited in Elmer John Thiessen, *In Defense of Religious Schools and Colleges* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 134. Siegel observes that indoctrination "precludes student questioning or demand for reasons" (132).

<sup>17</sup>Thiessen, *In Defense of Religious Schools and Colleges*, 134.

invader suppresses the immune response of its host so as to ensure its own flourishing. As Michael Merry puts it: "Indoctrination involves a process of knowledge or belief transmission whereby persons are left with crippled reflective capacities with respect to particular content."<sup>18</sup> And as Siegel observes: "Indoctrination results in beliefs which students do not, will not and/or cannot subject to critical scrutiny."<sup>19</sup> To sum up, indoctrination halts and even reverses cognitive maturation in order to perpetuate the ideology.<sup>20</sup>

This brings us to an important point: the presence of doctrinaire elements within a curriculum does not entail that the writers of the curriculum intended to indoctrinate. To note but one possibility, it may simply be the case that a person who was once indoctrinated is now passing on that indoctrination while thinking all the while it is the truth unvarnished. And so the identification of indoctrination has no necessary implications about pedagogical intention. With that caveat, we can turn now to assess the TP curriculum.

## The Nature of Binary Thinking

The core of indoctrination is simplistic binary thinking. Such thinking is typical of children who think in terms of black and white, lacking nuance or qualification. But in certain cases an adult may be intellectually arrested at this simple binary level or may regress back to it. Individuals are especially vulnerable to such regression at times of crisis (for instance, war) when there is a perceived need to restore stability. Those who hold a worldview that posits a perpetual crisis of good versus evil are that much more susceptible to such binary oppositions. Thus, as Roderick Hindery observes, this "conspiratorial them-against-us mentality"<sup>21</sup> is common among fundamentalists who "propose a simplistic, Manichean division of people into two classes."<sup>22</sup> And so the typical fundamentalist perception of a "culture war" renders them vulnerable to seeking security in such bald categories.<sup>23</sup> But we must recognize that this clarity of vision is gained at the expense of an appropriately nuanced understanding of the world, involving, as John Kenneth Galbraith puts it, a choice for "orderly error" over "complex truth."<sup>24</sup>

Often in doctrinaire curricula, simplistic binary categories are introduced early on as a means to order all that is presented subsequently into absolute categories of good and bad, right and wrong, truth and error. Such is the case with the TP, which

<sup>18</sup>Michael S. Merry, "Indoctrination, Moral Instruction, and Nonrational Beliefs," *Educational Theory* 55.4 (2005): 406, emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup>Siegel, 132.

<sup>20</sup>Thiessen, 141.

<sup>21</sup>Roderick Hindery, "The Anatomy of Propaganda Within Religious Terrorism," *The Humanist* (March/April 2003): 17.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Chris Hedges provides many examples of evangelicals appropriating binary militaristic language. See for instance, *American Fascists*, 29-30.

<sup>24</sup>Hindery, 17.

introduces a simplistic Manichean division in the very first session on veritology. Tackett roots this dichotomy in a patina of scriptural references beginning with John 18:37 where Jesus reveals that he came to testify to the truth and that everyone who is on the side of truth listens to him. As Tackett explains, with these words "Jesus is actually bifurcating the world" into "Truth (Reality)" and "Lies (Illusion)," two diametrically opposed sides that are locked in "The Cosmic Battle."<sup>25</sup> The real power of the dichotomy emerges when Tackett intimates that all issues and positions conform ultimately to one of these two sides, a point he makes by randomly identifying the following complementary pairs as examples:

<u>Truth/Reality</u>	<u>Lies/Illusion</u>	<u>Examples of Lies</u> (stated or implied)
Unity	Division	Divorce
Diversity	Unification	Gay marriage
Roles	Jealousy	Feminism
Responsibility	Blame	Anti-corporatism
Authority	Rebellion	Delegation
Tyranny	Freedom	Bondage

Thus, Tackett illustrates that it is relatively easy to divide reality into Christian and non-Christian (that is, evil and illusory) elements. To drive the point home he adds:

This is a battle of worldviews. It is a battle between the truth claims of God and the lies and the illusions of the world of flesh and the devil. On this side the truth claims of God are consistent and logical. They make sense. They work. And even in a fallen world when we follow them they lead to peace and prosperity and happiness. And opposed to that, the web of lies of the world of flesh and the devil. And it is illogical, it has holes in it, it is inconsistent and it leads to the most grievous weeping, wailing and moaning and death. (session 1)

It is difficult to see how Tackett could have made the contrast more absolute.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in maximizing the contrast he overplays the difference. For one thing, contrary to Tackett's naive rationalism, Judeo-Christian revelation does not always appear consistent or logical. (Just think about Yahweh's demand to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac or the doctrine that the one God is three distinct and equally divine persons.) Nor is the Christian guaranteed peace, prosperity and happiness in this life as Tackett implies. (Indeed, Christ's command to take up one's cross might lead one to conclude the opposite.)

