

## IV. APOLOGETICS PROPER

### INTRODUCTON

Apologetics, the discipline that teaches Christians how to defend the faith, is as old as Christianity. The apostle Paul, for example, writes about the wickedness of men who suppress the truth even though *what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse* (Romans 1:19f.). In his debates with Jews, Paul mentioned O.T. events and prophecies to substantiate his message; with pagans he did the same, but with them he also referred, as in Romans 1, to what people already knew about God from creation alone (see Acts 14:15-17; 17:24-28). Paul, in short, used “arguments” in support of the gospel. So did other inspired authors, and so did Christ Himself. We have been told to follow their example. Think of the exhortation of the apostle Peter, *But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. . . .* (1 Peter 3:15).

#### ***Different approaches***

It is customary to recognize three schools in Christian apologetics, namely classical or traditional apologetics, evidential apologetics, and presuppositional apologetics. These approaches indeed differ, although apologists frequently combine aspects of all three. (This applies to several of the authors mentioned in this section.) Here follow brief descriptions.

*Classical apologetics* stresses the use of reason in defending the faith, and is the oldest of the three schools. It has been sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, but various Protestant apologists (including Reformed ones), follow the approach as well. Among them are the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Princeton theologians Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield, and contemporary apologists such as R. C. Sproul and Norman Geisler. C. S. Lewis and others, who are usually categorized as evidentialists, use classical arguments as well (see under “Evidentialism,” below). Two well-known arguments of the classical school are the *cosmological* argument and the *teleological or design* argument. A classical apologist who used the *cosmological* argument was the medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas, who attempted to prove the truth of the Christian faith with reference to the need for a First Cause, a First Mover, and so on. Proponents of the *teleological* argument reason that the order of the universe suggests purpose (Greek *telos*, hence teleological) and a designer, and that therefore it is reasonable to assume the existence of God.

*Evidential apologetics* has similarities with the previous school, but has flourished especially in recent centuries as a result of the growth of modern science and historiography. Apologists of this school (among whom are the Anglicans C.S. Lewis and N.T. Wright), refer to evidence from nature, archaeology, ancient history, biblical prophecy, biblical miracles, and Christ's resurrection. As indicated above, evidentialists can at the same time be classical apologists (and *vice versa*). Lewis, for example, made use of the moral argument, the

epistemological argument, and the mental argument. (For definitions of these arguments see the *Postscriptum* at the end of this introduction.) Evidential apologetics in its reference to creation, prophecies, miracles, and the resurrection, is similar to that used in both the Old and New Testament – by the prophets, by Christ Himself, and by the apostles.

*Presuppositional apologetics* (also called *Reformed apologetics*) is largely a 20<sup>th</sup>-century development, the brain child of Dr. Cornelius van Til (1895-1987) of Westminster Theological Seminary. This school recognizes that all human beings reason from certain presuppositions, that these serve as coloured lenses through which they look at reality, and that the presuppositions of believers are radically different from those of unbelievers. The apologist, who must base himself on the truth of the Bible, should aim at changing the unbelieving person's assumptions. This approach, presuppositionalism teaches, is essential; one can't reason with a non-Christian on the basis of a set of neutral assumptions. The apologist therefore has to urge the unbeliever to let go of his presuppositions, to believe the claims of the Gospel, to repent of his unbelief and turn to Christ. Well-known adherents of presuppositionalism are Greg L. Bahnsen, John M. Frame (with important qualifications), and Francis Schaeffer. For further details and for examples of the approach see Bibliography below under Greg L. Bahnsen, John M. Frame, Richard Pratt, and Cornelius van Til.

