

Communication as a Problem. A Critical Comparison of Several Types of Philosophical Apologetics**

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In church history, philosophy has often played a major role in the defence of the truth of the Christian faith. This applies especially to the early church. The great apologists were philosophers or at least well acquainted with the philosophy of their time. In this essay, I wish to discuss four contemporary “apologists” of whom the same can rightly be said: Van Til, Plantinga, Dooyeweerd, and Lewis — three philosophers and a literary scholar. The aim is, by means of a comparison of their positions, to draw attention to a constantly recurring fundamental problem, namely that of confrontation and communication, antithesis and dialogue.

1. Introduction of the Main Characters

Cornelis van Til was born in Grootegast, in The Netherlands, in 1895 and emigrated with his parents to the United States in 1905. There he studied at Calvin College and Princeton Seminary. For more than forty years, he taught at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia; his teaching assignment was apologetics. He held a prominent position within the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, from the very inception of this denomination.

Dr. Van Til passed away a few days ago [ed: 17 April 1987] at the age of 91. His relationship to Reformed philosophy in the Netherlands is somewhat remarkable. For many years, his name appeared among the editors of *Philosophia Reformata*. His publications did not remain without impact: for instance, it is known that his book on Karl Barth acted as an eye-opener for S. U. Zuidema; the latter subsequently began writing much more critically about Barth.¹ In 1971, *Jerusalem and Athens* appeared, a collection of essays on the occasion of his 75th birthday, supplemented with extensive replies from the celebrant.

The most striking aspect of this is the discussion between Dooyeweerd and Van Til: both appear to be impressed by the distance separating their positions. At the time, this debate was regularly given attention within the philosophy program at the VU, particularly in the lectures of Prof. Van Riessen.

¹ [Ed.: See for instance, S U Zuidema, The structure of Karl Barth’s doctrine of creation. In: *Communication and Confrontation*. Assen: Royal Van Gorkum, Kok: Kampen, 1971, 309-328. Zuidema reviewed Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the theology of Karl Barth*, and wrote other articles on Barth. See the Bibliography in *Communication and Confrontation*.]

It seems to me worthwhile to draw attention once again, after more than fifteen years, to Dooyeweerd's essay and Van Til's response. The recent passing of the latter makes the matter even more topical. Furthermore, attention should be drawn to a kinship with K. Schilder and his supporters regarding the point of common grace. The similarity lies in the combating of the broad "common grace" (general grace) views in (among others) Kuypertian circles.²

More generally, I dare to state that Van Til's radical view on the "antithesis" between what is from God and what is from man finds a natural resonance in Free Reformed circles.³

Alvin Plantinga was born in 1932. He attended Calvin College (where his father taught psychology) and subsequently specialized in logic and epistemology. He first worked at Wayne State University (Detroit) and then for a long period at Calvin College. A number of years ago, he was appointed to Notre Dame University (South Bend, Indiana). He played a major role in the founding of The Society of Christian Philosophers (1978), a society that now numbers over 800 members and that has published its own journal since 1984: *Faith and Philosophy*, in which studies by him regularly appear. In 1987, he delivered the Gifford Lectures in Scotland. I will limit myself to *God, Freedom, and Evil* from 1974 and the lectures given at the VU in the spring of 1987 (based on the Gifford Lectures).

It will become apparent from the discussion that my judgment of these lectures is more positive than that of the 1974 work. On the one hand, I appreciate that Plantinga now goes further than the conclusions of *God, Freedom, and Evil*, which are somewhat meager from an apologetic point of view (the "theism" is intellectually respectable). On the other hand, there are indications that an insurmountable difficulty from the first period, in my opinion, is now shifting into the background. I mean the assumption that logical matters possess a timeless, uncreated status; this Platonism is addressed in point 3. As an example of his later work, reference should also be made to "Advice to Christian Philosophers" (1984), his inaugural lecture at Notre Dame. The main message of the lecture is that Christian philosophers should not allow their agenda to be dictated by the world. In his final writings, Plantinga explicitly speaks of a "Reformed theory of knowledge." Does this mean

² Regarding the "common grace" debate within the circle of Dutch immigrants in the United States, see James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984. Herein, regarding C. van Til: 190-1, 196, 292.

³ Van Til himself maintained contact with K. Schilder. A common ally in combating the general grace position was Herman Hoeksema, the fiercest opponent of the "common grace" doctrine within the Christian Reformed Church. After a protracted ecclesiastical conflict, which reached a climax in 1924, Hoeksema became the "leader" of a new denomination, the Protestant Reformed Church.

that the aforementioned “Platonism” is in decline? In my opinion, it cannot be otherwise; but let us await the publication of the Gifford Lectures.⁴

Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977), jurist and philosopher, increasingly occupied himself with the preliminary questions surrounding communication and confrontation after the publication of his main work, *De wijbegeerte der wetstidee* (1935-1936). He set as his goal the restoration of the “community of thought of the West,” a very topical concept related to Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1917). Strictly speaking, Dooyeweerd was not an apologist. He viewed his task as “merely” a preparation for apologetics, i.e., formulating the conditions to arrive at a good apologetics (see point 2). The reason we place him here in apologetic company is that he, more sharply than others, made the relationship between “communication” and “confrontation” into a problem, and thus forces us to inspect the weapons with which we think we are taking up the defence of the Christian faith.

Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963). His first names are so unusual that he was traditionally referred to by the initials “C.S.” (“Jack” to close friends). Lewis taught English literature at Oxford. There, in 1929, his conversion took place as a dramatic breakthrough in a long preparatory process.⁵ He was certainly not a philosopher.

