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Nick Van Til

*Dordt College*

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# Perspectives in Apologetics

Nick Van Til

Professor of History and Philosophy, Emeritus



*A member of the original faculty of Dordt College, Nick Van Til has been a frequent contributor to the pages of Pro Rege. Retired since 1981 he has been Professor of History and Philosophy, Emeritus. But his zeal and ability to write have not flagged. We look forward to future contributions.*

If you listen to the various radio and television preachers who are currently competing for your attention, you will discover that they work from a variety of apologetic positions, either expressed or implied. In fact, one radio and television preacher I listened to with some regularity shifted from the use of one apologetic method to another quite freely and perhaps even without premeditated intent. This led me to the conclusion that it might be helpful to review what has been going on in apologetics in the past few years.

The question of apologetic stance comes down to the question concerning the foundation of one's Christian confession. Thinking apologetically, one should be

willing to entertain the question, "On the basis of what authority do you accept the Christian faith as your faith?"

In answer to that question I would reply that one must accept the Christian faith on the basis of the self-attesting authority of the Scriptures as God's inspired word. One does not need to, nor should one, go outside of the Bible to look for additional confirmation or authority. We must admit that belief on the basis of biblical authority involves us in a form of question begging or, as we might say, circular reasoning. One accepts the Bible because it is the word of God and one accepts God as the sovereign Lord on one's life because the Bible has revealed Him as such. That may be circuitous, but then are not

all foundational premises accepted on faith? For example, the rationalist places his faith in reason, and the empiricist his faith in the senses. They then use these as their basic authority.

Those who are students of apologetics will recognize the position which I have taken as the one which was propagated by Cornelius Van Til at Westminster Theological Seminary during his forty-five year tenure there, beginning in the early 1930's. I shall refer to Cornelius Van Til's position as the Westminster Apologetic.

The Westminster Apologetic maintains that any modification that would compromise the sole and complete authority of the Bible by an appeal to any other kind of authority or proof dilutes the authority which the Bible claims for itself. That is, the word of our sovereign God is the only authority for our knowledge concerning him and the foundation for all truth and meaning. That is not to deny, as the Belgic Confession has it, that we can learn about God by studying nature. But to use Calvin's figure, we can see that revelation only after we have appropriated the spectacles which the Bible provides for the correction of our sin-darkened vision.

### Rationalism and the "A Priori" Argument

"A priori" means proof before and without any sense inspection. It appeals to self-evidence. The celebrated argument in this category is the Ontological Argument of St. Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109. Using uncomplicated terminology, the argument went as follows: The idea of God includes the idea of perfection. The idea of perfection must include the idea of existence. Therefore, God necessarily exists.

A monk, a contemporary of Anselm, was quick to point out that it is possible to entertain the idea of a perfect island as a perfect environment, but mere ideation would not bring it into existence. In our day, movie makers have presented us with Shangri La's

but we know that we can never inhabit them.

Immanuel Kant, in his refutation of the Ontological Argument, became more technical and grammatical. He insisted that the argument is invalid because existence is not a predicate by which we can qualify a subject. In other words, we can say all the same things about a non-existent that we can about an existent.

In his book entitled, *The Ontological Argument: From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*, Alvin Plantinga brings the history of the argument up to date. It includes discussions by such present-day notables as William Alston, Charles Hartshorne, and Norman Malcolm. As one might expect, the analytical philosophers see the ontological argument as a clear case of an analytical proposition. We only need read the implication of the lingual symbols. In doing this we will find that the predicate of the argument is implied in the subject, but that does not provide verification for the existence of the subject.

Plantinga's conclusion, I think in sum convincing, is as follows:

From all these considerations it would appear not merely that the ontological argument not only cannot produce conviction where none existed before, but also was not intended to by some of its more prominent exponents. This is the reason that, as Malcolm notices at the end of his paper, an atheist might recognize the validity of the argument and still not be converted. He would recognize the validity but not the truth of the premises, and so would find the argument no more than a simple exercise in hypothetical reasoning. Thus not merely is Malcolm right in concluding that "It would be unreasonable to require that the recognition of Anselm's demonstration as valid must produce conversion," but one may go further and say that it would be unreasonable to expect

that the argument should produce the slightest change in belief.<sup>1</sup>

### Empirical-Rational Arguments: The Five Ways of Thomas Aquinas

Perhaps not everyone will agree with my "empirical-rational" designation here, but I think it is correct in that the method to be described begins with the empirical, i.e., sense data, and then extrapolates to some general principles. This too is basically the method of science. Aquinas expanded on the beginnings of this kind of argument as he found it in Aristotle and formulated his Five Ways of proof for the existence of God. Modern Roman Catholics often express enthusiasm for Aquinas as one who effectively Christianized Aristotle. Regrettably, from time to time, Protestant apologists have concurred in that estimation of the contribution of Thomas Aquinas to Christian apologetics.