### ***Criticisms of Christian apologetics***

There have been objections to Christian apologetics. Among the critics were the 18<sup>th</sup>-century non-Christian philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant, the Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, and 20<sup>th</sup>-century dialectical theologians like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Christian objectors argue, *inter alia*, that even if reason or nature can point to a first cause, a first mover, an intelligent designer, and so on, they do not reveal God as He has made Himself known in Scripture and in Christ. They also point out that the human mind, however brilliant, cannot reach up to the infinite God. If we are to know Him, He must reveal Himself to us. Other objections are that divine revelation does not need reasoned defence, and that faith is not simply a matter of evidence and logic, but also of the will. As the Lord told the Jews, certainty that His teachings were indeed true would come only by a spirit of obedience, that is, by their choosing to do God's will (John 7:17). Religious understanding does not precede a living faith but follows it. Yet another argument against the idea that unaided reason can provide a sufficient ground for religious conviction is that reason is not neutral, and that its pronouncements are not definitive. Counter-arguments can always be found.

Even if they agree with some of these objections, other Christians insist that a proper use can and should be made of rational and evidential arguments for apologetic purposes. John Calvin, who was certainly no rationalist or "natural theologian," nevertheless believed that arguments in support of the credibility of Scripture could be "useful aids." Evidence, in fact, could be seen as a confirmation of the faith and as a preparation for it. Calvin did not, however, speak of rational *proofs*, but of the *testimony* creation gives of God's wisdom and glory. And he made it clear that these "aids" could not, by themselves, lead to faith in revelation. ". . .The only true faith," he wrote, "is that which the Spirit of God works in our hearts." And ". . .unless this certainty, higher and stronger than any human judgment, be present, it will be vain to fortify the

authority of Scripture by arguments, to establish it by common agreement of the church, or to confirm it with other helps. For unless this foundation is laid, its authority will always remain in doubt" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, vii, 5, viii, 1).

Nevertheless, Calvin agreed that creation gives witness to God. Scripture itself teaches this. In short, the choice for Christians is not between a rationalist or evidentialist apologetics on the one hand and an extreme fideism (i.e., a belief that all religious knowledge depends on faith alone) on the other. Historian George Marsden is among those who have argued this point. Stating that arguments in support of Christianity are, especially since Darwin, not logically compelling unless one already believes in a benevolent Creator, he adds that they nevertheless "may have a great psychological and even intellectual force, particularly for those who are wavering in their resolution to deny the presence of God and his Word" ("The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality*, pp. 254f.). Another modern apologist makes a similar point by distinguishing between knowing and showing (William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 1994, p. 48). We know Christianity to be true by the witness of the Spirit; we show it to be true by pointing to the witness of creation and providence.

### ***Postscriptum: The Mental, Moral, and Epistemological Arguments***

as used by C.S. Lewis and others

*\*The mental argument.* It is used to attack the naturalistic notion that not God, but nature gave rise to the human mind (via evolution). On the naturalistic account, nature evolved by chance, is without intelligence or purpose, and could therefore produce mind only by chance. But if that is so, the mental argument asks, how can we trust our reasoning power? (Darwin himself struggled with that problem.) Doesn't it make more sense to postulate a Mind to have created our minds?

*\*The moral argument.* It deals with two related questions: (1) why do all human beings have a sense of right and wrong, and indeed seem to believe in a moral law, and (2) why do they fail to keep that law and feel guilty when they transgress it? The answer of apologists using this argument is that only the biblical doctrine of God as the origin of the moral law, and the biblical account of a human race fallen into sin, can truly explain the facts: mankind's awareness of a moral law, its failure to keep it, and its sense of guilt.

*\*The epistemological argument.* Those who use it argue that since we humans can make sense of nature and can even engage in scientific research, nature must have a rational structure that agrees with our mind. How is this to be explained? By chance and evolution? But then, who would have "invented" an evolutionary process (which is by definition a process of randomness and chance) that shows so much purpose and rationality? Does not the biblical confession of God, who made us in His image, explain the phenomenon better than the naturalistic hypothesis?