The style of apologetics he developed owed more to literary and theological examples than to philosophical ones.⁶ Meanwhile, one can indeed uncover an implicit philosophy without great difficulty — we will do so in points 3 and 8 — a philosophy which, on the other hand, had the advantage of being hidden behind a distinctly literary form, allowing his books to reach a broad audience.

Lewis is a born apologist. With psychological precision and logical reasoning, he manages to formulate the arguments that haunt the minds of people who experience the pull of the Christian faith but are held back by all kinds of intellectual reservations. In the following paragraph, I will give an example of how he tackles a reservation head-on (“is the existence of hell not contrary to our sense of justice?”) and counters it with other arguments. The characterization Anthony Burgess once gave hits the nail on the head: “persuader of the half-convinced”: “Lewis is the ideal persuader

⁴ [Ed: *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*. Oxford University Press, 2011.]

⁵ See his *Surprised by Joy*.

⁶ His great literary role model was George Macdonald (1824-1905); see, for example, his introduction to *George Macdonald, An Anthology*, London: The Centenary Press, 1946.

for the half-convinced, for the good man who would like to be a Christian but finds his intellect getting in the way.”⁷

Of all the great apologists we skip, I will mention only one: Augustine. It is exactly sixteen hundred years ago, on the Easter night of April 24 to 25 in the year 387, that he and his son Adeodatus were baptized by Ambrose. What a difference in circumstances between then and now! We living in an age that fancies itself “post-Christian” — he in a world in which pagans formed a “dwindling minority,” indeed of which it is said that there were cities where one had to search for a pagan “with a lantern” and where no one mocked the new faith.⁸ And yet: what are 1600 years for God of Whom we confess that He is the same yesterday and today? Is He not able to break through the façades of modern unbelief? Is that more difficult than making children of Abraham out of stones (Matt. 3:9)? Above all apologetics must stand for the glory of God alone; that applies to us as well as to Augustine.

2. Brief typology

I regard the four main characters primarily as representatives of four different types. Secondly, I group Lewis and Plantinga together (point 3) and subsequently Dooyeweerd and Van Til (4).

a. Lewis

Two examples to illustrate his method.

(1) “How can God permit evil?” The characteristic answer is: If God did not permit evil, we would not be able to choose wrongly. We would be reduced to puppets, for a will that can only choose good is not free. Conclusion: the fact of human freedom implies the possibility of evil (e.g. *The Problem of Pain*, 1940, chapter 2).

(2) “Does the existence of hell not conflict with our sense of justice?” I quote a passage from the eighth chapter of *The Problem of Pain*. One should also consult *The Great Divorce*: the masterful

⁷ Thus the back cover of *The Abolition of Man*, New York: Macmillan, n.d.

⁸ From F. van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961, p. 30. Was Augustine not too optimistic in this? Too focused on the cities? See the poignant passage from a later chapter of Van der Meer’s masterpiece: “It has been pointed out that neither he nor the African Church as a whole succeeded in educating the indigenous masses. Even his immediate preoccupation was the towns and the upper classes – and two hundred years later the whole province proved helpless in face of the onslaught of Islam; indeed the tribes behind the limes were not even baptized.” (568).

narrative of a bus journey from hell to heaven and (for some) back. Just imagine someone, as I can put it in my own words, who consciously does evil, who is successful and seemingly happy; not necessarily someone like Stalin or Hitler, but nonetheless without a trace of guilty feeling. Well then, asks Lewis, can you really wish that such a person be given a place within the scope of eternal salvation? And if not, must you not also admit that here justice takes precedence over mercy, condemnation over pardon? Must not the flag of justice be planted, even with the possible implication of a definitive condemnation? Lewis knows that the sense of justice rebels against the lack of a “second chance.” His counter-question is whether it is certain that a new chance would be seized. *The Great Divorce* depicts people who, in the face of heaven, seek out the “bus” to hell again because they do not want to give up (e.g.) an acquired lifestyle.⁹ Lewis places hell and heaven in the perspective of human choices. Arminian? I will not deny it. On the other hand, it is a biblical idea that hell confronts people with the consequences of their own deeds,¹⁰ also that a second chance would often not be taken: was it not the case with the brothers of the rich man from Luke 16? Those who do not believe Moses and the prophets will also not allow themselves to be persuaded by someone who has risen from the dead.

b. Plantinga

With regard to our subject, in my (humble) opinion, two phases can be distinguished in Plantinga's development. I take *God, Freedom, and Evil*, from 1974, as a typical example of the first and the recent VU lectures as an example of the second phase. The issue around which the aforementioned book revolves, just as with Lewis, is the question of how the existence of evil can be reconciled with God's omnipotence and goodness. Plantinga, however, treats this question only in a negative sense (1) and moves exclusively on logical territory (2).

⁹ Mrs. L. Schaeffer-de Wal recently pointed out the significance of an “acquired lifestyle” (column in “Variant”, Ned. Dagblad, April 4, 1987). The occasion lay in the remarkably “neutral” texts of the official information regarding AIDS. She noted how desperately people try to keep a lifestyle whose dangers are known free from criticism. In *The Great Divorce*, it is about people who, in the face of heaven, cannot bring themselves to give up a lifestyle for fear of having to lose a part of their own personality.

