

The Trinity and Apologetics: The Undeniability of Presuppositionalism Van Til versus Geisler

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Synopsis and Introduction

Classical apologists such as Norman Geisler complain that a “one-step” transcendental argument (X is a necessary condition for Y) for a trinitarian God is illegitimate. On the other hand, presuppositionalists like Cornelius Van Til (and followers), reject the use of a “two-step” apologetic (God-proofs, then Jesus/resurrection). There is, however, a significant problem demonstrating the distinctly Christian view of God as a trinity of persons in one divine nature, since according to Christian theologians the world over, there are no natural examples of a trinity. In this paper I will argue that evidences and “God-proofs” from the principles of nature and reason may be useful, but they do not lead to the rational demonstration that the God of Scripture exists.

The title of this paper draws together three main ideas in apologetics: 1) Defending God as a Trinity as the goal of apologetics, 2) the classical apologetic claim of the un-deniability of the Christian view from Norman Geisler, and 3) the presuppositional approach of Cornelius Van Til. It has three sections: I. Geisler and Thomism, II. Contemporary Epistemology, and III. Van Til’s Apologetic.²

I. Geisler and Thomism

A. Biographical Information

Dr. Norman Geisler (b. 1932) is a leading light and teacher of the Thomist-Classical approach to apologetics. Through his influential seminary teaching career he has directly or indirectly influenced virtually all of the published evidential and classical apologists today.³ Germane to our meeting, Geisler also founded and was first president of The Evangelical Philosophical Society. Geisler is prolific and certainly has a gift for the rhetorical organization of his ideas in his many writings.⁴ Geisler was formatively trained in philosophy at Wheaton, but then went on to complete his doctoral work at the Jesuit school, Loyola University and defends a Thomistic-Aristotelian set of “first principles.”

B. The Application of Thomism to Evidential Apologetics

The Thomistic “first principles” which Geisler urges as rationally undeniable are: the law of noncontradiction (A is not non-A), the law of identity (A is A), and the law of excluded middle (either A or non-A), the law of causation for finite things, and the law of finality or final causation or teleology (being communicates being). Geisler’s theistic argument depends on these first principles and he argues the existential proposition that, “something exists.” He then reasons that “something must have always existed.” Through the ontological

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² Some background: “As a result of the Enlightenment challenges to authority, beliefs, to be rational, demanded evidence. Could Christian theism stand the test of such evidential interrogations? Many believed that it could not, especially in the face of the rigorous counter argumentation to the primary natural theological arguments (ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments), most notably David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Others, however, followed in the steps of Thomas Reid and the Common Sense reaction to radical empiricism and the skepticism it bred, particularly, Nineteenth century American Protestants. Men such as Charles Hodge, Archibald Alexander and later, B. B. Warfield of the Princetonian school mounted the Baconian scientific method and reformulated theistic arguments to accept the evidential challenges to Christianity (Marsden, 1983)” (from Gregg Strawbridge, “The Epistemological Proposal of Alvin Plantinga: Belief in God as Properly Basic” at WordMp3.com/reformationresources)

³ Ravi Zacharias, Gary Habermas, Douglas Geivett, William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland, Richard Howe, and more

⁴ It is literally difficult to count the number of books he has written, but this list includes not only apologetical texts and textbooks, but also a three volume Systematic Theology and one of the most helpful books explaining and defending Scripture ever published, *A General Introduction into the Bible*, with William Nix.

definition of God⁵ and cosmological reasoning, he concludes with the concepts of a Necessary Being (God), using the terminology of the famous Third Way of Aquinas and the cosmos as the Necessary Being's creation, including contingent human beings. In this way we reason from nature and undeniable premises to "God." As Aquinas said: ". . . and this we understand to be God." Thus, a "natural theology" which reasons from nature to God is not only possible, but the only rational conclusion; Geisler claims this conclusion is "undeniable."⁶

C. About the Five Ways

1) In the first place, when Aquinas concludes, ". . . and this we understand to be God," this statement does not strictly follow from any of the Five Ways. It may get one to an Unmoved Mover or some generic causer of the universe. But no amount of a conception of causation, teleology, necessity, and contingency (alone) will get one to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, let alone a Trinity or a Trinity with one Incarnate member. This is the problem of identification. It is true that some of the attributes of a Necessary Being correspond to the God revealed in Scripture, but the specific identity of a Tri-Personal Eternal Being of which the Second Person is now Incarnate, is not manifestly not proved from the Five Ways.

