

What Frames What?

By Richard V. Horner

One of two questions that I frequently ask my students is, “What frames what?” In asking this question I am trying to get my students to be thoughtful about the fact that we all have ideas and beliefs that do the work of framing other ideas and beliefs. Indeed, these key ideas frame not only other ideas and beliefs but all of life—our own experience and that of others. Sometimes we call these large ideas world-views, sometimes we refer to them as background beliefs, and because they tell the stories that make sense of our lives, we might also call them first-order narratives. Whatever we call them, though, we all have ideas and beliefs that do this framing, and it is good to reflect on just what these ideas and beliefs are.

One reason why I push students to think deliberately and consciously about this question is that often the large ideas that frame and dominate our lives are so deeply ingrained that we do not realize they are there. They work at such deep levels that they have become second-nature to us. This is why these ideas are also sometimes called presuppositions or assumptions. We presuppose or assume them to be true at such a basic level that we do not even realize they have us in their grip. Simply being religious, moreover, does not make this problem go away. To the contrary, it makes it all the more problematic. Though people easily assume that their religion frames their life, this may not be the case.

Unrecognized assumptions often frame our religious beliefs and practices, and the result is that we profess one set of beliefs but live according to another. I would suggest that late-modern ways of thinking often frame our lives and our religious beliefs and practices far more than we may realize. Specifically, an understanding of the spiritual realm that views it as either a realm of imagination or a realm that is malleable and open to individual taste and will generally frames religious and spiritual experience and belief. While it is true that our society has seen a resurgence in religion and that it generally affirms the exploration of the religious and the spiritual, one needs to be thoughtful in assessing this resurgence and affirmation. The affirmation of religion comes at a cost, and the cost is that our beliefs and practices must be framed by something other than orthodox religion.

On current terms, we may be as religious as we please, but only if we are willing to place our religious experience within a framework that views the spiritual realm as largely imaginative or at least as malleable and open to individual taste and will and fashioning. Let me offer a couple of instances where I think I have seen this frame at work. Recently *Newsweek* published a double-issue that featured a cover-story on “Spirituality in America.” It arrived the day before I began teaching a class entitled “Christianity and the Modern Mind” (and it even cited the University of Florida Religion Department), so the issue caught my attention. Filling a full twenty pages “in search of the spiritual,” the article explores a wide range of spiritualities and religions. It presents portraits of Christian environmentalists, Islamic worshipers, John Paul II Catholics, the real Kabbalah, and several others. “Move over, politics,” the article begins. “Americans are looking for personal, ecstatic experiences of God, and, according to our poll, they don’t much care what the neighbors are doing.”¹

Even in the simple observation that people don’t care much what the neighbors are doing, the *Newsweek* article raises the question of “What frames what?” Though the editors don’t use my question exactly, they do draw attention to the fact that something other than orthodox religion seems to be framing religious belief and practice these days. Noting the great diversity of forms in which religious interest finds expression, the article states that, “along with the diversity has come a degree of inclusiveness that would have scandalized an earlier generation.

According to the *Newsweek*/BeliefNet poll, eight in 10 Americans—including 68% of evangelicals—believe that more than one faith can be a path to salvation” (52). The article then quite accurately and significantly notes that this inclusiveness “is most likely not what [these people] were taught in Sunday School” (52). The editors are right. This is not what Sunday Schools used to teach, nor is it what Judaism, Christianity, or Islam have taught over the centuries. To the contrary, these religions have held very specific ideas about who God is and how he is to be known, and each of these major religions would have understood itself to be the source of the largest framework for the believer’s life. Everything else, and certainly religious belief and practices themselves, would have fit within that framework. Now, however, even our belief in God is apparently framed by a larger, late-modern understanding of spirituality that gives a place to religious beliefs but does not allow religious belief to frame all of life.