¹⁰ See the “God has given them over” of Romans 1:28 and Ps. 81:13: “Therefore I let them go...” Richard John Neuhaus remarks regarding Ps. 81: “God needs not invent new punishments to fit hell with horror; hell is man abandoned, man on his own.” *The Naked Public Square*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, p. 152. Cf. K. Schilder: “God is no tyrant: He gives everyone what he wants. He imposes no burden on anyone other than the burden of his own choice. He kills only what is dead. He ruins the house that was divided against itself and could no longer exist.” *The Revelation of John and Social Life*, 1st edition.

(1) The answer is negative because it is limited to refuting an objection raised against the “theistic” position and refrains from attempting to prove the truth of that position. What objection is this? That the existence of evil would be logically incompatible with God's omnipotence and goodness. Plantinga calls this the typical position of natural a-theology.

The refutation takes up many pages. Even a relative outsider like the undersigned is gradually coming to understand why the author possesses the reputation of being one of the most virtuoso logicians in North America.

Here I will suffice with an indication of the main point. Just as with Lewis, we encounter the assumption that human freedom implies the possibility of choosing evil and that, consequently, it may be said that God can only create free people by also allowing evil (pp. 26-34). By means of reasoning in terms of “possible worlds,” the conclusion is reached that God's omnipotence is compatible with the statement just mentioned that He can only create worlds in which good and evil coexist (45-64).

However, the argument does not go beyond a “toleration” of views: Plantinga merely claims to be able to show the rational acceptability of the “theistic” position, not its truth (112).

(2) The strength of the book lies in the stringent logical argumentation with which the logical attack on the theistic position is parried. The opponent is forced to listen and will not simply be able to dismiss the conclusion that his “a-theology” is actually a flop (75). On the other hand, the limitation lies in the aforementioned. One misses the psychological, aesthetic, and ethical arguments with which Lewis substantiates the thesis of “rational acceptability.” I realize, however, that Plantinga does not claim at all to provide a complete apologetics in this book. In that respect, the comparison with Lewis is flawed. But on the other hand, it is not without significance that he later turns his attention to a Christian foundation of epistemology.

From this, one may conclude that the earlier negative position (see 1) did not satisfy him either. I consider the shift that is emerging in Plantinga's later work to be promising. In the background lies the much-discussed crisis of “foundationalism” in epistemology (and logic).¹¹ This fundamentalism entailed a search for unquestionable basic facts (“evidence”) for the construction of the edifice of knowledge. Nowadays, leading logicians and epistemologists are distancing themselves from this. They have, in fact, come to the realization that such evidence is often impossible to find and that in order to be able to begin at all, one must cast anchor somewhere: an act that itself cannot be

¹¹ I do not explicitly distinguish between logic and epistemology.

justified on the basis of deeper evidence. Plantinga distinguishes between two types of assertions: scientific hypotheses that always give reason to inquire further about grounds (etc.) and, on the other hand, assertions that express a conviction (“belief”) that cannot be further substantiated; he calls the latter “beliefs” properly basic (“sufficiently fundamental”, or more sharply: “properly fundamental”).

An example of this is an assertion such as “this is green”, referring to a green object. Such a statement must be accepted as true if there are reasons to assume that the cognitive faculties of the person making this assertion are functioning correctly and the statement was made under normal circumstances. There is then no reason to press on: “why do you call this green?” The person being questioned might answer with a laconic “because I see that it is green.” Well, for Plantinga, the situation is not fundamentally different with the assertion “I believe in God.” He also considers this statement “properly basic.” An epistemologist does not have the right to reject the statement as “false” because it can not be substantiated by hard evidence. Or in the words of Plantinga: belief in God is entirely rational, reasonable, intellectually respectable, and acceptable.¹² The foregoing already implies a difference compared to the previously discussed book. Admittedly, that also ended with “rational acceptability,” but that point was reached via the path of negations, namely by combating and rejecting objections.

Now, on the other hand, positive propositions come to the fore: under normal circumstances and if the cognitive faculties function correctly, people are capable of making reliable assertions about reality. Perhaps you say: “No news! I’ve always known that.” But then I would still like to point out a break with a philosophical tradition that still numbers thousands within universities. Since the Enlightenment, “critical thinking” has been synonymous with questioning down to the last, hard evidence and being willing to give up everything — including the faith you grew up with — that does not meet this strict requirement. Plantinga —as a logician and epistemologist of stature — simply denies the Enlightenment the right to perform its experiments of doubt on you! There is something else to add. He also seeks a “natural explanation” for the reliability of knowledge.¹³ In his judgment, two come into consideration: creationism and evolutionism, the latter of which, upon closer examination, proves to be unsound because evolutionism stops at the usefulness of knowledge and has nothing sensible to say about the truth of knowledge. What is more natural, asks

¹² Taken from the beginning of the manual distributed at the first lecture (VU, March 17, 1987).

¹³ I present matters somewhat simplified. Plantinga speaks of “positive epistemic status”. This status is linked to the proper functioning, under appropriate circumstances, of the cognitive faculties in the formation of this particular “belief” (2nd lecture, March 17, 1987)

Plantinga, than the explanation that man, as a creature of God, is attuned to the entire created reality, including his cognitive faculties? ¹⁴

c. Van Til

While the issue has so far always been the reasonable acceptability of the Christian faith (or more generally: the theistic standpoint), Van Til goes a step further by demanding from the other the recognition of the exclusive truth of the Christian standpoint. There can no longer be any question here of more or less, e.g., in the sense of the comparison mentioned above between creationism and evolutionism as alternative explanations for a single state of affairs. Plantinga, as we have seen, considers the Christian answer to be the better explanation in this regard, but not the only one. Van Til would not be able to accept that position. Although he does not wish to entirely deny the commonality between the Christian and non-Christian viewpoints, he considers them of subordinate importance compared to the fundamental dissimilarity between the two viewpoints. Insofar as a non-Christian has insight into states of affairs, he argues to Dooyeweerd, in **Jerusalem and Athens** this is something incidental, a stroke of luck as it were, and not something of a structural nature; it is “borrowed capital” (91), or a partial truth achieved in defiance of wrong principles (115-6).