While Tackett is correct that Jesus bifurcated the world, there are at least three critical problems with his take on this bifurcation. First, there is often a lot more

<sup>25</sup>Tackett describes Christians as people of the truth (1 John 4:6) while non-Christians are like POWs awaiting liberation from their world of illusion and deceit.

<sup>26</sup>Compare Chris Hedges' observation that with Christian dominionists: "There are only two types of people. There are godly men and women who advance Christian values, and there are nonbelievers—many of them liberal Christians—who peddle the filth and evil of secular humanism." Hedges, *American Fascists*, 150.

distance between Christians and Christ's Truth/Reality than Tackett seems willing to admit. Harry Blamires comments:

The Christian mind knows that, in any sorting out of the sheep and the goats, of the virtuous from the sinful, the forces of Heaven would slice through human society at an unexpected angle. The knife would cut firmly, but certainly not horizontally. What can we say or think of how it would separate the self-seekers from the fundamentally God-directed souls, except that it would certainly not leave all the convicts and perverts and public nuisances on one side, and all the cabinet ministers and business executives...on the other?<sup>27</sup>

At this point Blamires is tapping into a scriptural theme that Christians overlook at their peril: though we may believe Christianity, we neither have that knowledge perfectly nor do we live in accord with it as we should. And our ability for self-deception on both counts is captured in the chilling depiction of the sheep and goats (Mt. 25:1-13, 31-46). Thus, the claim that Christians are people of truth must be qualified by the fact that each individual must test himself to see if he is in the truth (2 Cor. 13:5). But once we recognize that we must continue vigorously to pursue the truth that remains beyond us, we find absolute contrasts between the "people of the truth" and "people of the lie" hopelessly marginalized.<sup>28</sup>

The second problem is that Tackett's binary opposition ignores the extent that common grace and general revelation are operative in the world. Even if we could draw Tackett's absolute soteriological boundary, that does not map onto a parallel alethic boundary. As such, we could still learn all sorts of valuable truths from non-Christian philosophers, theologians, economists, political scientists, physicians, historians, artists, and so on. Tackett's dualism reminds me of a Christian rock music fan I heard declare: "If you're not singing for God you're singing for the devil." I confess that I always found it hard to think of Karen Carpenter singing "We've only just begun" as a paean to the dark lord. Is there not a category for the Carpenters that is neither divine nor demonic? (Perhaps the purgatorial hinterland of MOR radio?) Clearly Tackett needs a category between absolute truth and lies to allow for the varying degrees of truth (and error) that one finds in different worldviews. And, in keeping with our first point, Christianity in its many concrete historical manifestations will find itself at varying places on that continuum.<sup>29</sup>

Third, Tackett describes one view as occupying the side of lies and deception, namely the belief that the universe is a closed "cosmic cube" with nothing beyond it. In other words, Tackett only acknowledges the existence of two worldviews: Christianity and atheistic naturalism. Assuming that he is not implying that all non-Christian religions and philosophies are atheistic at base (certainly an incredible supposition), he appears to have chosen (arbitrarily and without

<sup>27</sup>Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (London: SPCK, 1963), 91.

<sup>28</sup>While Tackett recognizes that Christians commit sin (in session three he focuses some time on Galatians 5:17), this admission is never allowed to qualify his absolute dichotomy.

<sup>29</sup>For a disturbing exploration of these themes at an ecclesial level, see Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

acknowledgement) to focus on only two worldviews. While this is clearly indefensible, it has an ideological rationale as it secures the absolute binary opposition that consigns all non-Christian views to the side of lies (along with all Christian views of which one disapproves – for example, theistic evolution) while protecting one's own conservative Christian ideology from critical introspection.<sup>30</sup>

### The Effect of Binary Thinking

As noted above, unqualified binary thinking secures an uncritical acceptance of certain assumptions while inhibiting subsequent critical reflection on those assumptions. We will now consider the way that this binary thinking distorts complex issues, encourages the distortion and dismissal of opposing opinions, and undermines critical analysis of one's own views and confirmation bias.