2) The account of a Necessary Being (the Third Way) rendered by Geisler depends upon the opponent accepting the terms and concepts of contingent and necessary, as defined by Thomistic first principles. But what is rationally necessary about this distinction? Why can't reality be a Heraclitian fire? Or following panentheists, like Alfred Northwhitehead, assert (despite linguistic difficulties) all is change or better, change is the one truth about reality. Thus, God is not an unmoved mover causing a reality of finite effects, but He is the conglomerate of all process and change. This is the problem of accepting the Thomistic categories. One can almost Thomists, like Geisler, reverse-engineering Christian Theism.

3) In Thomas, there is a rejection of an infinite regress of finite causes which is the operative argument to conclude a Necessary Being must be. But, is it rationally compelling to deny an infinite stream of contingent causes? To assert there are an infinite series of finite causes does not violate the laws of logic. It does even strictly violate the principle of causation: all finite things have causes. Why reject the prima facie observation that all the causes of finite things are other finite things.⁷ Certainly empirically that seems evident from much of our experience. Further, with Hume, causation, strictly speaking, cannot be proved.

This is not an exhaustive list of the problems with the Thomistic approach (see Hume & Kant for more). It is not my purpose to assess all of the "defeaters" to the traditional God-proofs.⁸ Rather, I want to move to the meta-critique. Even if we grant that Geisler, *et al* can prove that a Beings exists with a substantial overlap with incommunicable attributes of the God of Scripture, where are we on our journey to establish proof for the Triune God of Scripture?

D. The Problem of Brute Theism

Imagine that Geisler has been successful in taking a person from atheism to brute theism with this alleged "undeniable" conclusion. Put that in terms of ordering at a restaurant. Now that you believe in a God, here's the menu: Deism served with a side of rationalistic rice pilaf, Pantheism with curry, Theism of the Islamic goat chop variety, Theism with a finite god portion of crab stuffing, or the many varieties of our chef's special: Christian Theisms - with a side of Gnostic, Arian, Ebionite, or Trinitarian varieties. Which one will you pick? We encourage

⁵ Geisler does not accept the Ontological Argument for God's existence, but utilizes this as a definition, per the Thomistic "necessary being" concept.

⁶ I am drawing my description of Geisler's views from several recorded lectures, critiquing Van Til, addressing epistemology, and laying out his view of Thomistic First Principles, available at www.wordmp3.com/geisler.

⁷ I am aware of William Lane Craig's attempt to defeat this with his Kalam argument, notably borrowed from Islamic apologists.

⁸ Actually, I think many of the criticisms of these Theistic proofs have been overcome (for now) by the likes of J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig.

the Trinitarian delight, complete with a dessert package providing a rational foundation for love and aesthetics.

I am seeking to express the problem that even if one is successful proving that a Being with Godish attributes exists by appeal to such natural theology, in what way is it rationally obligatory to move to the Triune God revealed in Scripture? Van Til argued, "To talk about the existence of God, the fact of God's existence without bringing in the whole of what God in Christ through the Holy Spirit has done and is doing for men, and to claim that this barren fact is the common ground between believers and unbelievers, is not only an abstraction, but complete distortion. To tell someone *that* God exists means nothing unless you tell him who God is and what he does."⁹

The answer of classical apologetics is that the second step is necessary, involving proving God has revealed Himself, that Jesus was raised, and that Jesus taught the Scriptures are the Word of God, finally then that the Bible teaches God is a Trinity. In other words, *only when one concedes to faith in the revelation of Scripture can you arrive at a right view of God, particularly a Trinitarian God.*

While this kind of approach has been widely published in evangelical circles, the undergirding principles of a classical or evidential structure of knowledge (epistemology) have been cracking under the weight of recent critical inquiries into epistemology, like a dam that has sprung a leak. There has been something of a Copernican revolution of epistemology in the last few decades. Modernity, since Descartes, has been consumed with epistemology and has finally abandoned the ship of certainty in postmodernity.

II. The Problem of Contemporary Epistemology

A. A Brief History of Recent Epistemological Challenges

For some time into modernity, thinkers believed they had a stainless steel structure of knowledge. "Classical foundationalism" (CF) is the view that there are undeniable basic beliefs (*cogito ergo sum* - I think therefore I am) and all other beliefs are deduced from such undeniable foundations, forming a noetic structure which has certainty. But this structure has been challenged.

Alvin Plantinga¹⁰ argues in "God and Other Minds" that one cannot easily or even clearly prove that other minds exist (i.e., solipsism is not easily toppled philosophically).¹¹ Nevertheless, virtually everyone functions on the assumption that there are other minds. Given this "release" from a rigorous epistemic requirement for a belief, why could not God and His mind exist as a basic belief? But this belief would be lacking the criterion of being infallible, self-evident, incorrigible, undeniable, or evident to the senses.