Which principles is Van Til thinking of? According to the text to which I am limiting myself here, he proceeds from the assumption that the thought of the modern era is centered around the ideal of man as lawgiver, or the ideal of autonomy, and that it must arrive at the acceptance of chance and chaos with inner necessity: for, Van Til reasons, that man can only maintain his freedom insofar as his works, i.e. the culture he creates sovereignly, show no inner order and structure — otherwise, for they would limit his creative power with their own legality. Conclusion: “Committed as he is by his virtual confession of faith in human autonomy, apostate man is also committed to the idea of pure contingency” (97, cf. 100). The autonomy position is in truth quicksand (91). Insofar as the unbeliever finds a foothold, it is like a rebel who, despite himself, affirms that which he opposes.¹⁵ Armed with this insight, the apologist sets to work. He places himself in the position of the unbeliever in order to subsequently demonstrate its untenability (91, 98).

¹⁴ Cf. 2nd lecture.

¹⁵ *Jerusalem and Athens*, p. 98: “...the non-believer... has to presuppose the truth of the Christian position even to oppose it.” As is evident from the addition, Van Til means that rebellion, too, does not abolish the dependency on what God gives. It is the example of a girl who hits her father, but can only do so from the position in which the father holds her: “I saw a little girl one day on a train sitting on the lap of her “daddy” slapping him in the face. “If the “daddy” had not held her on his lap she would not have been able to slap him.” See also below, note 23.

d. Dooyeweerd

Dooyeweerd shares the rejection of the autonomy ideal with Van Til. Neither opposes this but in its most pronounced forms: man as Lucifer, Prometheus, the *ni Dieu ni maître* – or when it expresses itself less presumptuously, such as in the assumption that thought is capable of gaining insight regarding fundamental truths on its own. In that regard, both are representatives of “radical Kuyperianism” with its characteristic emphasis on the antithesis posited by Christ rather than on general grace. They find common ground on the basis of the declaration of principles formulated by Kuyper: normal (=relying solely on natural data) and abnormal (= placing everything in the light of creation, sin, and regeneration) “are two absolute starting points that tolerate no compromise”; “they dispute each other's entire field of life.”¹⁶

All things considered, it is not surprising that Van Til was long regarded as a “Dooyeweerdian.” Meanwhile, there is a major difference in method between the two. In Dooyeweerd's eyes, Van Til's approach has all the flaws of a “transcendent method”: by this, he understands a critique that is unleashed upon the thinking of another from the outside, based on one's own assumptions. He deems such a critique philosophically worthless: one's own assumptions are not open to discussion; the other has every reason to disregard the critique, or will fire back projectiles of his own making. To better understand the objections, it is good to pay attention to the beginning of Dooyeweerd's reply to Van Til. Transcendent critique, according to the former, has traditionally been a weapon of scholastic theology to combat scientific and philosophical ideas that do not align with one's own traditional view, in which the truth of one's own standpoint takes precedence uncritically as “biblical.” As an example, he mentions Prof. Hepp, the dogmatician of the VU who, appealing to the Reformed Confession, deployed this weapon against any opposition to the scholastic view of man and brought many of the theological faculty along with him (75). Opposite the transcendent, the transcendental method is placed. This aims to expose the presuppositions of thought from within.

The process begins with “states of affairs,” and subsequently the question of their justification is raised. In the third instance, the discussion will then turn to the presuppositions. For Dooyeweerd, one particular state of affairs is at the center: the structure of theoretical thinking. The question of justification is then: how is theoretical thinking itself possible? In answering this, he trusts, it will become apparent that the autonomy standpoint cannot offer any justification. At that point, it becomes clear that theoretical thinking requires a vision of faith (76-79).

¹⁶ Dr. Abraham Kuyper, *Het Calvinisme* (1898), Kampen: Kok, 1959, 109 (chapter 4).

3. Natural Theology

While the previous section placed the main figures side by side, here I will work on a typical similarity, specifically between Lewis and Plantinga. In both, a confidence in human reasoning capacity is evident, a confidence that, however, extends only to a certain level. The pattern is related to that of “natural theology.” First, a few remarks on this.

Traditionally, natural theology aims to encompass the entirety of what can be understood regarding God with the natural intellect. A preparatory function was (is) attributed to this theology: here, it was believed, the truths are mapped out to which the supernatural truths of revelation connect.

The proclamation of the Gospel would, viewed in this light, connect with what people know (or can know) from their own upbringing.

This also provides a limitation: the preparation reaches a point where Revelation takes over the reins. That boundary was often drawn between the “that” and the “who” — I believe this is, for example, the view of Thomism —: the intellect knows that God exists, but who He is can only be known on the basis of Revelation. My thesis is that Lewis and Plantinga similarly attribute a relative autonomy to the intellect: autonomous insofar as the intellect can bring it to true insights on its own domain without being dependent on knowledge of revelation; relative because outside of it — to use Calvin's words — it is blinder than a mole and cannot take a single step without the guidance of faith.

