
Pro Rege

Volume 6 | Number 4


Article 2

June 1978

Francis Schaeffer in Review

Nick Van Til
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Van Til, Nick (1978) "Francis Schaeffer in Review," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 6: No. 4, 2 - 8.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol6/iss4/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Francis Schaeffer in Review

by Nick Van Til
Professor of Philosophy



Mr. Van Til is a charter member of the Dordt faculty and is chairman of the Theology-Philosophy Department.

The prominence of the publicity and programs associated with Francis Schaeffer among evangelicals in the past few years quite naturally invites evaluations of his method and message. And because Schaeffer makes a kind of intellectual pitch in his writings, and more recently in his film series, we are not surprised that several assessments of his apologetic method have appeared over the past few years.

In response to some of his students at Westminster Seminary as early as 1967, Cornelius Van Til began to set down some of his reactions to Schaeffer's lectures and writing. Van Til continued to do this so that in a syllabus prepared for student references he covered most of Schaeffer's works. The syllabus treats Schaeffer's *Westminster Lectures*, *Wheaton Lectures*, *The God Who Is There*, *Death in the City*, *Escape From Reason*, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth-Century*, *The Mark of a Christian*, and *He Is There and Is Not Silent*.

Because Schaeffer subscribed to the old Princeton apologetic which had also been retained by Machen (essentially that of Bishop Butler and Thomas Aquinas), we

are not surprised to find Van Til taking rigorous exception to Schaeffer's approach. Although he is no doubt serious in his profession of adherence to Christian presuppositions, in many instances Schaeffer does not make presuppositional use of his Christian beliefs. He does not always make his Christian presuppositions the precondition for all meaningful thinking and knowing on all subjects. Rather, he uses his presuppositions as the best hypotheses by which to explain rationally the data with which men, both Christians and non-Christians, have to deal.

While expressing appreciation for Schaeffer's work at L'Abri, after reviewing the afore-mentioned Schaeffer works, Van Til feels bound to conclude as follows:

Looking back for a moment over the road we have traversed, we observe that Schaeffer seems to agree that unless we presuppose the truth of the Christian position, all predication is self-stultifying and God-insulting. But Schaeffer also keeps saying that Christianity must prove itself true

to apostate man in terms of the standard that apostate man has devised, i.e. (a) the idea of human autonomy (b) the idea of pure contingent factuality, and (c) the idea of a pure abstract principle of rationality.¹

Particularly with frequent use of (c) above, Schaeffer takes the position that one can assume some possibility of knowledge without assuming that God has to be the foundation of that possibility. In competition with other religious positions, assuming that all metaphysical positions are basically religious, Schaeffer wants to offer the best metaphysics by which to view the physical, that is, the day-to-day world in which we live. He has taken the position that one cannot fairly ask the non-Christian to believe the Bible before he convinces him that the Bible offers the best foundational explanation for his life and its general context.

In the past, some persons—including some in the Reformed community—have argued that if you do not take Schaeffer's approach, then you are virtually denying that the non-Christian can have any knowledge at all. It would be the same as saying that the non-Christian cannot know that two plus two equals four. From time to time, Van Til's position has been caricatured by suggestions that it leads to that result.

On the contrary, Van Til would insist that all men operate epistemologically, as well as physically, within the parameters of a commonly shared creation, wherein meaning can be found only by presupposing the Creator as the transcendent reference and beginning of all meaning. The condition for the acceptance of that presupposition is a disposition that only the Holy Spirit can generate in the heart of the believer. So, with Augustine and Calvin, Van Til holds that believing precedes knowing and not the other way around as with Thomas Aquinas, and in many instances, with Francis Schaeffer.

The fact that man in unbelief refuses to admit the preconditions of his ability to

know does not alter the situation. In fact, Calvin insisted that in spite of the unbeliever's disclaimers, he has the *sensus deitatis* indelibly etched on his consciousness, leaving him without excuse for his apostasy as Paul also tells us in the first chapter of Romans.