So Plantinga argues regarding CF, "(C) p is properly basic for S if and only if p is self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the senses for S." But (C) cannot be justified on a CF basis since it is neither a basic proposition nor is it deducible from basic propositions.¹² Therefore, classical foundationalism turns out to be self-defeating, since the

⁹ Cited in *Van Til's Apologetic*, 655.

¹⁰ Plantinga (b. 1932) is the John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at the University of Notre Dame. He has authored numerous books about the rationality of religious belief and along with Nicholas Wolterstorff fathered the movement of "Reformed Epistemology." A helpful summary of his work is available online: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ref-epis>.

¹¹ It is also interesting to observe that Plantinga's arguments that arise from the rationality of God and other minds mirror the efforts of recent epistemologists (Stawson, et al) that have sought to use transcendental arguments to overcome skepticism about others minds; see the Transcendental Arguments references below.

¹² Plantinga, A. C. (1986). "On Taking Belief in God as Basic" (A condensed version of *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, 1983) In C. K. Ihara & J. Runzo (Eds.) *Religious belief and religious experience: Essays in the epistemology of religion*, 1-18. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 9-10.

theory cannot justify its key criterion. This form of argument is a *reduction ad absurdum*; or CF is self-referentially incoherent. It is the equivalent of, "I cannot write a word of English."¹³

Plantinga's project has been to derail CF for the sake of theistic belief, but once that train is off the tracks, he has put a less formidable train on the same foundationalist's tracks. But this train moves more cautiously and does not have a final destination. The name for this more cautious epistemological structure is "modest foundationalism." The main objective of the postmodern war on CF is to prove we are in a sea of subjective pontoon boats and no pylons extend to the ocean floor. We are all afloat. Therefore, basic beliefs do not need to be anchored in an infallible way.

B. Geisler's Evasion of Reformed Epistemology

If Plantinga is correct, this means for classical apologists, like Geisler, that our knowledge claims in such areas as belief in God are *fallible*. The good news is that evidential atheists (W. K. Clifford, Brand Blanshard, Bertrand Russell, Michael Scriven, [formerly] Anthony Flew, and the new atheists) are no longer justified in their CF apologetic against theism. But the price tag is *a less than rationally necessary case for theism*.¹⁴ Classical apologists have not gone down without spilling ink on the matter.

Geisler seeks to evade Plantinga's critique by claiming that his Thomistic foundationalism is "reductive" and not "deductive" - that is all knowledge can be reduced to basic foundations (first principles).¹⁵ Of course, Plantinga's exhibit A for CF is Thomas Aquinas!¹⁶

Does this work? So let us adjust Plantinga's argument for Geisler: "(C) p is properly basic if and only if p is *reducible to* undeniable first principles." Is this assertion (p) reducible to such first principles? This seems to turn on the meaning of "reducible." If reducible means something like does not contradict first principles or is consistent with them, then yes - Geisler has evaded the critique. If reduce means something like *derive from* first principles, then it is apparent that this assertion is neither basic and nor does it necessarily follow from the five first principles of Geisler/Aquinas.

So if all Geisler is saying is, "No claim to knowledge is valid without using one or more of the Thomistic first principles" - that would be true, since all claims to knowledge utilize the laws of thought (law of non-contradiction, law of identity, law of excluded middle) in order to assert a claim. But of course this is not getting us very far in an apologetic for the Triune God. Most people wishing to argue the case stipulate the laws of thought. But Geisler asserts that through the use of reason we can arrive safely at the Triune God and that without probabilistic arguments.¹⁷

While leading Christian philosophers like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff have used the force of the incoherence of classical foundationalism against atheistic opponents to the applause of a Christian world, many

¹³ The same critique came a generation earlier and quite forcibly in the case of the Positivists, such as A.J. Ayer's verifiability criterion (namely, only that which can be empirically verified or that which is deduced from such is meaningful). The beautiful *reductio* of this is that the verifiability criterion is neither empirical nor a deduction from it.

¹⁴ Plantinga's "Reformed Epistemology" departs radically at this point from Van Til's, "Reformed Apologetics." Plantinga gives away the rational necessity of Christianity, while Van Til vigorously argues for it.

¹⁵ Geisler's First Principles (lecture 1-2), WordMp3.com/Geisler. Interestingly, in this lecture he also calls Van Til a transcendental foundationalist.

¹⁶ Plantinga, A. C. (1986), "On Taking Belief in God as Basic."