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Bahnsen, Greg L. *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, ed. Robert R. Booth. American Vision/Covenant Media Foundation, 1996, 289 pp. Dr. Greg Bahnsen (1948-1995) was

an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a friend of Cornelius van Til, an unwearied supporter of Van Til's apologetics, and a redoubtable philosopher and apologist in his own right. (He was also a leading proponent of the American Theonomy or Christian Reconstructionist movement.) The book under review explains Van Til's presuppositionalism and is heartily recommended to those who want to familiarize themselves with this approach to apologetics. As even his most ardent supporters agree, Van Til is at times hard to follow, whereas Bahnsen communicates clearly. Among the salient points of VanTil's system that Bahnsen brings to the fore are the following:

- (1) there is no "neutral common ground" on which to reason with unbelievers
- (2) this does not mean, however, that we can't reason with unbelievers
- (3) we can reason with them because unbelievers share in a common light of nature, and because the unbeliever's assumption of autonomy is suppressed by the restraining power of common grace; these facts constitute "points of contact" between Christians and non-Christians
- (4) another point of contact is that man was made in the image of God and has impressed on him the law of God; there is therefore a (suppressed) truth "deep inside" the believer
- 5) nevertheless, facts as such are not good enough, since the interpretation of facts depends on one's worldview or presuppositions.

The proper method, writes Bahnsen, following Van Til, is the "twofold" approach: One is to start from the unbeliever's position, show that it does not explain anything, and then move on to the Christian worldview – which alone make sense of the facts of nature, history, ethics, logic, and so on. [FGO]

D'Souza, Dinesh. *What's So Great About Christianity*. Regnery, 2007. 348 pp. D'Souza was born in India in 1961, is now an American citizen, a member of the R.C. Church, the conservative author of various best-selling books and a formidable public speaker. In this publication he reacts to the work of the "militant atheists" of the present decade (Richard Dawkins and associates). Among the many topics of this highly readable book is the author's taking issue with the militant atheists' tendency to portray religion, including Christianity, as the bane of history. He points out that the crusades came after Muslim aggression and were in that sense of a defensive, rather than an offensive nature. He also draws attention to the fact that the Inquisition and the historic witch trials, although regrettable, accounted for relatively few deaths, whereas atheism (most recently in the form of communism) has resulted in the death of untold millions. Also of interest is his suggestion that objections to Christianity are often not of a rational, but of a moral nature. For God is not as we would have invented him. In fact, He *demand*s things of us, difficult things, such as "purity rather than indulgence, virtue rather than convenience, charity rather than self-gratification." If Karl Marx called religion the opium of the people, then unbelief, D'Souza suggests, should be called the opium of the morally corrupt. [FGO]

Flew, Antony. *There is a God: How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind*. Harper Collins, 2007, 222 pp. The title speaks for itself. Flew explains that his change of mind was not a result of supernatural revelation but of reasoning. Specifically, he looked for answers to such

questions as (1) how did the laws of nature come to be? (2) how did life originate from non-life? and (3) how did the universe come into being? and concluded that the only reasonable answer was to postulate the existence of a divine Mind. He describes himself as a deist, not a biblical Christian, but he is not indifferent to biblical Christianity. Appendix B in his book consists of a dialogue with the Anglican New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, who attempts to answer Flew's questions regarding divine revelation, the divinity of Christ, and the evidence for Christ's resurrection. That Appendix alone is worth the price of the book. [FGO]

Frame, John M. *Apologetics to the Glory of God*. P&R, 1999, 265 pp. The author underlines Van Til's principle that Christian apologists are not to reason with unbelievers on a neutral basis. Unbelievers must be made aware of the fact that only by accepting the biblical worldview will they receive true answers to their questions. Frame disagrees with Van Til on a number of points, however. One of these concerns the value of subsidiary *traditional* arguments. Frame believes that these can and indeed should be used, arguing that they do not necessarily conclude "with something less than the Biblical God." Frame distinguishes between apologetics as proof and as defence. In connection with the latter, he gives much attention to the problem of evil. His analysis here is one of the best I have encountered. In an appendix, the author replies to the criticism of presuppositionalism by classical apologists R.C. Sproul c.s. (see below). He concludes that, although there are disagreements between presuppositionalism and traditional apologetics, the two have much in common as well, and they can supplement each other. Presuppositionalism reminds apologists of the need to stay with the truth of the Bible and avoid all neutrality; traditional apologists are correct in stressing evidence ("proofs" or "arguments" from nature, reason, history, archaeology, etcetera). [FGO]