Let me turn next to the writing of Professor Robert L. Reymond of Covenant Seminary. He has given us a summary of the various apologetic positions current among evangelicals in his book *The Justification of Knowledge*.² Reymond is in fundamental agreement with Van Til on the view that the validation of knowledge rests on the presupposition that there is a Triune Creator-God who is the source of all truth and meaning through His various acts of revelation, including creation itself. Revelation is the source of all knowledge.

Reymond disagrees with Van Til as to the nature of our knowledge in relation to the knowledge of the Creator. Reymond holds that man's knowledge has a univocal status in comparison with God's knowledge. It is essentially of the same kind as God's knowledge.³ Van Til, however, insists that man knows analogically and not univocally. Man's knowledge is not identical in kind with God's knowledge. Van Til and Reymond concur that man can know truly, though not comprehensively. And they are in virtual agreement in their assessment of Francis Schaeffer's apologetic method.

Reymond discusses Schaeffer under the heading "Empirical Apologetics" along with such men as Thomas Aquinas, J. Oliver Buswell, Edward Carnell, John Warwick Montgomery, Clark Pinnock, and Josh McDowell. Reymond notes that Schaeffer considers pre-Hegelian antithetical rationalism as preferable to Hegelian dialectic. Let me explain. For the pre-Hegelians, a thesis had its contradictory in its antithesis. If one is true, the other is false and vice versa. Hegel proposed that two such positions are really only in provisional opposition and may be resolved into a higher synthesis with some contribution from each. So we do not deal with *yes* and *no* but with two *maybe's* which

cannot in turn yield more than another *maybe*.

Concerning this problem Reymond writes that

For once Schaeffer has been able to restore the concept of antithesis in the thinking of modern man (in what he calls "pre-evangelism"), he invites the man, now "rational" to test the truth claims of Scripture, reminiscent of Carnell, by its consistency and the space-time evidence; and to do this prior to faith. (Cf. *The God Who Is There*, p. 94, 109, 141) Schaeffer asks, "Specifically in relation to the question of man, does the Christian answer conform to and explain what we observe concerning man as he is. . .?" (*The God Who Is There*, p. 109)⁴

And Reymond continues:

Note the expression "what we observe." Surely Schaeffer is aware that what a man observes is dependent upon his religious *pou sto*.^{*} What Schaeffer observes may not be at all what another man observes. Still with Carnell, Schaeffer invites the non-believer to judge Christianity with an apostate epistemology.⁵

Concerning man's access to knowledge, Reymond writes thus:

If his understanding of the world and himself is not derived from the Scripture, then he opens himself up to all the fallacies of the cosmological argument.⁶ [For example, in following that kind of argument one might offer the idea that one can ascertain the characteristics of God by noting the characteristics of the

world. N.V.T.]

Commenting on Schaeffer's attempts to prove that the *manishness* of man requires the existence of a personal God, Reymond concludes as follows:

It is the old cosmological argument of Thomas in new garb, but Schaeffer 'out-Thomases' Thomas. Thomas, at least, was not willing to deduce personal effects, while Schaeffer, on the basis of observed effects alone, (e.g. human love), purports to demonstrate not only the necessity of a personal God, but an infinite personal God which exists ontologically in personal unity and diversity. Needless to say, I find this incredible.⁷

Next, let us look at another book on apologetics which devotes itself solely to the approach of Schaeffer. It is *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique*, by Thomas V. Morris. Morris is a Ph.D. candidate at Yale University pursuing a degree in the philosophy of religion.

The weight of Morris' argument seems to hinge on the idea that whereas Schaeffer's method is basically correct, Schaeffer does not use his method rigorously enough. Morris feels that Schaeffer should not take the stance of an apologist if he is not going to present adequately the arguments that one might expect from his chosen method. Schaeffer seems to be satisfied with suggesting arguments rather than devoting himself to the rigorous establishment of those arguments.⁸

At the end of his discussion, Morris indicates that his own presuppositions, like Schaeffer's, serve only to furnish the most likely hypothesis in the contest for the most rational explanation of the facts and experiences that go to make up our lives. Morris uses the analogy of celestial

^{*}This reference is to the place one takes for his foundation as a place to stand. It comes from the Greek Archimedes who, in illustration of the principle of the lever, said that if he had a place where he could firmly stand, he could move the world.