Newsweek is right in noting that something has changed. As Walter Truett Anderson puts it in his very helpful book on the post-modern condition, there has been “a change not so much in *what* we believe as in *how* we believe.”² We are all welcome to be as religious as we please as long as we are willing to place our religious experience within a framework that sees the spiritual realm as malleable, imaginative, and open to individual will and taste. When I was a graduate student at the University of Virginia, I experienced another instance of this framework in a more personal way. After some time of working together, my advisor and I finally had one of those conversations that got below the surface. In it he learned that I hold to a Christian understanding of human experience, and in his response to that disclosure he went straight to the heart of the matter. Focusing his

question on my comments about the Bible, he asked if I read the Bible in the same way that he read Dickens or if I read the Bible thinking that it ought to impact every aspect of my life. In short, he was asking the framing question. He wanted to know whether I thought the Bible ought to frame all of life, or whether I would be willing to frame my specific beliefs within his framework for belief. As long as I was willing to place my “quaint religious faith”³ within his understanding that what we call spiritual reality is largely imaginative, then all would be well. I would be welcome to be as religious as I wanted to be. If, on the other hand, I thought that a Biblical or Christian understanding of human and spiritual reality ought to frame everything – both his experience and mine – then he would be strenuously opposed.

Often it is at this point that someone will protest that it is not right for me to “impose my beliefs on others.” People will argue that while my advisor was not asking to impose his beliefs on me, I was wanting to impose my beliefs on him. The problem with Christians, these critics maintain, is that they want to convert people. It is true that Christians do want to convert people, but I would argue that we all want to convert people. The trick lies in getting down to the level at which the desire to convert others actually amounts to something. My advisor is not especially interested in converting me to Dickens, or even in converting me to his current favorite poet. It is fine with him if I take or leave his idiosyncratic source of inspiration. He would, however, like to convert me to the understanding of the human situation that he shares with Nietzsche and Sartre, and he is quite disappointed that I am not willing to be converted.

Once again, then, we confront the framing question. If you want to get down to the level at which some- thing is at stake, if you want to get down to the level at which people genuinely want to convert others, then get all the way down to the question of “What frames what?” That is the level at which people around you will want to change your mind, and at which you will want to change theirs. The challenge lies in getting to that level and clarifying what issues are at stake there.

As someone who views the Bible as playing an essential role in framing life, I do find it striking to see the framing issue also emerging in significant ways in the pages of Scripture. Consider for instance, the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Colossians, where he encourages his readers to continue in Christ as they had begun, rooted and grounded in Him. The Apostle then warns, “Do not be taken in by the basic philosophies of this age” (2:8). He cautions against something he calls the “basic principles of this world” (2:8) and then notes the subtle ways that these principles can frame our thinking and practice without us realizing it. “Why, having been freed from the basic principles of this world,” he asks, “do you live as though you were still captive to it? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” (2:20- 21). Putting his finger on the tendency of our world to emphasize appearances, Paul exposes the fact that supposedly distinctive Christian practices are, in fact, often framed by a basic principle that is anything but Christian. The practices look impressively religious, but having lost their true framework, they have also lost any genuine Christian meaning.

In a similar manner, Jesus seems to be asking “What frames what?” when he discusses the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount. Early in that sermon Jesus considers several of the commandments in succession. In each case he states, “You have heard it said...., but I say to you...” (5:21, 27, etc.). In effect, he is saying that while his listeners profess submission to the Ten Commandments, they have come to frame those commandments in ways that suit their self-interest rather than in ways that suit God’s interests. Here and elsewhere Jesus points out that merely professing a belief does not mean that the belief is playing the role in your life that it ought to play or that you think it is playing. Jesus points out to His listeners that while they claimed to believe what they had always believed, they had re-framed those beliefs and reduced them to something much less than they are when Jesus frames them for us.

Finally, the words of the original temptation in the Garden of Eden also come to mind. Notice, once again, that the serpent did not change God’s words, he just re-framed them. Here the heart of the matter becomes apparent. In their original form God’s words were framed by God Himself. Adam and Eve were to entrust to God what He had not chosen to reveal to them. The serpent, however, proposed a new way of framing God’s words, and much more importantly, it was a way of thinking that also framed God Himself. In offering an explanation of why God had said what He had said, the serpent was offering a framework that was larger than God, a framework that was meant to explain God and His words. God’s words remained the same, but by virtue of being explained, those words had been re-framed, and it made all the difference.

How often has this original sin been repeated over the course of human history? In what ways are we guilty of exactly this same emptying of the words of God by simply re-framing them and re-framing God in the process? From the world of Adam and Eve, to the ancient world of Jesus and Paul, and on into our own world, this pattern has repeated itself over and over again. We give God a nod, but then we frame His teaching in a way that points beyond Him. Similarly, we give Jesus a nod, but then frame Him in a way that points beyond Him to some supposedly deeper truth. Over and over the question is, “What frames what?” What is the final point of orientation for our thinking, believing, and acting? Is it what we think it is? Is it what we profess it to be? Or has some other framework slipped in when we were not paying attention? These are the questions that repeat themselves over and over again.