Keller, Timothy. *The Reason for God: Religion in an Age of Skepticism*. Penguin, 2008. 293 pp. Keller is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York, a church that attracts some 5000 listeners each Sunday. His target audience consists of young, skeptical, highly-educated urban professionals, and he has to spend much time dealing with modern-day objections to the Christian faith. A good impression of the criticisms he meets can be had from the chapter headings of the first part of the book, which deals with objections such as: There can't be just one true religion; How could an all-good and all-powerful God allow suffering or send people to hell; Christianity is a straitjacket; Christianity is responsible for much injustice; Science has disproved Christianity; One cannot take the Bible literally. Having dealt with this type of objection in the first part of the book, Keller concludes that there are *insufficient* arguments for rejecting Christianity. In the second part he goes on to show that there *are* sufficient reasons for believing in it. Throughout the book he refers to two central themes, namely: (1) all the skeptics' doubts about the truth of Christianity are based not on demonstrative proof but on belief, and skeptics therefore should test their own beliefs as rigorously as they test those of Christianity; and (2) Christianity makes more sense of life, nature, and history (gives a better "empirical fit") than any alternative worldview. *The Reason for God* is accessible, well-written, and highly instructive. [FGO]

Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. Harper Collins, 1977, 189 pp. This is probably the best-known of Lewis's apologetic works and is as relevant today as it was when first published, more than half a century ago. The book is divided into four parts. The first gives an illustration of the so-called moral argument of the truth of Christianity, the second describes what Christians believe, the third deals with Christian behavior, and the fourth attempts to explain the doctrine of the Trinity. *Mere Christianity* is not, of course, Lewis's only work in defence of the faith. Practically all his Christian writings, including his space trilogy and his Narnia *Chronicles*, have an apologetic message. [FGO]

Pratt, Jr., Richard L. *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Truth*. P&R, 1979, 143 pp. This booklet, which has a laudatory Foreword by John M. Frame, aims at presenting VanTillian apologetics to non-academics, including secondary school students. The book is divided into 14 lessons, all but the last of them concluding with a list of questions to facilitate discussion. The book follows VanTil's reasoning quite closely, but the more popular style makes it easier to understand the issues. Pratt agrees with VanTil that traditional arguments are of little use, unless they are looked at from a biblical perspective. He gives, unfortunately, few examples of actual apologetics, except for the final chapter, which contains an "Apologetic Parable" aimed at showing the superiority of the "two-fold approach" of presuppositionalism over more traditional apologetic methods. [FGO]

Sproul, R.C. , John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsey. *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics*. Zondervan, 1984, 364 pp. This book consists of three parts. The first deals with classical natural theology (problem and method); the second with classical apologetics (theistic proofs, the deity of Christ, the infallibility of Scripture); and the third consists of a classical critique of presuppositional apologetics as promoted by Cornelius Van Til and, in a modified form, by John M. Frame and others. [FGO]

Stott, John. *Basic Christianity*. IVP, 2006, 179 pp. This small classic, which was first published in 1958, seeks to answer intellectual and other questions about the Christian faith. Stott begins with the historicity of Christ's person, character, and resurrection, moves on to man's need and Christ's work to fill that need, and concludes with a section on man's response – the need of counting the cost, of reaching a decision, and of obedient Christian praxis. Stott's book can serve as an apologetic tool by itself or as an introduction to more complex works, such as those by C.S. Lewis and N.T. Wright. [FGO]

Van Til, Cornelius. *Christian Apologetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. William Edgar. P&R, 1976, 2003. 207 pp. Although it is rather heavy on dogmatics and philosophy (especially Greek and Idealist philosophy), and although an excessive amount of time is spent on debating the differences between Calvinism on the one hand and Roman Catholicism and Arminianism on the other, this book is helpful in that it contains a good outline of Van Til's apologetics. As in Bahnsen, we read about the chasm between believers and unbelievers, the "points of contact" between them, and the methodology of the "two-fold approach." It also becomes clear that Van Til does not deny the validity of using of evidence, although he insists that evidence makes sense only when