Lewis offers a fine illustration of the above in his description of the four phases in the development of religions; this can be found in the introduction to *The Problem of Pain*.

- (1) Everywhere in the world man has come to recognize a Power that disposes of his life.
- (2) Everywhere one also finds recognition of a moral law, a moral order, the Good, to which ethical action orients itself like a star. To this extent and no further does natural reason reach.
- (3) The third phase is that of the connection of both the preceding points. Here reason gropes in the dark, for, as Lewis states (rightly, I believe), in many religions (1) and (2) remain separate. The identification of the numinous power with God who loves justice is a leap: either folly or revelation, but in any case not a product of our logic (22-3).
- (4) The fourth phase is formed by the gospel of Christmas and Easter. “Shocking”, “paradoxical”, “not transparent to reason”, here are some of the qualifications used, followed by the typical Lewisian turn: “and thus something that we could not have conceived” (25).

Plantinga himself places his own work in line with natural theology; this is evident from the conclusion of *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Moreover, that writing expresses a remarkably strong confidence in logical reasoning. Evidently, man is deemed capable, with the aid of logic, of eternal, to penetrate “uncreated” truths and states of affairs. These include simple logical rules (e.g., *modus ponens*), the logical implications of all possible propositions (— assertive sentences), but also the theses discussed under the previous point (“God cannot create a world in which only good exists”). On the other hand, Plantinga is always the first to relativize the meaning of the conclusions himself: merely proof of the rational acceptability, not of the truth of theism; merely the acceptability of theism, not specifically of the Christian faith, etc. The concluding remarks of his VU lectures had a similar tenor: there exist weighty philosophical arguments in favour of theism (we discussed one in the preceding section), but the true believer does not need them, any more than one needs proof of the existence of one’s wife.¹⁷

In both cases, all in all, a substantial relativization of intellectual autonomy occurs. I can therefore imagine that some readers have already concluded that on this point the difference with respect to Van Til and Dooyeweerd is of no importance. My only question is whether we are not overlooking the sting in autonomy. I am referring to what was already indicated under point 1 as a certain “Platonism”. In both Lewis and Plantinga we do find the proposition that laws, norms, and certain states of affairs are uncreated. Lewis applies this to the moral law. The following quote from *Christian Reflections* speaks for itself: “The good is uncreated; it never could have been otherwise; it has no shadow of contingency; it lies, as Plato said, on the other side of existence” (80).

In Plantinga, we find the view that, as already indicated, logical possibilities fall outside the created world: “...God does not, strictly speaking, create any possible worlds or state of affairs at all. What He creates are the heavens and the earth and all that they contain.” But He has not created states of affairs” (38). In my judgment this “Platonism” conflicts with what we profess regarding the absolute sense in which God is the origin of everything, including “the good” and the logical states of affairs — I cannot elaborate on this now.¹⁸ I think that both Lewis and Plantinga realized the problem. The former wants to avoid the conclusion that is obvious from his position, namely that God himself is subject to the moral law. This is highly commendable. However, whether there is a way out in a double negation — God is not the creator of the moral law and yet is not subject to that

¹⁷ Thus the conclusion of the third lecture, March 18, '87.

¹⁸ I recently drew a single line in a column in *Ned. Dagblad* regarding “the image”: images, too, belong to the created reality; a good novel is a product of fiction and yet exhibits structure; thus, objectivity can be attributed to something that stems from our imagination (18/4/1987). Extending this line further, I arrive at the conclusion that logical possibilities, possible worlds, and the like also belong to this, one, reality originating from God's hand.

law — is doubtful.¹⁹ Regarding Plantinga I have already said earlier that “Platonism” shifts to the background in his later work (cf. 1).

4. Faith versus faith

The search for mutual similarities between the main characters is continued in this section with regard to Dooyeweerd and Van Til. We do this by building upon what was said in 2.d. regarding the common critique of the idea of autonomy. I view both as principled opponents of all attempts to arrive at a natural theology (or something similar). The emphatic “no” is already inherent in the critique of the idea of autonomy. This is directed against the attribution of independence or self-sufficiency to anything but: thought, logical possibilities, the human person, the moral order, etc. The critique is motivated by the fear that “independence” will repeatedly turn out to mean autonomization in relation to God as the origin of all existence. Therefore, Dooyeweerd and Van Til simply cannot be at peace with the pretension of natural theology — whether in traditional or modern forms — that certain truths concerning God could be understood with the natural intellect, the unbiased faculty of thought. In their view, this amounts to an autonomization of thought, however Christian the underlying intentions may be. Moreover, the two are not merely brothers-in-arms in the negative.

There is also a positive side to the agreement. To bring this into focus, let us briefly go back into the history of philosophy — to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). It was Kant who launched the great attack on natural theology, making use of the subversive activities that others — especially David Hume — had already undertaken. The proofs of God's existence, in particular, bore the brunt of the criticism of the Allzermalmer (“All-destroyer”). According to him, this entire undertaking rested on a lamentable overestimation of the possibilities of theoretical thinking. His position was that the existence of God cannot be proven by “reason.” Well, Dooyeweerd and Van Til can be considered post-Kantians. I do not mean that in the trivial sense that both date from after Kant (that would apply to all readers of this article), but that they have incorporated Kant's critique into their own thinking. Both proceed from the assumption that “reason” is unable to prove the truth of faith, not even in the limited sense in which “truth” is usually taken in this context: the “that” of God's

¹⁹ “But it might be permissible to lay down two negations: that God neither obeys nor creates the moral law.” (*Christian Reflections*, p. 80). Cf. for a related argument: Alasdair MacIntyre, “Which God Ought We to Obey and Why?” *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (October 1986), 4: 359-371. See especially p. 370: “From the fact that we can at one stage in our progress towards God evaluate the divine claims, using a standard of justice acquired and elaborated independently of the knowledge of God, it does not follow that in so doing we are judging the Word of God by something external to it.”

existence, awareness of the numinous, knowledge of the moral law, the rational acceptability of theism, etc. (cf. 3).