Tackett ignores the complexity of important issues repeatedly. Consider as an example one of the complementary pairs in his truth versus lies chart: Responsibility vs. Blame. When introducing this contrast, Tackett provides an example of how people refuse to accept individual responsibility: "That's why we get a woman who can sue McDonald's for millions of dollars. Why? Because she spilled a cup of hot coffee in her lap. It must not be her fault, right? We live in a culture of blame" (session 1). Not surprisingly, the facts of the case are much more complex. In February 1992, 79-year-old Stella Liebeck spilled a coffee that she had just purchased at a McDonald's drive thru in Albuquerque, New Mexico. While home-brewed coffee is generally heated to between 135-140 degrees Fahrenheit, at the time of the accident McDonald's nationwide was regularly serving their coffee at between 180-190 degrees. The American Association for Justice reports that "McDonald's own quality assurance manager testified that a burn hazard exists with any food substance served at 140 degrees or above and that McDonald's coffee was not fit for consumption because it would burn the mouth and throat."<sup>31</sup> Further, in the trial it was revealed that McDonald's had settled over 700 claims for coffee burns between 1982 and 1992.<sup>32</sup> As a result of the scorching temperature, Liebeck suffered severe burns on her thighs, buttocks and genitals, injuries which required eight days of hospitalization and skin graft procedures. While we can debate the exact balance between individual and corporate responsibility, the case is not simply evidence of a greedy grandma trying to shake down a conscientious corporation.

The second example is found in the ninth session where Tackett tells the fictional story of James and Heidi, a happy couple who realize their dream by build-

<sup>30</sup>It is also troubling how malleable Tackett's complementary pairs are. For instance, while he tendentiously invokes roles over jealousy to chasten feminism, one could just as well do so to silence women's suffrage or the civil rights movement. So how does one discern what the proper application of the "truth" position is?

<sup>31</sup>American Association for Justice, "McDonald's Scalding Coffee Case," <<http://www.atla.org/pressroom/FACTS/frivolous/McdonaldsCoffeecase.aspx>>.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

ing and tending a bucolic farm. After setting up the idyllic scene, Tackett then asks the class whether they would consider it stealing if a gang charged in after James and Heidi died and took half of their estate. Not surprisingly, there is unanimous agreement. Next Tackett asks the class whether they would change their view if the governor passed a law that declared this act legal. Of course the class is undeterred: it would still be stealing. If anybody has missed this less than subtle reference to the estate tax, Tackett then says: "Well do you know that we have a law like that in America? That gives the state the right in certain situations to take half of a dead man's property? Is that stealing?" Clearly Tackett believes so, as he draws a comparison with Ahab's seizure of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21 and then launches into a diatribe against government taxation that sounds like a speech at a Michigan Militia convention.<sup>33</sup> Even a child could discern the obvious differences between a roving mob and a democratic state seeking to account for systemic inequity by the programmatic redistribution of wealth.<sup>34</sup> Tackett does not even acknowledge the existence of a rationale for taxation, leaving the single impression that it is an unambiguous instance of stealing. As such, one is left with a bald proof-texting of Scripture to support libertarian, laissez-faire capitalism.

When Tackett turns to discuss the United States in session ten, he warns of the anti-Americanism of certain educated elites: "It is in vogue today to hate America." "...there is a deep hatred of America within liberal academia."<sup>35</sup> While acknowledging that this anti-Americanism also is widely felt abroad, Tackett dismisses the possibility that it may have anything to do with such factors as military invasions, CIA-led coups, trade blockades, internment camps, Guantanamo Bay, WTO, IMF and World Bank policies, Abu Ghraib, and the proliferation of McDonald's, Coca Cola, Britney Spears and Baywatch reruns. Instead, he marginalizes all anti-Americanism as rooted in an aversion to the Puritans' 1643 declaration "to advance the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ." As Tackett puts it,

That's why they came, and I think that it is because of that foundation, it is because of those roots, that we see that it is now in vogue to hate America. Oh, there's a lot of things that are wrong with this country and my heart grieves for it, but that hatred is not because of that. It is because of something else. (session 10)

<sup>33</sup>After noting Samuel's warning that a king in Israel would take one tenth of the citizenry's possessions (1 Sam. 8:15, 17), Tackett comments sarcastically: "Now I know this is probably hard for you to imagine, that the state would take ten percent." Then he comments: "Interesting statement by God who is warning them what this government will become: a behemoth that will take the best – your first fruits – that will take ten percent of your goods, it will redistribute your wealth to others – a warning – you will become its slaves."