viewed from Christian presuppositions. In his 15-page Introduction, editor William Edgar, himself a VanTillian, admits that Van Til's is not the last word, and that his followers have to work with his heritage. Among the points that need the presuppositionists' attention, according to Edgar, are the challenges of post-structuralism, the insights of the new Reformed epistemology, hermeneutical philosophies, cultural analysis, the history of science, world religions, and psychology. Much more attention must also be given to actual arguments – to both their form and content. Edgar further notes the somewhat forbidding academic character of presuppositionalism. “. . . We will,” he concludes, “need to apply the principles of presuppositional apologetics to social groups other than academics. How does it work with street children, with business people, with athletes?” I believe that Edgar's comments and questions are to the point. [FGO]

Wright, N.T. *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, 237 pp.

The title suggests similarities between this book and C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Moreover, just like Lewis, Wright discusses “evidence” for Christianity in the first part of his book. But whereas Lewis dealt in part I only with the evidence of a divinely given moral law, Wright speaks of four “arguments.” They are “echoes of a voice” that speaks of the human longing for justice, the quest for spirituality, the hunger for relationship, and the delight in beauty. Each of them, Wright says, ultimately points to God, to Jesus Christ, and to the new creation when things will at last be put to rights. Part II lays out the historical Christian faith, beginning with the Old Testament, and Part III speaks of the believers' practice of following Christ and being instruments of God's new creation. [FGO]

## Dutch Language Section

Green, Michael, *Dat geloof je toch niet! Twaalf veelgehoorde reacties op het christelijk geloof*, Uitgeverij Plateau, 2007, 206 pp. **Oorspronkelijke titel:** *You can't be serious*. De auteur gaat in op de volgende reacties op het christelijk geloof:

- a. Ik ben gewoon niet zo'n godsdienstig type.
- b. Je kunt tegenwoordig echt niet meer in God geloven.
- c. De wetenschap heeft het geloof verslagen.
- d. Jezus had toch een kind bij Maria Magdalena?
- e. Het maakt niet uit wat je gelooft, zolang je maar oprecht bent.
- f. Alle godsdiensten leiden naar God.
- g. Jezus? Die heeft toch niet echt bestaan?
- h. Jezus was gewoon een goed mens.
- i. Ik doe mijn best. Meer kan ik toch niet doen?
- j. Aan het verleden kun je niets meer veranderen.
- k. Dood is dood.
- l. Dat is nu eenmaal de aard van het beestje.

Green neemt de opmerkingen serieus en gaat op onderzoek uit. Hij daagt sceptische vragenstellers uit hetzelfde te doen. Als waarheid je aan het hart gaat, kun je Jezus niet negeren. Ga op onderzoek uit! Hij brengt onder woorden waar het in het geloof echt om draait. Wie is Jezus? Welke feiten zijn er over hem bekend? Wat doet en zegt hij in de Bijbel? Wat betekent dat voor jou? Bij uitstek een apologetisch boek.

(JAVL)

Ouweneel, Prof. dr. W.J., *Wijs met de wetenschap*, Barnabas, 1997, 156 pp. De tijd is allang voorbij dat orthodoxe, bijbelgetrouwe christenen zich in de verdediging lieten drijven door bijbelkritische wetenschappers. Op bijvoorbeeld de Evangelische Hogeschool in Amersfoort wordt vrijmoedig onderwijs gegeven en studie verricht met de Bijbel als uitgangspunt. In dit boek wordt hieraan bijgedragen door Willem Ouweneel, docent aan die Hogeschool. Alleen al de titel wil de lezer doen nadenken. Er zit een drievoudige betekenislaag in. Ten eerste: wij moeten wijs 'omspringen' met de wetenschap. Ten tweede: als we dat doen, zullen we met behulp van de wetenschap wijs kunnen worden. Ten derde kan 'wijs met' soms ook de betekenis hebben van 'trots op', 'genoegen vindend in', en zo mag de vraag best gesteld worden of wij trots kunnen zijn op de hedendaagse wetenschap, en speciaal of we als christenen vreugde kunnen vinden in de wetenschapsbeoefening. (HvL)