motions, comparing the Ptolemaic and the Copernican explanation as competing for plausibility. Morris writes that

The Ptolemaic picture became so complicated and inelegant that its validity finally came to be doubted. The Copernican or heliocentric hypothesis (the sun as the center around which the heavenlies revolve) which some few voices proclaimed, offered an alternative picture which simply and fully accounted for all the observations which so troubled the geocentrists. Thus came about the Copernican revolution. This is a picture of how our presuppositional arguments may function.⁹

Morris also calls attention to the dispositional factors that affect one's religious decisions. He quotes Michael Polanyi and John Ballie to support the idea that dispositional influences, those that play on our emotions, generally count for more in religious decision and commitment than do arguments that require rational assent.¹⁰ But from his critique of Schaeffer and his discussion of his own apologetic method we conclude that Morris does not take the same view of the use of presuppositions as do Van Til and Reymond. His principal criticism is not that Schaeffer ought to use a different method, but that he ought to be more thorough in the method that he has chosen.

Jack Rogers is another theologian who has turned his attention to Schaeffer. Rogers is Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Religion and Theology at Fuller Seminary. Rogers presented his critique of Schaeffer in a two-article series in the 1977 May and June issues of *The Reformed Journal*. In March of 1977, Rogers drove to Anaheim, California, where, along with 6,800 others, mostly evangelicals, he heard Francis Schaeffer preside over the presentation of a few segments of his ten-part film production *How Shall We Then Live*. The films are based on his book of the same title, which by its jacket is proclaimed

to be the "crowning work of scholarship" by the "foremost evangelical thinker of our day."

Rogers is convinced that for the majority of his Anaheim audience of evangelicals, Schaeffer

is a symbol, an intellectual Daniel, standing tall for them amidst the frightening lions of secular scholarship. They don't really understand or analyze Schaeffer's arguments. What he says sounds good and they feel better. They go home and function no differently from before. In the short run it has given them encouragement. In the long run it provides no sustenance.¹¹

Why, then, do they receive no sustenance from Schaeffer? Because they don't analyze, to be sure, Rogers continues, but more importantly because Schaeffer's theological method is wrong.

For the (Old) Princeton theologians and for Schaeffer, nature and the Bible are both systems which cross-reference so we may enjoy a complete system of knowledge. This is not demonstrated from a study of either nature or Scripture, but is rather held as a necessary presupposition.¹²

Rogers is critical of Schaeffer's neo-scholastic rationalism or, as Norman Geisler put it, Rogers "chastises Francis Schaeffer for his demand for reason prior to faith and for a prior commitment to Aristotelian philosophy."¹³ In his criticism of Schaeffer's Aristotelianism, Rogers seems to be in agreement with Van Til and Reymond, but his disagreement comes from a different theological emphasis. He shares the Neo-orthodox sympathies of his colleagues, President David Hubbard and James Daane, Dean of the Graduate School.

Rogers strenuously objects to what he thinks of as Schaeffer's absolutizing of Scriptures and his antithetical method. Schaeffer has expressed himself in support of an antithesis as follows: "To the extent

that anyone gives up the mentality of the antithesis, he has moved over to the other side, even if he still tries to defend orthodoxy or evangelicalism.”¹⁴

Rogers then traces Schaeffer’s absolutism back to the influence of Scottish Realism as it was brought to bear on the old Princeton theologians. The Scottish Realists like Thomas Reid held

that the mind could truly know objects as they are in themselves. They asserted that language was precise and literal and that languages shared a universal grammar. With these and other principles of Scottish Realism Princeton theologians believed that a nineteenth-century American theologian could interpret the Bible with accuracy using a current dictionary and logic, without undue concern for historical or cultural context.¹⁵

Schaeffer was taught the method of antithesis in theology at Westminster and Faith. His theological views were fixed at that time and have not significantly changed. The Scottish Common Sense philosophy presupposed by the old Princeton theologians he imbibed, with a presuppositional twist probably contributed by Cornelius Van Til.¹⁶

The last remark seems to come as a Rogers’ twist. For if Schaeffer has indeed appropriated a “presuppositional twist,” he often fails to use it either presuppositionally or antithetically. But as Reymond suggests, Schaeffer often begins with the rationality that he assumes is common to all men and then argues the superiority of the Christian explanation in understanding such phenomena as the “manishness” of man. By contrast, Van Til and Reymond would argue that no meaningful predication, that is, the assertion of any meaning whatsoever, can proceed without the assumption that there is a Creator-God behind the order of creation which both believers and unbeliev-

ers commonly share, regardless of the denials of the latter.