<sup>34</sup>For a fascinating account of the origins of American wealth inequity, see Meizhu Lui, et. al, *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Radial Wealth Divide* (New York: New Press, 2006).

<sup>35</sup>As a side note, there is little evidence that Tackett has read any "liberal academics." Indeed, the research behind the TP appears to consist largely of quotes lifted from Josh McDowell, David Noebel and Francis Schaffer.

This binary opposition is so simplistic and absolute that surely it must border on willful self-delusion.<sup>36</sup>

A second casualty of Tackett's simplistic binary categories is found in the repeated distortion, conflation, and dismissal of opposing views.<sup>37</sup> Consider for example session three, where Tackett mashes together incompatible views under the title of "Naturalistic Philosophy Implications." To begin with, Tackett quotes PETA founder Ingrid Newkirk as saying "A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy." Next, he explains how this view leads to the controversial views of Finnish environmentalist Pentti Linkola:

Linkola ... goes so far as to say that he has more sympathy for threatened insect species than for children dying of hunger in Africa. Now does that seem to shock us? It shouldn't. If a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy then why shouldn't we be more concerned about an insect species that's about to go extinct? We've got lots of human beings, and so if lots of them are just out there dying, that's no big deal.

Tackett then explains how Newkirk and Linkola's views are linked to the humanist beliefs of people like Paul Kurtz: "Paul Kurtz again says 'If man is a product of evolution, one species among others, in a universe without purpose, then man's option is to live for himself.'"

Now it is not hard to identify an uneasy tension in Tackett's juxtaposition of these three individuals, for while Newkirk appears to treat human beings as equivalent to other terrestrial life forms, Linkola apparently views them as inferior to certain other life forms and Kurtz as superior. And that initial assessment of incompatibility is correct. Newkirk is an animal liberation activist whose preeminent concern is with the cessation of the suffering of individual sentient creatures. As such, her central point is not, as Tackett interprets it, that "We are no different than a rat or a pig" but rather that their suffering is of no less significance than ours.<sup>38</sup> While Newkirk is concerned with liberating chickens from their battery cages, Linkola is a deep ecologist whose primary concern is the overall health of planet Earth. This cashes out in a concern to maintain the harmony between Earth's various animal populations within their respective ecosystems. As such, for Linkola, the suffering of individual animals is of less importance than the survival of the

<sup>36</sup>For a more balanced assessment of empire (American or otherwise), see Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952); and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Warning to the West* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976). As a Canadian myself, let it be noted that north of the border we have nothing to brag about. See Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*, ed. Peter R. Mitchell and John Schoeffel (New York: New Press, 2002), 290.

<sup>37</sup>For instance, Tackett refers to Carl Sagan erroneously as an atheist when in fact his views ranged between deism (*Contact: A Novel* [London: Century, 1986]) and agnosticism (*The Varieties of Scientific Experience* [New York: Penguin, 2006], 31).

<sup>38</sup>It saddens me that I have heard this single Newkirk quote repeated innumerable times by evangelicals with nary a concern to understand the view being expressed or its motivation. In doing this, evangelicals prevent themselves from learning from Newkirk, as in her interesting book *50 Awesome Ways Kids Can Help Animals* (New York: Warner Books, 1991).

species, and an individual animal's value decreases in inverse proportion to the increase of the species' destabilizing influence upon Earth. It is for that reason that an endangered insect population figures higher on Linkola's moral radar than the starving offspring of a dangerously abundant and destabilizing species like humanity. Bluntly stated, to say that Newkirk's animal liberation activism leads to Linkola's deep ecology is like saying ultramontanist leads to Anabaptist church polity.<sup>39</sup> As for Paul Kurtz, as an excellent exemplar of the modern humanist tradition, he elevates the human species as a normative standard bearer of value, an act that both Newkirk and Linkola would dismiss as morally repugnant. For instance, in the *Humanist Manifesto 2000* he writes: "Humanist ethics...does not require agreement about theological or religious premises – we may never reach that – but it relates ethical choices ultimately to shared human interests, wants, needs, and values."<sup>40</sup> To this, Newkirk and Linkola would reply in one voice: "A pox on you and your house!"