How, then, shall we proceed? Let me conclude with just a few suggestions for how we might make some progress in recognizing the frameworks that are actually in place in our lives. First, begin by looking at the way you actually live your life and then work backwards to the ideas that are driving your practices and behaviors. For instance, take a look at how you live on a Tuesday afternoon, a Saturday morning, or a Sunday evening. What does the way you live tell you about the ideas that are framing your life? In a similar way, think about specific aspects of your experience and reflect on what actually frames those experiences. For instance, how do you determine which of your desires should be encouraged and which restrained? How do you understand yourself as male or female? What is your understanding of intimacy, affection, and sexuality? What does it mean to be a citizen of a particular country, and which citizenship frames which—your citizenship in your country or your citizenship in heaven? What frames baseball and tennis? Music and dance? Food and drink? What frames the work that you do from day to day, including the weekends? Take time to reflect on your most mundane experiences, and they will tell you a lot about what frames what in your life.

Second, think about the way you talk. What vocabularies do you use? Your words might tell you more than you want to know about the hidden assumptions and frameworks that are operating in your life. You may be struck by how crass you can be, or how self-absorbed your conversation is, but there is more at stake than that. Richard Neuhaus, for instance, has suggested that our language reveals the fact that a therapeutic mind-set has become so ingrained in us that we have forgotten it is there. We use the language of mental health and self-fulfillment even in discussing the work of Christ, the significance of the Church, and issues of righteousness and morality. With penetrating insight, Neuhaus cuts to the heart of the matter and wonders simply, “What is the psychological term for holiness?”⁴ Many vocabularies have become embedded in our speech, and we do well to consider what our words say about us.

Third, remember that the ideas that often frame our lives are not conscious to us at all. They are embedded in the social structures and institutions that frame and dominate each day of our lives. Just as ideas are embedded in the vocabularies we use, so they are embedded in institutions and structures. They have become like the air we breathe and the water we drink. Democratic values, capitalist practices, unfettered technologies, the entertainment industries, and more shape our lives day-in and day-out. Consider, for instance, how computer technology frames your life, quite literally. Even at this moment, a computer is framing my work as I write this essay. It shapes the scope of my vision, and it alters the pace at which I think. I know that when I write by hand on a yellow pad, both my vision and my pace change. So does my thinking process. How important is that? I honestly do not know, but I do know it is not insignificant. I aim to keep thinking about it—and to keep a good supply of yellow pads close at hand.

Finally, do your thinking in conversation with others. Do not try to figure this out alone. As I mentioned at the outset of this article, I have two questions that I typically ask students. The first is, “What frames what?” The second is, “With whom are you in conversation?” Nothing is likely to leave you more ignorant of your own framework than isolation, and nothing is likely to be more useful in helping you recognize your blind spots than being in conversation with others. Talk with the real-live human beings who are around you day by day, read some good books, and don’t just seek out those with whom you know you already agree. Find people and books with whom you have disagreements. Genuinely listen to them and don’t think that you have to have an answer right away. These conversations will reward you with some of your best insights into what frames what in your life, and they just might be helpful to others too.

I trust it is obvious by now that when I ask what frames what, I do not mean that you ought to spend five minutes on this question, get the answer right, and then move on to the next question. This is not even something to make a project for the month. To the contrary, this is one of those questions that will need to be answered over and over again. This one will challenge each of us throughout our lifetimes. Don’t ever expect to be done with it. No matter who you are or what you believe, you do well to engage it, and if you are someone who seeks to love the Lord God with a whole heart and a whole mind, the question is all the more important. If you want Christ to have every thought captive, moreover, then certainly you must ask, what ideas, beliefs, notions define me and frame my life from day to day? Are they what I think they are? Which of these ideas work at a conscious level and which work so far below the surface I do not realize the work that they are doing? In short, “What frames what?”

*Dr. Richard V. Horner
is Director of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville.*

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¹ *Newsweek*. 29 Aug./5 Sept. 2005: 46.

² Walter Truett Anderson, ed. *The Truth About the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995: 6.

³ Richard Rorty. "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids." *Philosophy and Social Hope*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999: 13.

⁴ Richard John Neuhaus. *Freedom for Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992: 86.