Ever since John Calvin, some who stand in the Reformed tradition have urged that Christians discard classic foundationalism and its modern variations.

The Five Ways of Aquinas are the following:

The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain and evident to our senses that some things are in motion. Whatever is in motion is moved by another. . . . Therefore, it is necessary to arrive at a First Mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

The second way is from the formality of efficient causation. In the world of sense we find there is an order of

efficient causation. . . . Therefore, it is necessary to put forward a First Efficient Cause, to which everyone gives the name God.

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. . . . Every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. It is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another. . . . Therefore, we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble, and the like. . . . What is most complete in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; . . . Therefore, there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world; for we see the things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for some purpose. . . . Therefore, some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are ordained towards a definite purpose, and this being we call God.<sup>2</sup>

The first and principal objection which can be brought against these arguments of Aquinas is that in its methods, that of natural theology, it begins with a wrong assumption. It assumes that there is a common reliability in the senses and reason which can function as a universal test for truth and meaning. If allegations of truth

meet this test, they are acceptable.

However, checking with a number of present-day philosophers and theologians, we find that the assumptions of natural theology have been repudiated. That method has been characterized as classical foundationalism—"classical" because as we have already suggested, it goes back to Plato and Aristotle.

To reiterate, the empirical-rational character of classic foundationalism is evident when we note that it "tended to hold that a proposition is properly basic for a person if it is either self-evident or evident to the senses."<sup>3</sup> Working out from that basis as the center, one must substantiate by an appeal to reason all propositions on the periphery. The classical mind appealed to the reliability of "right reason."

Ever since John Calvin, some who stand in the Reformed tradition have urged that Christians discard classic foundationalism and its modern variations. But like the Israelites in the wilderness, some of whom, while restricted to manna, carried fond memories of leeks and melons in Egypt, some in the Reformed tradition want to hark back to the Greeks and are tempted by the intricacies of logic and proof from the senses in order to establish a foundation for their belief in God and for their work in science.

Among the Roman Catholics, Blaisé Pascal, (1623-62) the French scientist and philosopher, clearly understood the weakness of the Five Ways of Aquinas. He argued that the God so derived was an abstraction and is not the triune God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Despite that seventeenth-century insight, some Protestants were ready to appropriate scholastic arguments in an effort to give their apologetics more cogency. For example, in America in the nineteenth century, theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary were still leaning on Aquinas and his successors Joseph Butler (1692-1752) and William Paley (1743-1805), both Anglicans and both using variants of the extra-biblical way to a knowledge of God.

Though Westminster initiated its break with traditional, classic foundationalism in the 1930's, the philosophic leadership in the Christian Reformed Church was reluctant to do so. In fact, in the 1950's there was a concerted journalistic effort through the use of the *Calvin Forum* to repudiate the Westminster Apologetic. In introducing this journalistic blitz, Cecil De Boer, editor of the *Calvin Forum*, reaffirmed the idea that one can gain knowledge of God by nonbiblical means. He stated that the critics of Cornelius Van Til did not "question the legitimacy of the attempt to demonstrate the reasonableness of the Christian faith by borrowing from secular philosophers."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as recently as 1971, at the Wheaton Philosophy Conference, the late W. Harry Jellema stated that we could learn about our God by listening to what Plato and Hegel had to say about their god.

In the wider world of evangelicals beyond the Reformed community, men like Edward Carnell, late of Fuller Theological Seminary, and Francis Schaeffer, global evangelist and defender of the Faith, are notable proponents of the classical foundationalism. Carnell held that the Christian position is the most reasonable position one can hold. Schaeffer stated that "before a man is ready to become a Christian he must have a proper understanding of the truth."<sup>5</sup> One might add the name of Gordon H. Clark because he has also written extensively. As a scholar, Clark seems to have carried on a lifelong love affair with the law of noncontradiction.<sup>6</sup>

To bring ourselves up-to-date on foundationalism, we should take account of the thinking of the current philosophic leadership of the Christian Reformed community. I will cite the works of Nick Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga as perhaps the most widely read. In doing so I have no intention of slighting the work of others who are working as professional philosophers.