Rogers may be right in suggesting that Schaeffer’s use of antithesis has suffered some rationalistic fossilizing under the old Princeton influence; but through the influences he has experienced, Rogers fails to appreciate the point that Schaeffer is trying to make by the use of antithetical categories. Here is an example. At Anaheim, in answer to a question Schaeffer declared, “God gave categories to the human mind. It isn’t Aristotelian thought. We’re being sold a bill of goods today when we’re told that is only Aristotelian. Because Eastern people think exactly the same way when you talk to them.”¹⁷

I would interpret Schaeffer as saying that all human minds have to follow essentially the same laws of analysis when doing their cogitating as conceptualizing creatures. The laws of analysis are then not of Aristotelian origin but are inherent in the created order. Despite arguments on the origin of the notion of causality since the days of David Hume, men think in terms of causal relationships. Primitive peoples often mistakenly and unscientifically allege ghostly causes for physical effects. This does not discredit causality but merely the alleged cause in question.

By contrast, Rogers feels that Schaeffer has no appreciation for either the cultural conditioning that brings variety in current cultures or the cultural matrix of the Scriptures (which must be understood for an understanding of the Scriptures). Rogers would severely limit the number of absolutes that one can posit on the basis of Biblical studies. Schaeffer has too many absolutes, in Rogers’ opinion.

A few paragraphs later, Rogers objects to Schaeffer’s lumping Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard together and then casting them into the limbo of irrationalism. Concerning Schaeffer’s treatment of these thinkers, Rogers says,

His characterizations of their thought are almost unrecognizable with reference to either their own works or standard

textbook treatment of them.¹⁸

Yet, when one turns to Schaeffer, one finds this assessment of Hume:

In his criticism of reason as a method of knowing, Hume questioned the existence of the cause-and-effect concept itself. Hume had a wide influence both on British philosophy and on the German philosopher Kant.¹⁹

I find that assessment of Hume entirely valid, for it exposes the crux of Hume's skepticism and his subsequent influence that called into question the previous estimates of the inductive method, so that after Hume, science no longer claims certainty but only a high degree of probability. As for Kant, he admitted that Hume "woke him out of his dogmatic slumbers."

For an assessment of Hegel, Schaeffer quotes from Frederick Copleston's *History of Philosophy*, which is certainly recognized as a standard work by this time. In his own summary assessment of Hegel, Schaeffer has this to say:

Instead of the antithesis (that some things are true and their opposite untrue), truth and moral rightness will be found in the flow of history, a synthesis of them.²⁰

By Schaeffer's own admission, this may be an over-simplification of Hegel but hardly an unrecognizable characterization. One must then conclude that Rogers is being hardly fair to Schaeffer or to his own readers by presenting Schaeffer's philosophizing in such an unfavorable light.

If one works from a Reformed approach to the Scriptures, holding that their self-authenticating character is the basis for man's true knowledge, then one cannot appropriate a skeptical or irrational approach to the problems of being and knowing. In that regard, then, Schaeffer can properly characterize Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard as standing on the wrong side of the Christian's antithetical division. The falling out, so to speak, does not occur because these philosophers

had a disrespect for a commonly shared (and a common respect for) universal reason. It occurs, rather, because the systems of thought of these men are committed to the ultimacy of man rather than the ultimacy of God. The subjectivism of Kierkegaard put him in the same class epistemologically with Hume, Kant, and Hegel regardless of some Christian tenets one might find in other areas of his thought.