¹⁷ Geisler's Critique of Van Til (lecture). Geisler believes that Van Til has misunderstood Aquinas about the matters of certainty; and this is possible. Many defenses of theism in the 18-19th centuries, such as Butler and Paley used probabilities. Perhaps Van Til is reading this idea back into Aquinas. Or perhaps Van Til has a deeper epistemology that cuts through Aristotle, Hume and Kant and provides for both a critique of such thought and a case for the rational certainty of Christianity.

evangelical apologists objected to the removal of objective and necessary rational standards. There must be a sturdy pylon from the bottom of the ocean to the pontoon boat. We cannot all be afloat.

This cognitive impulse of many evidentialist Evangelicals for certainty and against floating in a sea of unanchored basic beliefs, is right in my estimation. The Scripture provides many references to certainty and the apostles did not preach as though Gospel is just one possible rationally justifiable belief among many. We cannot do without rationality, the basic reliability of sense perception and the correspondence of thought to reality — as rational Christians. But, this entails that the final foundation of our noetic structure and our knowledge is much richer than, “cogito ergo sum,” or formal laws of thought, or appeals to raw uninterpreted facts, such as a man came back to life after crucifixion.

III. Van Til’s Apologetic

A. Biographical Information

Enter Van Til. Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) who was a Dutchman wearing wooden shoes under the tutorship of old Princeton.¹⁸ He received his graduate training in the educational tradition of old Princeton (Alexander, Hodge, Warfield, and Machen), but his thought is painted with the colors of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. In his apologetics he was “standing on the shoulders of Warfield and Kuyper” and building “on the main thrust of their thought...”¹⁹ “I have tried to use elements both of Kuyper's and of Warfield's thinking.”²⁰ Bahnsen stands out as his best interpreter in saying, “A person who can explain the ways in which Van Til agreed and disagreed with both Warfield and Kuyper, is a person who understands presuppositional apologetics.”²¹ Van Til argues Christianity is the only rational philosophy (Warfield) and is the complete antithesis to all non-Christianity worldviews (Kuyper).

Many have generally misrepresented Van Til's variety of presuppositionalism as fideism (no rational basis for faith).²² However, here are the quotes from Van Til which say otherwise: "Christianity is the only rational faith!" (116). "Christianity is objectively valid and that it is the only rational position for man to hold" (74). Or it alone "can ultimately make any sense of 'science,' logic, experience, reason, self-consciousness, morality, etc. (701). Or that the unbeliever "ought to be refuted by a reasoned argument, instead of by ridicule and assumption" (74). Or "there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism" (78). Or "Faith is not blind faith....Christianity can be shown to be, not 'just as good as' or even 'better than' the non-Christian position, but the only position that does not make nonsense of human experience" (75). Or "Hence Warfield was quite right in maintaining that Christianity is objectively defensible" (42).²³

¹⁸ In assessing Van Til, Geisler made a few assumptions that were wrong. He wrongly asserts that Van Til was trained under Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) in Amsterdam. Actually Van Til went to Calvin College, Calvin Seminary (for a year), then finished a B.D. at Princeton Seminary and a Ph.D. in philosophy from Princeton University. This is not to deny the Dutch influence in his thought which included a strong dose of Idealism, over against the “Scottish Common Sense” views of old Princeton. “Geisler Critiques Van Til” at [Wordmp3.com/Geisler](http://www.wordmp3.com/Geisler).

¹⁹ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (P & R, 1998), 611. Also see my review of this book: <http://www.wordmp3.com/files/gs/vantil.htm> (1999).

²⁰ *Van Til's Apologetic*, 597.

²¹ *Van Til's Apologetic*, 597.

²² “Presuppositionalism is often represented as irrational, deductivistic, and fideistic (by Van Tillians!). Well-known representatives of Presuppositionalism assert without qualification that attempting to prove Christianity is “blasphemous.” Still others write that a Presuppositionalist “does not try to ‘prove’ that God exists or that the Bible is true. . . . He does not try to convince the unconverted that the gospel is true” (see my review of Greg L. Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 1996 at [wordmp3.com/reformationresources](http://www.wordmp3.com/reformationresources)).

²³ Page numbers from *Van Til's Apologetic*. It should be noted that Geisler very accurately observed that Van Til was no fideist; but many of his disciples missed that lecture!