Incidentally, the (post-) Kantian aspect is most prominent in Dooyeweerd. The entire transcendental method (see 2.d. and 5.) owes much to Kant in terms of form. He assigned to philosophy the field of the “conditions of possibility” of knowledge; in Dooyeweerd, “transcendental” still has the meaning of “concerning the conditions of possibility”. Transcendental criticism concerns how theoretical thinking is possible, what conditions underlie it, and corresponding problems. With regard to our subject, Dooyeweerd’s first question is, characteristically enough, how is meaningful apologetics possible? The focus is thus typically directed at the preliminary questions.

I speak emphatically of a Kantianism because of the position that reason cannot ground itself and rests on religious presuppositions. That is from after Kant; one will not find it in him, as a child of the Enlightenment. His critique of theoretical thinking actually entails a “reculer pour mieux sauter” tactic: theoretical reason is shown its limits so that it may unfold its autonomy in an absolute sense within them! With Dooyeweerd and Van Til, none of this! For both of them, it is crystal clear that all theoretical thinking is religiously anchored, or in other words: proceeds from a vision of faith (I will leave aside the difficult distinction between “religion” and “faith” for now). Implicit in the above is that for post-Kantian apologetics, it all comes down to presuppositions: both one’s own assumptions (this applies especially to Dooyeweerd) and the confrontation with those of non-Christian thought. The apologetic encounter primarily concerns presuppositions. Between these, the clash and the dialogue must take place.

It is also clear that in this clash, faith stands opposed to faith. In the confrontation with non-Christian thought, it is not faith-bound thinking that stands opposed to “scientific” or “neutral” thinking, but rather, at its core, two visions of faith stand opposed to one another: a Christian one and (for example) a humanist one. In this regard, Dooyeweerd and Van Til are Kuyperians, for Kuyper had already clearly seen that the common opposition between faith and science obscures the true antithesis. I quote a phrase from **Calvinism**: “Mind you, I am not saying the conflict between faith and science does not exist. All science proceeds from faith, and conversely, faith, from which no science arises, is disbelief or superstition, but it is not faith.”²⁰ Naturally, for Lewis and Plantinga too, ultimately it is about faith versus faith. The difference, however, is that they do not start there.

²⁰ Kuyper, *Calvinism*, p. 107.

They begin by mapping out a common horizon of understanding. In that regard, their work breathes a classic, pre-Kantian confidence in the possibilities of thought.²¹

5. Confrontation and communication

Does the similarity traced in the preceding paragraph actually align with the thrust of the debate in Jerusalem and Athens? For does one not get the impression here of two former allies now standing against each other as rivals? In short: where do the differences lie, then? I begin with Van Til and subsequently answer his criticism from Dooyeweerd. Van Til identifies an adaptation to the modern communication ideal at the expense of the radical antithesis. The conversation with the non-Christian²² would no longer be from the outset under the squeezing of a radical rejection of all non-biblical presuppositions (94). This confrontation, Van Til continues, now only occurs at the third and final step of transcendental critique: the journey begins with the practice of communion around a jointly acknowledged state of affairs; only later do the paths diverge; in this way an unholy (and intrinsically impossible) intellectual community is constructed between believers and non-believers, covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers (109-10).

The moment of truth in Van Til's argument is that Dooyeweerd has indeed undergone a development in the course of which the bond of his philosophy with the neo-Calvinist view of life and the world has become looser.²³ Van Til has keenly realized this and rightly observed a growing distance between their respective positions. While the motivation of the criticism therefore deserves to be taken seriously, the arguments used are a different matter. Below, in (1) and (2), I will mention two

²¹ Please note, only in the respect mentioned here! In other respects, post-Kantian traits are indeed evident: see point 3 regarding Lewis concerning the transition from the first and second steps in the development of religious consciousness to the third and fourth: qualifications such as “paradoxical”, “absurd”, and “not transparent” are closer to the modern sense of life than to that of classical metaphysics (incidentally, one can hear an echo of Tertullian in it: “What does Athens have in common with Jerusalem? What does the Church have in common with the Academy?”). Plantinga's development moving in the direction of a Reformed epistemology is, of course, just as unpre-Kantian.

²² In Van Til's contribution to the discussion, no consistent distinction is made between “non-Calvinist” and “non-Christian”: sometimes the “other” is a Lutheran, sometimes a Roman Catholic, usually an atheist (marked with existentialist colours).

²³ See the Introduction and the contribution by A. M. Wolters. *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Theory*. Paul A. Marshall, Sander Griffioen and Richard J. Mouw, eds. Lanham: University Press of America, 1989. Marcel E. Verburg's intellectual biography of Dooyeweerd. *Herman Dooyeweerd: The Life and Work of a Christian Philosopher*. Trans. Herbert Donald Morton and Harry van Dyke. Jordan Station: Paideia Press, 2015. One will be able to verify my assertion therein without difficulty by paying attention to reviews of the *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* and also the reactions to critical studies by Dooyeweerd. The latter did not hide his grievance. It is against this background that he began to advocate for a restoration of the intellectual community.

points where the argumentation falls short. Finally, in (3), the question arises as to where Van Til himself ends up. Is there not a risk of him to act with the same great one-sidedness — albeit in the opposite direction — as that observed by Dooyeweerd?