In spite a measured defense of Schaeffer, I find myself in agreement with some of the additional criticisms that Rogers offers, however, Rogers suggests that for an audience, such as the one at Anaheim, Schaeffer's work is at best of superficial value. Those people identified themselves with the force of the intellectual blows that Schaeffer presumably was meting out to the forces of unbelief. But like quixotic tilting with windmills, such polemic has very little useful effect in the everyday life of the evangelical community.

Rogers also points to some of the hazards of Schaeffer's work with young people. Reaction to Schaeffer's method and message may take a variety of forms. Some students have accepted the intellectual challenge to make Christianity intellectually respectable:

These young people have heard Schaeffer's challenge to give honest answers to honest questions and to know the modern mind. They have begun to study and mature. In so doing they have almost always grown beyond Schaeffer, as their study led them to encounter greater complexities than he concedes.²⁰

Thomas V. Morris may be an example. He began his acquaintance with Schaeffer's work as an undergraduate in North Carolina. Now he hopes to go beyond Schaeffer in a more rigorous application of Schaeffer's method. As Morris says, "I will attempt to give a justification for the general type of apologetic enterprise in which both Dr. Schaeffer and I are involved."²²

Rogers continues his evaluation as

follows:

A second group, also mostly young people, become ardent disciples of Schaeffer. They accept his system as ultimate and his answers as final. They function best within the context of a L'Abri community where the entire ethos is controlled by Schaeffer's thought. These people must continue to live in a ghetto, a closed world, a subculture where only Schaeffer's thought is studied. Occasionally, life experience or other study somehow impinges on some and show fallacies in Schaeffer's system. I have observed some such devotees of a system follow their logic to its conclusion and reject the whole system and with it their Christian faith when faced with the realities of the system's weaknesses.²³

Such observations recall to mind a young man of my acquaintance. After a year at one of our Reformed Christian colleges, he became dissatisfied with what he termed "cold Calvinistic apologetics." In his quest for more warmth, he spent some time at L'Abri. There, the coldness of Schaeffer's apologetic rationalism was completely disguised by the warmth of the Schaeffer (Francis and Edith) evangelical fervor. Would that he had also comforted himself with the warmth that radiates from Calvin's sermons and devotional writings.

Another factor almost invariably appears in the work of those who furnish a substitute religious community for students who are turned off by the church affiliation of their youth. The religious leader becomes their guru in what Rogers sees as a religious ghetto. This poses a real danger though, I presume, Schaeffer is not trying to propagate Schaefferites.

How shall we then assess the work of Francis Schaeffer? I think we can be thankful that, as Rogers has also suggested, Schaeffer comes across mostly as an evangelist. His dispositional appeal overrides

his faulty apologetics. In fact, in some of the segments of his film presentation (for example, his assessment of Thomas Aquinas), he virtually repudiates the very Thomism which he espouses in much of his writing. In the final film segment, he quotes from the first chapter of Romans where Paul declares that the unbeliever is without excuse when he worships the creature rather than the Creator. Knowing, then, as we do, that God can and does use imperfect means to advance His kingdom, we should pray that Francis Schaeffer too will be used to the praise of the Father beyond any of the expectations that his apologetic method would lead us to predict.

Footnote References

1. Cornelius Van Til, *The Apologetic Methodology of Francis Schaeffer*, Mimeographed Syllabus, Westminster Seminary, p. 53.
2. Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Nutley, N.J., 1976.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 98 ff.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
8. Thomas V. Morris, *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1976, p. 23.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.
11. Jack Rogers, "Francis Schaeffer: The Promise and the Problem," *The Reformed Journal*, June, 1977, p. 19.
12. *Ibid.*, May, 1977, p. 15.
13. Norman Geisler, A review of Jack Roger's *The Nature of Scripture*, *Christianity Today*, Feb. 24, 1978, p. 34.
14. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill., 1968, p. 47.
15. Rogers, *op. cit.*, May, p. 15.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, June, p. 15.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Francis Schaeffer, *How Shall We Then Live*, Fleming H. Revell Co., Old Tappan, N.J., 1976, p. 156.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
21. Rogers, *op. cit.*, June, p. 19.
22. Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
23. Rogers, *op. cit.*, June, p. 19.