Aquinas said, "There is a twofold mode of truth in what we profess about God. Some truths about God exceed all the ability of human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune. But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are the truth that God exists, that he is one, and the like. In fact, such truths about God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of natural reason."²⁴

In contrast to Aquinas' high view of human reason (even apart from God), Van Til urged that there is no *neutral* ground of rationality between the believer and the unbeliever. One cannot start at the same point with an unbeliever, assuming that the basis for our noetic function is neutral. He referred to this approach as "autonomous reason." Van Til criticized Thomism as a Roman Catholic epistemology on ontological and well as theological grounds. Instead he urged that whatever argument and rational claim we make must be by the indirect proof of presupposition. Van Til and followers appealed to the history of philosophy which has provided many demonstrations of the truth that there cannot be a sure epistemology beginning with pure rationality or empiricism or a combination thereof. Rather all consistent uses of "autonomous human thought" will culminate in the skeptical and analytic traditions of philosophy which finally turn out to be unable to account for reality and even their own principles.²⁵

To use a Scriptural argument to illustrate this, Hebrews 11:5–6 says, "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." The reason that faith is required is because only faith can apprehend the Triune God. Yes, we can then reason about Him, but we cannot reason (autonomously) to Him since nothing in nature shows us a Triune Being. The biblical structure of knowledge requires an acceptance of a worldview claim by faith. However, this is not fideism, because one can make a rational demonstration that only the Christian faith provides the preconditions of intelligibility. Van Til claimed that there is only one worldview which may be posited by faith which does not implode on itself. "Christianity is objectively valid and [it] is the only rational position for man to hold" (74). Van Til makes exclusive claims.

The form of Van Til's argument is transcendental. "X is a necessary condition for the possibility of Y, where then, given that Y is the case, it logically follows that X must be the case too."²⁶ Van Til argued the God of Scripture is the necessary condition for the possibility of reality.²⁷ Thus, he argued that entire systems (worldviews) must be considered in the apologetic task.²⁸ Bahnsen summarizes, "Only the transcendent revelation of God can provide the philosophically necessary preconditions for logic, science, morality, et.c., in which case those who oppose the faith are reduced to utter foolishness and intellectually have nowhere to stand in objecting to Christianity's truth-claims."²⁹ Van Til says the Christian position, "When consistently expressed it posits God's self-existence and plan, as well as self-contained self-knowledge, as the presupposition of all created existence and knowledge. In that case, all facts show forth and thus prove the existence of God and His plan."³⁰

²⁴ *The Summa Contra Gentiles* I, ch.3, n.2.

²⁵ *Van Til's Apologetic*, 311ff, or listen to any of Greg Bahnsen's lectures on philosophy and this is the repeated theme.

²⁶ Cited from Robert Stern's, "Transcendental Arguments" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2015): <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendental-arguments/>

²⁷ "Aristotle's proof of the principle of non-contradiction (see *Metaphysics* 1005b35–1006a28...) - Stern, "Transcendental Arguments."

²⁸ *Van Til's Apologetic*, 261ff.

²⁹ *Van Til's Apologetic*, 676.

³⁰ *Van Til's Apologetic*, 63.

Conclusion: The Undeniability of the Presuppositional Call of Faith

I observed earlier that classical apologetics concedes that only after one has completed the “second step” involving accepting the revelation of Scripture as the Word of God - only then from “faith” can we arrive at the Trinity. This is admitted by both classical apologists and presuppositionalists. Belief in the Trinity (without resort to Scripture) cannot be the result of a train of reasoning from nature, natural law, or first principles of reason. Rather the Trinity is light in which we see all nature. Thus, faith is necessary in the one-step of transcendental method of Van Til and at least in/ after the second step of Geisler. Faith is necessary. Faith, therefore must, in this sense, precede reason if the object is the God of Scripture. This is true for both methodologies.

At that level and on that narrow point, both methodologies lack a purely rationally compelling case to the unbeliever without any appeal to faith. But I would assess that the classical apologetics of Geisler runs aground in the epistemic sea in terms of three major concerns: 1) the history of philosophy’s criticisms of the God-Proofs (Kant, Hume, et al), 2) Humean and analytic skepticism of epistemic certainty, as well as 3) the debunking of classical foundationalism. On the other hand, Van Til’s transcendental epistemology safely arrives at the Trinitarian shoreline and provides a rationally compelling demonstration, as well as an uncompromised methodology.³¹

³¹ There is much more to say to demonstrate whether Thomism, et al, compromises a true Christian epistemology; suffice it to say that the simplest proof I can offer reflects on one’s ultimate standard. Is it reason, sense perception, etc. or God’s revelation in Scripture? If reason and sense perception (etc.) are the ultimate standard, God’s authority has yet to be received. There can be no higher authority than the voice of God, in the nature of the case; and Scripture is the record of that Voice. Thus, only this kind of submission of reason and other means of knowing can be consistent with a Christian theory of knowledge. See Van Til’s, *Christian Theory of Knowledge* (P&R, 1961).