(1) Does placing (the restoration of) the intellectual community at the centre indeed mean an accommodation to the ideals of humanity of our time? I believe that this assertion is based on a serious misunderstanding. Biographical material shows that Dooyeweerd arrived at the theme mentioned under the impression of the way in which his colleagues in the Netherlands responded to the Philosophy of the Idea of Law and a number of critical studies that he published in the same period.²⁴ He repeatedly had to observe that people avoided a real discussion with him. They did respond, but they gave a wide berth to what was precisely the main issue for him, namely the question of the religious insufficiency of thought. His conclusion was that the adherents of “autonomous” philosophy (Dooyeweerd usually speaks of the “immanence standpoint”) were unwilling to question the presuppositions of their thinking. This had consequences not only for those who were excluded, but also internally. Because of the concealment of the deepest mutual differences by those who all, in one way or another, adopted the standpoint of autonomous thinking, the discussion could not progress further.

Later, in the “Prolegomena” of the English edition of his magnum opus,²⁵ he gives the example that no Thomist has ever convinced a Kantian or a positivist with purely theoretical arguments, any more than, conversely, Kantian epistemology has converted even a single Thomist to that position. In the debates between the philosophical schools, he continues, it is as if they are talking past each other. Why? “... because they are not able to find a way to penetrate to each other's true starting points. The latter are masked by the dogma concerning the autonomy of theoretical thought.”²⁶

By now it has become clear that Dooyeweerd, with his striving for a restoration of the intellectual community, does not intend to obscure religious differences or even push them into the background. The “antithesis” is not the discord that disturbs the joy of dialogue with those who think differently. On the contrary, true communication presupposes confrontation at the deepest level of what keeps minds separated. In the words of *Roots of Western Culture*, 1963, written against the background of

²⁴ Mr. Marcel E. Verburg is preparing an intellectual biography of Dooyeweerd. One will be able to verify my assertion therein without difficulty by paying attention to reviews of the **Wijsb. d. Wetsidee** and also the reactions to critical studies by Dooyeweerd. The latter did not hide his grievance. It is against this background that he began to advocate for a restoration of the intellectual community.

²⁵ Herman Dooyeweerd. *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia. 4 vols., 1953-1956.

²⁶ Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique*, Vol. I, p. 37.

the post-war attempt to get the “conversation” between spiritual currents going: “If the post-war ‘dialogue’ is to contribute to the spiritual renewal of our nation, it must penetrate to that depth dimension of human life *where one can no longer escape oneself*.” It is precisely there that we must unveil the various views regarding the significance and scope of the antithesis. Only when men have nothing to hide from themselves and from their counterparts in the discussion will the way be opened for a dialogue that seeks to convince rather than repel.”²⁷

(2) While Van Til's interpretation must already be contradicted for the aforementioned reasons, an important systematic question also arises regarding his critique of the transcendental method. As stated, he believes that the differences between the presuppositions only come into play in the final stage of the transcendental trajectory. In the first stage, the conversation about the “state of affairs” (see point 2.d.) would be conducted on the basis of recognition of the legitimacy of each other's presuppositions. He deduces this, among other things, from the reactions from the Roman Catholic side to Dooyeweerd's work, which he considers to be becoming milder. It was supposedly realized there (and appreciated) that the abandonment of the nature-grace motif was no longer set as a condition for the dialogue (94, regarding H. Robbers).

My objection is that Van Til pulls apart what belongs together. The distinction of three steps — simply rendered as positing a state of affairs, **secondly**, the joint search for justification thereof, and **finally** the confrontation between the answers — should not be presented as three stages succeeding each other in time, so that during one stage the other would still lie beyond the horizon, but should be understood as three moments concerning an internally coherent whole. The third moment, that of the confrontation between the “answers”, is already given with the first; it determines the force field within which the state of affairs is addressed. Or, to use a somewhat different image: the tension does not only enter in the third instance, after the non-committal part has passed. From the outset, the dialogue is under high tension. I therefore believe that Dooyeweerd's conception of the transcendental critique satisfies Van Til's *desideratum* in terms of intention: “My contention over against this is, Dr. Dooyeweerd, that this confrontation must be introduced at the first step, and if it is not introduced at the first step, it cannot be introduced properly at the third step.” (108).

(3) There is one more point of criticism that deserves mention here. Van Til opposes speaking of “thinking as such,” or “the structure of thinking,” or in another context: “the structure of being human,” “man as such.” He expressly has no place for the figure of “as such” (especially 109). He fears, namely, that Dooyeweerd, in this way, detaches certain matters from their connection to God

²⁷ Herman Dooyeweerd. *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Options*. Toronto: Wedge, 1979, 6.

and, intentionally or unintentionally, arrives at an autonomy standpoint. We can also put it this way: Van Til is wary of a shift in the centre of gravity of the conflict between the directions towards the commonality of the structures. With the aid of the distinction between structure and direction²⁸ just introduced, the consequence of Van Til's own position can also be interpreted. Here, in my view, the conflict of directions (the “antithesis”) threatens to degrade the recognition of creature-like structures to a mere afterthought.

