

THE SCOPE AND LIMITS OF VAN TIL'S TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENT:

A RESPONSE TO JOHN FRAME

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The questions that I address in this essay have been asked by a number of people, but the main source of these questions is the writings of John Frame, who was a student under Cornelius Van Til before succeeding him as professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary. Frame is sympathetic to Van Til's approach to apologetics, but he has a number of criticisms of Van Til which have been found persuasive by many other Christians interested in apologetics – Christians both anti-Van Til and sympathetic to Van Til's approach to apologetics. Frame says that he rejects Van Til's claim of a single transcendental argument to prove the Biblical God. Instead, he calls for a "presuppositionalism of the heart" that involves using a number of different arguments, including the traditional ones that Van Til rejects, all with the transcendental *goal* of honoring the sovereignty of God. In this essay I address one of his main

arguments for his position: Proving every element of Christian theism with one argument is unrealistic, so multiple arguments should be allowed.¹

The Whole of Christian Theism by a Single Argument:

Frame claims that it is Van Til's position that we must prove the whole of Christian Theism with a single argument:

Van Til's slogan, "Christian theism as a unit," should be understood with such qualifications. . . . I do not think that the whole of Christian theism can be established by a single argument, unless that argument is highly complex! I do not think an argument should be criticized because it fails to prove every element of Christian theism.²

¹ See John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1994), 72-73, 85-88; and John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1995), 315-17. His other main arguments for a "presuppositionalism of the heart" are 1) Van Til's demand for an argument that proves God's existence with absolute certainty is untenable, so probabilistic arguments should be allowed; 2) Van Til's demand that arguments proving God's existence be in a negative form is unnecessary, so positive arguments should be allowed; and 3) Van Til's claim of antithesis between believers and unbelievers in terms of verbal formulations is too extreme, so antithesis should be seen more as an attitude of the heart rather than in terms of arguments.

² Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 72.

The conclusion of Van Til's argument is that intelligible predication presupposes the biblical God. "The Biblical God" includes the "what" as well as the "that" – the whole biblical teaching concerning God.³

In Chapter 14, we considered Van Til's view that every apologetic argument ought to prove the whole of Christian theism, the "what" as well as the "that." . . . I believe, however, that proving the whole of Christian theism is a pretty tall order for a single apologetic argument.⁴

Few if any would disagree with Frame that "that proving the whole of Christian theism is a pretty tall order for a single apologetic argument," especially when it seems to refer to every detail of the Bible: "every element of Christian theism,"⁵ "the full richness of biblical revelation."⁶ This seems to mean proving that every statement in the Bible is necessarily true as the precondition of rationality, even something like Abraham being

³ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 315-16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁵ Frame, *Apologetics*, 72.

⁶ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 265. In a more recent essay, Frame presents a view of Van Til closer to what I defend here: "Does this principle imply that we must prove all the doctrines of Christianity in every apologetic argument we employ? Critics are sometimes tempted to understand Van Til this way, and Van Til's own expressions sometimes encourage that misunderstanding. But Van Til was too thoughtful to teach anything so absurd." John Frame, "Divine Aseity and Apologetics," *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (eds. K. Scott Oliphant and Lane G. Tipton; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2007), 119. But to prove that the view is wrong, Frame cites the very pages of his book *Cornelius Van Til* that we examine here that promote the misunderstanding.

from Ur rather than from some other city (cf. Gen 15:17). In a 1976 essay Frame was hesitant to attribute a view like that to Van Til: “Even for Van Til, I assume, not all doctrines are ‘major.’ ‘Abraham lived in Ur of the Chaldees’ is not as ‘central’ as the doctrine of the Trinity.”⁷ But Frame’s claim that Van Til requires one argument to prove “every element of Christian theism” and “the full richness of biblical revelation,” seem to mean that he thinks that Van Til taught that even less-than-central teachings of Scripture should be proved by a single argument.

Another interpretation of “the whole” or “every element” of “Christian theism” might be “every doctrine necessary for Christian orthodoxy.” In conversations that I have had with others about this subject, they often assume this meaning, since how else could Van Til call it *Christian* theism? A single argument that proved that every doctrine of Christian orthodoxy is necessarily true as the precondition of rationality would be less daunting than proving every statement in Scripture, but it still seems like a mountain too high to climb. How are you going to show that it’s necessary for the possibility of rationality that Christ rose from the dead?⁸ I will attempt to show that Van Til made

⁷ John Frame, “The Problem of Theological Paradox,” in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship* (ed. Gary North; Vallecito, Ca.: Ross House Books, 1976), 305. This essay was republished as *Van Til: The Theologian* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Pilgrim Publishing Company, 1976).