Wolterstorff, in his 1976 book, *Reason Within The Bounds Of Religion*, not only rejects classical foundationalism, but he also rejects all quests for "indubitability" based

on attempts to verify the Bible by authenticating the autographs of the Bible. For him, that kind of biblical foundationalism does not qualify as a satisfactory alternative for the discarded classical foundationalism.

In his rejection of classic foundationalism, Wolterstorff has moved away from the position of his college mentors of the 1950's. What he now substitutes verges on a subjectivism which, to my mind, is no more satisfactory. If we maintain that we cannot validate our foundation by secular standards of objectivity, it does not follow that we cannot have a shared biblical foundation to which we can commonly appeal. I do not believe that it is true that "each of us has no choice but 'to one's self be true.'" "

Richard Osling, *Time's* "Religion" editor, called Alvin Plantinga "America's leading orthodox philosopher of God."<sup>8</sup> Plantinga stated his position on classical foundationalism and natural theology definitively in an address to the American Catholic Philosophical Association in April of 1980.<sup>9</sup> Plantinga borrowed a phrase from Ralph McInery who suggested that Protestants who use natural theology as an apologetic method may be characterized as "Peeping Thomists." One might call that punning one's way to the suggestion that such Protestants stand in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas rather than John Calvin. For himself, Plantinga, too, would repudiate both classical foundationalism and natural theology. He maintains that

The Reformers mean to say, fundamentally, that belief in God can properly be taken as basic. That is, a person is entirely within his epistemic rights, entirely rational, in believing in God, even if he has no argument for this belief and does not believe it on the basis of any other beliefs he holds.<sup>10</sup>

Plantinga reads Calvin to mean that "one needs no arguments to know that God exists."<sup>11</sup> Plantinga then adds this:

Now I enthusiastically concur in these contentions of Reformed epistemology, and by way of conclusions I want to defend them against a popular objection.<sup>12</sup>

As one might anticipate, the demolition of classical foundationalism was a shock to some traditional apologists. Others were not satisfied with Plantinga's substitute. For example, Jay Van Hook in a *Reformed Journal* article entitled, "Knowledge, belief, and Reformed epistemology" brings the popular objection which Plantinga had anticipated. If we abandon classical foundationalism with its presumption of objectivity, are we not reduced to validating "any bizarre aberration we can think of?" What is to prevent a group of Linus Pumpkinites from claiming real existence for their Halloween aberration: If we hold that our belief in God belongs to the foundation of our knowledge, how can we show a serious Great Pumpkin advocate that his belief is not properly basic?<sup>14</sup> If we give up the idea that knowledge is what can be proved from some common ground, then do we not really give up the idea of knowledge altogether?<sup>15</sup>

For such objectors Plantinga iterates and reiterates. The rejection of classical foundationalism does not commit the Reformed epistemologist to a toleration of irrationality.

The Reformed epistemologist may concur with Calvin in holding that God has implanted in us a natural tendency to see his hand in the world around us; the same cannot be said for the Great Pumpkin, there being no Great Pumpkin and no natural tendency to accept beliefs about the Great Pumpkin.<sup>16</sup>

Why doesn't everyone respond to the natural tendency to see God's hand in the world round about?

It is only because of sin that some of

us human beings find belief in God difficult or absurd.<sup>17</sup>

In a *Pro Rege* "Dialogue" Plantinga succinctly summed up his position as follows:

What I accept here and what I think Reformed Christians ought to accept is to be found in, say, the *Heidelberg Catechism*. And the fundamental tenets of Christianity to be found there, are to be established not by rational argument, but by appeal to scriptures, wherein God speaks to us, revealing these and other truths. Of course I do think that serious thought and rigorous argument are useful in exploring and expanding our understanding of the truths of Christianity and in defending them against many sorts of attacks mounted against them.<sup>18</sup>

### The Critical Historical Method

Those who would use this method contend that Christianity or the case for belief in God can be validated by using the methods of the secular critical historian. John Warwick Montgomery is eminent among those who hold to this approach. In a 1971 discussion, Montgomery wrote as follows:

The proper methods of the historian are precisely the methods by which questions not only of the Crucifixion but also the Resurrection and Incarnation are approached (note how the documentary issues are identical in all three instances and the Resurrection is claimed by the primary-source witnesses to constitute the basis for belief in a *de facto* Incarnation).<sup>19</sup>

What Montgomery is saying, I take it, is that the Resurrection is as well attested as, for example, Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. If the latter is accepted on the basis

of the methods of the critical historian, why not the former? Some of Montgomery's associates in the Conference on Faith and History gave the reply which Plantinga suggested. They hold that the mind of the secular historian is clouded by sin. Believing for him is also a matter of heart. The secular critical historian believes that the New Testament witnesses were deluded in their witness to the resurrection. Because there are no empirically verifiable resurrections now, he believes there could have been no such resurrection in the first century A.D.

As one might anticipate, the demolition of classical foundationalism was a shock to some traditional apologists.

As I have elaborated in criticism of Montgomery's thesis elsewhere,<sup>20</sup> let me proceed to take account of a more recent use of scientific history as an apologetic method. In their book, *The Verdict of the Shroud*, Kenneth E. Stevenson and Gary R. Habermas make a case for the thesis that there is firm scientific evidence to prove that the Shroud of Turin is the burial shroud of Jesus Christ and that its condition effectively proves that the occupant of the shroud was resurrected from the dead. They then come to the following conclusion as to the apologetic significance of the Shroud:

Some skeptical philosophers have long raised the question of whether there is any empirical evidence for theistic beliefs. The Shroud just may initiate a new interest in this question since it provides such strong corroborating evidence for a theistic world-view. What better validation could God have left than this highly probable, *empirical*, and *historical* evidence for Jesus' resurrection and

the possibility of eternal life for each of us? Indeed, when skeptics asked him to verify his message, Jesus also pointed to his resurrection from the dead (Matthew 12:38-40). (Emphasis added)<sup>21</sup>

It seems highly inconsistent for the authors of *The Verdict of the Shroud* to quote the very text in which Jesus condemns the demand for extra-biblical evidence in order to validate their use of extra-biblical evidence in trying to authenticate the gospel. In an earlier paragraph these authors wrote this:

Perhaps God means for the Shroud to encourage faith in an age when there are so many doubters and questioners, even among believers.<sup>22</sup>

Having pronounced his blessing on those that believe without empirical evidence (John 20:29) is it likely that God is now catering to the doubting Thomases among us or to modern scientific man who has learned to demand empirical-rational evidence before committing himself to belief?

Catering to a special group also seems to be the tack of Clark H. Pinnock in his recent book, *Reason Enough, A Case for the Christian Faith*. Pinnock casts the intelligentsia among unbelievers in the role of jury which is to sit in judgment on the evidence. He assures them it will be a

testing of faith in the light of knowledge which will enable you to take the step of commitment without sacrificing your intellect.<sup>23</sup>

In reply to a critique of his book by Nick Wolterstorff, Pinnock suggests that the impetus for intellectual proof, in this case reasonable probability, is the apostle Peter's demand that you "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have" (I Peter 3:15).

Pinnock's case here is weak on two counts.

First, I believe it is a mistake to interpret "reason" in such a way that meeting its demands would presumably meet the modern skeptic's demands for empirical-rational proof. For example, an entirely biblical reason would be that "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Romans 8:16). This would be accompanied by the testimony of a spirit-filled life.

Secondly, by his method Pinnock is making entirely too weak a case for Christianity. He writes as follows:

We will be dealing with reasonable probabilities. No world view offers more than that, and Christianity offers nothing less.<sup>24</sup>

While it is true that ever since David Hume repudiated the idea that causality stands on some bedrock of primary qualities as suggested by John Locke, empiricists have been willing to settle for a reasonable probability as the highest degree of surety which they can attain; it is not true that a Christian should try to convince a non-Christian on the basis of the weakness of the non-Christian's method. When the apostle Paul was brought to a meeting of the Areopagus in Athens, he did not tell the Greeks that he was going to argue the probability of eternal life by the use of their methods. Plato had done that and was only able to make a case for the survival of the soul. Rather, Paul corrected their theological misconceptions and then preached sin and repentance and gave the resurrection as proof of the authenticity of his message. Some sneered, some became procrastinators, and "A few men became followers of Paul and believed" (Acts 17:34).