Here, too, the point is reached where a one-sided radical apologetics falls on its own sword. For how can the truth of the Christian faith be defended where the possibility of communication is abandoned? Apologetics à la Van Til can only hold up a mirror to the other in which the absurdity of his situation is revealed; the truth of the Christian position cannot be articulated in the absence of a common language. I deliberately wrote one-sided radical criticism just now. It is, in fact, my conviction that starting from common structures need not (and must not) diminish the radicality of apologetics. The conflict between the City of God and the City of Man occurs everywhere; There are no religiously “neutral” structures. Or, put positively: all structures lie under the sway of the Kingdom of God. There is nothing to which no direction need be given. In fact, in this way we do nothing other than express both sides of Romans 1 in philosophical terms: not only we, but also unbelievers have knowledge of God's works — in many respects there is an enormous amount to be learned from them — but this knowing is only true knowing where it becomes a (re-)acknowledgment and confession, where the Creator and not the creature is worshipped and thanked.

6. On exercises in the mirror and real opportunities

With this, the treatment of the four positions comes to an end. What do we do with them? It must be admitted immediately that much has remained undiscussed, with all the risks of a summary treatment! One might, for example, believe that the “antithesis” follows the dividing line between believers and unbelievers. Entirely wrongly! The works of believers must go through the fire of purification! However, what counts now is the believing intention, the “yes” of the answer — however imperfect — to God's appeal. It has meanwhile become clear that I wish to broadly align myself with Dooyeweerd. The question now remains what can practically be expected from

²⁸ To my knowledge, the clearest exposition of the “structure-direction” distinction is that of Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained. Biblical Basics for a reformational Worldview*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985. The example given by Van Til of the girl and her father, see note 13, can in my opinion be well (if not better) be developed using this distinction.

transcendental criticism. Has it been able to contribute to the intended restoration of the intellectual community? I begin with two strongly relativizing considerations, only to end on a positive note in the third instance.

(1) The success of the method proposed by Dooyeweerd depends on the extent to which “the other” is willing to admit that he/she cannot offer an unambiguous, consistent justification for the “state of affairs” at issue. The transcendental undertaking rests, I believe, on the assumption that the failure of attempts at unambiguous self-accountability will cause a salutary crisis — perhaps not leading to a conversion, but in any case to the recognition that so-called autonomous philosophy, so-called neutral science, etc., also departs from a **faith**. The leverage is the supposed impossibility of setting aside inner contradiction.

The expectation outlined could be conceded with a certain justification as originating in the time when “transcendental critique” prevailed. The philosophy and specialized science of those days were brimming with the search for unity, albeit in a more limited or broader sense. In the meantime, however, a profound change of climate has occurred. In recent thought, unity is often no longer a characteristic of the truth, but is instead quickly associated with “coercion,” in the sense of an imposed, enforced unity, a straitjacket in which humanity or society threatens to become trapped. It is now rather “multiplicity” and “contradiction” that pass for characteristics of the truth. We will not delve into the background here, nor into the dissemination of these ideas (broader than the much-discussed Nietzsche Renaissance in recent French thought). The crucial point is that the transcendental criticism loses its grip within this intellectual climate.

Suppose we reach the point where we can demonstrate that the interlocutor cannot justify a certain structural state of affairs (e.g. the possibility of reliable knowledge, but one might also consider the possibility of freedom, of love, etc.) without becoming entangled in internal contradictions, then in the current climate one is more likely to expect a laconic “so what?” than a salutary crisis.

(2) It is even uncertain whether we will reach the point just mentioned. Judging by my own experience, I fear that the enthusiasm to even begin such a conversation is not great. I often sense that Christian thought is defined to the core by exclusivity and consequently could be considered as something foreign, based on assumptions one could not possibly be privy to, and therefore not worth one’s time to engage with. However, with (e.g.) a dogmatic Marxist one always suspects something in common. It is as if in this “outsider” we encounter the mirror image of Van Til’s views: the assumption of exclusivity without a common structure!

(3) Based on (1) and (2), the conclusion seems justified that we are being sent “back to square one,” i.e., to the situation in which Dooyeweerd found himself when he devised transcendental criticism (cf. 5. (1)). Yet this is not my conclusion.

In conclusion, two reasons for optimism. — Even if we cannot reach the other, philosophical apologetics still makes good sense as highly necessary exercises in the mirror. It has been said that without mission, the Christian life withers. The same applies to our subject.

A lack of apologetic passion means the lack of an essential ethos, namely a willingness to account for what we stand for (in the sense of 1 Peter 3:15). This sooner or later leads to a loss of quality in the Christian life. That is why it is so important that we passionately engage with what is happening in our culture, not from an attitude of slavish admiration for everything that is called new and creative, but rather to intensely search for truth **and** falsehood, constantly seeking arguments with which the truth of the Christian faith can be defended in a way that is neither tasteless nor stale. — The essence was already stated at the end of the Introduction: God’s spirit is stronger than the strongest façade. Signs of it impose themselves upon us. Renewal of nature in spring, the ripening of fruits, the laughter of a child; and stronger: the Word that itself draws listeners, the withered hand that is nevertheless extended. A transcendental critique has a chance as long as it is attuned to this source of power. I say this without wishing to dismiss the other types discussed in this essay.

From Lewis and also Plantinga we must learn to speak in a contemporary manner; the drive of a Van Til remains necessary to keenly realize the gravity of the matter; Dooyeweerd's framework offers the best justification of the two-sidedness according to Romans 1: knowledge of the works of God and the choice between service to the Creator or to the creature.

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