To make matters worse, convinced that the views of Newkirk, Linkola and Kurtz are linked with Darwinian evolution,<sup>41</sup> Tackett quotes with approval atheist G. Richard Bozarth's claim that

Evolution destroys utterly and finally the very reason Jesus' earthly life was supposedly made necessary. Destroy Adam and Eve and original sin, and in the rubble you will find the sorry remains of the son of God...and if Jesus was not the redeemer who dies for our sins, and this is what evolution means, then Christianity is nothing. (session 3)

Like the logical connection between Newkirk, Linkola and Kurtz, this claim is utterly ridiculous. Even if one disagreed with the opinion of so eminent an evangelical scientist as Francis Collins that Darwinian evolution and Christianity are compatible, evolution certainly does not mean that Jesus was not the redeemer who dies for our sins. And to quote such a statement with approval only perpetuates the very worst of the warfare model of science/religion (no doubt much to the delight of Richard Dawkins).<sup>42</sup>

Tackett's absolute binary opposition leads to those with whom he disagrees

<sup>39</sup>For more on the distinction between animal liberation activism and deep ecology, see Robert Wennberg, *God, Humans, and Animals: an Invitation to Enlarge our Moral Universe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 46.

<sup>40</sup>Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999), 24.

<sup>41</sup>His slide on Linkola is headed with the title "Implications from an Icon of Evolution."

<sup>42</sup>Further, Tackett caricatures the naturalistic view of human persons as "imago goo" and concludes that on the view "we are now left with the logical conclusion that we are nothing but a straw man, in a straw universe, looking for a straw brain" (session 3). Unfortunately the only straw man here is Tackett's own characterization of naturalism. This is truly a lost opportunity, given the sophisticated critique that Christian philosophers have launched against naturalism in recent years. See, for instance, William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland eds., *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis*, Routledge Studies in Twentieth Century Philosophy (London: Routledge, 2000); Michael C. Rea, *World Without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliafero, *Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

being misrepresented and dismissed rather than being treated as serious interlocutors. For instance, in session three Tackett dismisses Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs with the ominous warning: "Can you hear the hiss of the snake?" Convinced that Maslow's view of self-actualization as the highest aspiration reiterates the primal sin in the garden, Tackett never considers the possibility that we might appropriate insights critically from the hierarchy of needs. In contrast to Tackett's closed stance, Christian psychologist Ronald Philipchalk suggests that the Christian might adopt the hierarchy while positing a sixth level beyond self-actualization: that of spiritual need.<sup>43</sup> Or rather than supplant self-actualization, perhaps one could reinterpret it in theological terms (for instance, an Augustinian view of self-actualization in God). But the main point concerns not how Maslow might be appropriated, but rather that Tackett's absolute binary categories inhibit a critical dialogue from even beginning.

The final effect of Tackett's simplistic binary opposition is the inhibition of critical introspection, a move that blinds us to the arbitrariness and inconsistency of our beliefs and which is masked typically by unexamined confirmation biases. Raymond Nickerson explains that the "confirmation bias connotes a less explicit, less consciously one-sided case-building process. It refers usually to unwitting selectivity in the acquisition and use of evidence."<sup>44</sup> As a result, "one selectively gathers, or gives undue weight to, evidence that supports one's position while neglecting to gather, or discounting, evidence that would tell against it."<sup>45</sup> While this tendency to seek only to support one's beliefs is pervasive, it must be kept in close check. As Nickerson warns, "If one is constantly urged to present reasons for opinions that one holds and is not encouraged also to articulate reasons that could be given against them, one is being trained to exercise a confirmation bias."<sup>46</sup>

Needless to say, Tackett's dichotomy is ideally designed to reinforce the most regrettable aspects of one's confirmation biases, his treatment of evil in session three being an excellent example. Tackett begins by asking, "Why is there evil in the world?" Although this question is posed to Christians often, Tackett avers that it "really should be presented back to the world not to us. We really do have a lot of answers for the issue of evil." But, he adds: "The world does not." Then Tackett argues that according to an atheistic naturalist anthropology, human beings are basically good. But this gives rise to a dilemma: if human beings are basically good, then why do we do bad things?