Pinnock expresses his apologetic expectations in these words:

I would hope that the non-Christian, upon catching a glimpse of the truthful beauty of the gospel, would then take the step which that same gospel asks



of him and her, the step of repentance and faith.<sup>25</sup>

Again, I think that Pinnock is asking some to see the "truthful beauty of the gospel" by a measure for truth which stands outside the gospel itself. The Bible does not encourage the use of that method (Cf. I Cor. 1:18ff.). Therefore, I do not believe it can be recommended as an effective and valid apologetic method.

Again, I think that Pinnock is asking some to see the "truthful beauty of the gospel" by a measure for truth which stands outside the gospel itself.

The foregoing survey has covered the apologetic approaches to a belief in God which emphasize intellectual exercises. However, many Christians would not take an intellectual route in their approach to the problem of proving the existence of God. Some are satisfied with their own subjectivity. Some are not embarrassed by their admission that it is entirely irrational to believe in God. Some believe that it is blasphemous to talk about God as a rational being. These take a subjective approach to the existence of God.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Alvin Plantinga, *The Ontological Argument: from Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1965) p. 180.

<sup>2</sup>From *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. tr. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (New York 1911) Reprinted in Eugen Weber, *Western Tradition: From the Ancient World to Louis XIV* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972) pp. 241, 242.

<sup>3</sup>Compare Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Christian Scholars Review*, Vol. XI, No. 3, p. 194. Hereinafter, "The Reformed Objection."

<sup>4</sup>Cecil De Boer, "The New Apologetic," *The Calvin*

*Forum*, Vol. XIX, No. I-II, Aug. Sept., 1953, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968) p. 143.

<sup>6</sup>In his criticism of John Devey in his *Dewey* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1960) and his criticism of R.G. Collingwood in his *Historiography, Secular and Religious*, (Nutley, N.J.: Craig Press, 1971) Clark comes down more heavily on these men for their "playing fast and loose" with the law of ono-contradiction than for their basic apostasy.

<sup>7</sup>For an interesting study in transition of thought compare Wolterstorff's "Faith and Philosophy" in *Faith and Philosophy*, Alvin Plantinga, Ed., (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964) pp. 3-33 with his *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976).

<sup>8</sup>*Time*, "Modernizing the Case for God" April 7, 1980, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup>Reprinted in the *Christian Scholars Review*, Vol. XI, No. 3, pp. 187 ff.

<sup>10</sup>Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection" p. 191.

<sup>11</sup>Plantinga, p. 195.

<sup>12</sup>Plantinga, p. 195.

<sup>13</sup>Jay M. Van Hook, "Knowledge, belief, and Reformed epistemology," *The Reformed Journal*, July 1981, pp. 12-17. Van Hook is a graduate of Calvin College, a member of the Christian Reformed Church, currently teaching philosophy at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa.

<sup>14</sup>Van Hook, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup>Compare Plantinga, "On Reformed Epistemology," *Reformed Journal*, January, 1982, p. 14. The editor called a halt to the discussion of epistemology with the article Plantinga "Reformed Epistemology Again" in the July, 1982, *Reformed Journal*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>16</sup>Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection" p. 198.

<sup>17</sup>Plantinga, *Reformed Journal*, Jan., 1982, p. 16. The editor of the *Reformed Journal* called a halt to the discussion of epistemology after the contribution of Plantinga in this issue.

<sup>18</sup>*Pro Rege*, March 1981, p. 30.

<sup>19</sup>John Warwick Montgomery, "The Speck in Butterfield's Eye: A Reply to William A. Speck," *Fides et Historia*, (Publication of the Conference on Faith and History) Fall 1971, p. 76.

<sup>20</sup>See my "The Place and Nature of History as a Scientific Study," *Pro Rege*, December 1979, pp. 17-27.

<sup>21</sup>Kenneth E. Stevenson and Gary R. Habermas, *The Verdict of the Shroud*, (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1981) p. 187.

<sup>22</sup>Stevenson and Habermas, p. 187.

<sup>23</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, *Reason Enough: A Case for the Christian Faith*, (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980) p. 18.

<sup>24</sup>Pinnock, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup>"Response by Clark Pinnock," *The Reformed Journal*, April 1981, p. 25. This is Pinnock's reply to a review of his book in the same issue of *The Reformed Journal*.