Do you understand this question that is constantly laid upon us? The question of evil? And it is usually asked of us in somewhat of a smug way, and I don't mean to be trite about it, but a smug way that implies that not only has the questioner stumped you as a believer but they

<sup>43</sup>Ronald Philipchalk, *Psychology and Christianity: An Introduction to Controversial Issues*, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 123.

<sup>44</sup>Raymond S. Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises," *Review of General Psychology* 2.2 (1998): 175.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 205.

have somehow toppled Christianity, when in reality we have a lot of answers for this question, and the truth is they have none. If man is basically good, if his instinct and his nature is basically good, then why is there evil in the world?

According to Tackett, the Christian has no such problem:

The question of evil is not an easy one. And I don't mean to trivialize it from the standpoint of the answers that we have because in reality the ultimate origin of evil is somewhat puzzling for us. But in reality you and I have been given that universal answer to the question of why there is evil in the world and what is evil.

And so, while human depravity confounds naturalism's anthropological optimism, it accords perfectly with the Christian view of the fall.

Any claim that Christians have all the answers to the problem of evil is, at best, grossly misleading. Indeed, in one respect at least, the Christian has a *greater* difficulty with evil than the naturalist. Note first that the typical naturalist's view is not all sunny optimism, as will be evident to anyone who has read literature on evolutionary biology. Indeed, naturalists actually have quite a good explanation of human evil: we evolved first to perpetuate the species, not to do the right thing.<sup>47</sup> But while atheists can accommodate the origin of human evil in the terms of our blind evolutionary origins, Christians have a much more difficult time explaining it, given divine origins.<sup>48</sup> And in addition to moral evil, the Christian must explain the vast amount of natural evil that predates the appearance of human beings on the earth, including the carnage of Tyrannosaurus Rex and the digger wasp's macabre habits of reproduction.<sup>49</sup> These are hardly trifling concerns, and so Tackett's dismissal of them can be attributed only to an egregious perpetuation of his own Christian confirmation bias.

Our second example concerns Tackett's treatment of the formation of Scripture. Here if anywhere, nuanced, critical thinking is required, as became obvious a few years ago when Dan Brown sent many evangelicals into fits of angst upon the realization that the canon developed gradually. But rather than take the opportunity to provide a properly nuanced historical account of Scripture's development, Tackett attempts to discount it by presenting a distorted and ahistorical account which appears oblivious to contemporary scholarship. When it comes to the formation of the Torah, Tackett apparently will not countenance anything less than Mosaic authorship while dismissing the JEDP hypothesis as a tendentious product

<sup>47</sup>Indeed, many Darwinian naturalists have a more pessimistic view of human moral potential than Christians since many believe true altruism is impossible. See Andrew Brown, *The Darwin Wars: The Scientific Battle for the Soul of Man* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1999), chapter 1.

<sup>48</sup>As David Hume observed famously, if God really is omnibenevolent and omnipotent, whence then is evil? Even if one believes Hume's logical problem has been answered, one can still puzzle over the amount and distribution of evil.

<sup>49</sup>For discussion of the latter, see Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 95.

of liberal, skeptical scholarship (session 3). Even more disturbing is his treatment of the New Testament in session six when he presents a chart titled "Ancient Works and Their Oldest Manuscripts" (apparently drawn from Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*<sup>50</sup>). This list illustrates the time-gap between the initial composition of various ancient writings and the earliest extant copies:<sup>51</sup>

Homer's <i>Iliad</i>	500 years
Julius Caesar's <i>Gallic Wars</i>	1000 years
Pliny's <i>History</i>	750 years
Thucydides' <i>History</i>	1300 years
Herodotus' <i>History</i>	1300 years

With those points of comparison, Tackett then turns to address the time gap between the composition of the New Testament and our earliest extant copy: "Let's look at the New Testament. What do we have? Twenty-five years. Only twenty-five years to the first and earliest document that we have. That's pretty significant."

Note first that this chart creates a misleading impression that the New Testament is a unitary document parallel to Homer's *Iliad* or Herodotus' *History*. This grounds a second, subtle distortion that the process of canon recognition was a relatively straightforward manner of recognizing this single document's authority. However, the most serious distortion concerns the impression that we have a (relatively) complete New Testament manuscript that dates to within twenty-five years of the New Testament's composition. In fact, the earliest relatively complete manuscript, the Codex Sinaiticus, dates to between 330 and 350. Perhaps then Tackett was actually referring to P52, the earliest extant manuscript which dates to about AD 130. But far from being a manuscript of the whole New Testament (as a layperson would assume), P52 is a small fragment (2.5 by 3.5 inches) from the Gospel of John (18:31-33 and 37-38).<sup>52</sup> While this fragment provides powerful evidence for the antiquity of John, it says nothing directly about the fidelity of the later extant manuscripts of John that we have, let alone about the rest of the New Testament. While I do not know his intentions, it looks as if Tackett is trading off the layperson's ignorance of the semantic range of the technical term "manuscript" as referring to everything from parchment fragments to complete codices, thereby conveying the impression that we have a copy of the New Testament centuries earlier than is in fact the case.

<sup>50</sup>Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (USA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972), 48.

<sup>51</sup>Tackett explains the comparison as follows: "What I want you to do is compare the oldest manuscript for each one. Let's look at one. For Homer's *Iliad* the earliest manuscript we have—let's assume that Homer is writing his *Iliad* on this date [points at the ground]. The oldest manuscript we have is one that was written five hundred years after Homer wrote the *Iliad* in the beginning"(session 6).

<sup>52</sup>In contrast to Tackett, McDowell is forthright that P52 is a "portion of the gospel of John" and a "little fragment." McDowell, 48.

In session six of the TP, Tackett points to the case of Rigoberta Menchu, a human rights activist and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize who fabricated a number of events in her bestselling, critically acclaimed autobiography *An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Tackett notes that one defender of Menchu dismissed the charge of fabrication thusly: "Whether her book is true, I don't care. What is important is that we teach our students about the brutality of the Guatemalan military, the horrors of capitalism and so forth."<sup>53</sup> Tackett intends the example as a sober warning of the error in attempting to defend truth through the perpetuation of falsity as if one could win the battle for good through the perpetuation of evil. And he is surely right. Menchu's defender illustrates the sobering fact that some ideologues will engage in that final irony of sacrificing truth in order to save it.

The task of educating the Christian laity is an enormous one, and I commend Focus on the Family for shouldering this most difficult task. But this cannot change the fact that the TP echoes the fault of Menchu by subverting the pursuit of truth to its own ideological ends. Frankly it is astounding that after spending two million dollars on the production costs of the TP,<sup>54</sup> Focus on the Family apparently never bothered to undertake even a rudimentary vetting of the curriculum itself. And if the TP demonstrates little concern for pursuing the truth, one can hardly expect more from its participants. The first thing we need in the midst of a perceived culture war is sober self-criticism to ensure that we truly are people living out the truth (1 John 1:6).<sup>55</sup> In addition, we need to recognize that the battle is the Lord's, so that we do not capitulate to the tempting pragmatism that seeks victory at the expense of truth.<sup>56</sup> Only then will evangelicals reach intellectual maturity in which they stand for the truth in all its complexity. Sadly, the TP reflects instead more the pragmatism of the soldier in the film *Flags of Our Fathers* who defends the ideologically-driven war bonds campaign with the quip: "We need easy-to-understand truths and damn few words."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Unfortunately, Tackett gives no reference for this quote.

<sup>54</sup>"Dr. Dobson Introduces The Truth Project," <<http://www.thetruthproject.org/about/culturefocus/A000000118.cfm/>>

<sup>55</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that we can describe both a proposition and a person as true relative to a common concept of measuring up in excellence: "When we speak of 'a true so-and-so,' we are implicitly measuring a contrast between this so-and-so that measures up and other so-and-so's that do not, or would not, measure up." Nicholas Wolterstorff, "True Words," in *But Is It All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth*, eds. Alan G. Padgett and Patrick R. Keifert (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, MA: Eerdmans, 2006), 42.

<sup>56</sup>As Bert Gordijn observes: "On a surgical ward during an operation or in the army in a battle situation, more dictatorial forms of consensus formation with regard to the next actions to undertake are appropriate and justified." Bert Gordijn, "Regulating Moral Dissent in an Open Society: The Dutch Experience with Pragmatic Tolerance," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 26.3 (2001): 227.

<sup>57</sup>Thanks to an anonymous reader at *Christian Scholar's Review* for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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