⁸ Not only can some doctrines essential to orthodoxy not be deduced from the attributes of God that are transcendentally necessary, but some doctrines that can be deduced are not necessary for orthodoxy, as it would seem from 1 Corinthians 10:25-33. Paul argues from the fact of God’s sovereign creation of all things to the conclusion that food sacrificed to idols can be eaten in good conscience, yet he also commands us to be accommodating to someone who believes that food sacrificed to idols is unclean (cf. Rom 14).

neither of these claims when he talked about proving Christian theism as a unit and that what he did claim is much more modest and reasonable.

Since Frame says in *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, “In Chapter 14, we considered Van Til’s view that every apologetic argument ought to prove the whole of Christian theism,”⁹ let’s look at Frame’s argument in Chapter 14. He says in this chapter that he agrees with Van Til that “all facts are theory laden,”¹⁰ and therefore an apologist cannot prove *that* God exists without proving *what* kind of God exists.

Frame thinks that Van Til’s point should be obvious. He says,

But if all the facts are laden with meaning, then it is simply impossible to separate fact from meaning, no matter how much we may try. We cannot even talk about the “fact of the Resurrection” without having some meaning in mind. A resurrection, after all, is a resurrection, not a storm at sea.¹¹

If Frame is agreeing with Van Til, why bring it up as a disagreement? Frame even notes that Van Til *rejects* the view that God must be exhaustively known to be known at all.¹²

This should count against Frame’s characterization of Van Til’s position, but apparently

⁹ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 264.

¹⁰ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 183.

¹¹ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 183.

¹² *Ibid.*, 183. Van Til specifically criticizes Aquinas for holding a position that demands that we have exhaustive knowledge of God in order to prove His existence: “On this argument he could not at all prove the existence of God unless he fully knew the nature of God. He himself faces the question how it is possible that we should be able to say *anything* about God, if we cannot say *everything* about him.”¹²

Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980 [1971]), 95.

Frame just sees it as an inconsistency in Van Til's thinking. Frame then concludes that "Van Til does not present enough argument to require a particular degree of definition in an apologetic proof,"¹³ even though *Frame never shows in this chapter where Van Til talks about a particular degree of definition nor where Van Til demanded that the whole of Christian theism be proved by a single argument*, despite his claim quoted above that in Chapter 14 he examines Van Til's defense of these views. Frame is under the mistaken impression that Van Til is claiming that we must prove everything about God on the basis of the observation that fact and meaning cannot be separated. Frame is right that that would be a *non sequitur*, but he provides no proof that Van Til is making that argument.

Frame uses this discussion in a later chapter to disagree with Van Til for criticizing Thomas Aquinas. Frame says that, since it's impossible to separate the "that" from the "what," Van Til should not have criticized Aquinas for separating the idea "that" God exists from the idea of "what" kind of God exists. Since Frame doesn't like that criticism, he makes Van Til's criticism of Aquinas a different one – that Aquinas did not prove enough about God's character: "[N]o argument proves bare existence without any additional definition. If Van Til objects to Aquinas on these grounds, he should show how much 'whatness' is required in an argument for God's existence, and precisely why that degree of definition is required."¹⁴ Actually, Van Til is criticizing Aquinas for *claiming* to separate the "that" from the "what" even though it's impossible to rationally do so, but that distinction doesn't enter into Frame's consideration. The degree of

¹³ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 183.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 265.

definition is not the issue, but on the basis of a criticism that Van Til never made, Frame claims that Van Til demanded that arguments for God's existence prove "the whole of Christian theism."¹⁵ And finally this alleged demand by Van Til that is based on a criticism of Aquinas that Van Til never made is rejected by Frame as obviously too burdensome.

The root of the problem with Frame's confused analysis of Van Til's critique of Aquinas is that the "that" and "what" issue relates to Van Til's argument concerning the one and the many, but Frame only mentions this issue briefly in passing in the chapter on Aquinas: "Thus, as Van Til says, he does attempt to impose the Christian worldview on top of Aristotle's scheme of abstract form and chaotic matter and the Neoplatonic scheme of wholly other deity and chain of being."¹⁶ Frame announces his agreement with Van Til here, but he doesn't relate it to Van Til's criticism of Aquinas for separating the "that" from the "what." If he did, he should have realized that Van Til is right in his criticism of Aquinas and that specifying a particular degree of definition is irrelevant to it.

Rather than following up his agreement with Van Til by explaining in detail how Aquinas' compromise with Greek philosophy undermines Christian doctrine and apologetics, Frame scolds Van Til that such an analysis is rude: "Yet we must be careful not to attribute to Aquinas all the absurdities that might be logically derivable from his system. That sort of analysis is neither fair, nor illuminating, nor useful to the progress of Christian apologetics."¹⁷ On the contrary, since apologetics is giving a rational defense

¹⁵ Ibid., 315-17.

¹⁶ Ibid., 267.

¹⁷ Ibid.

of the faith, pointing out how a false doctrine logically undermines the faith is extremely relevant. And Aquinas' adoption of the Greek view of the one and the many is no minor intrusion into his philosophy but a view of the world that he tries to thoroughly integrate into it. By dismissing Van Til's critique of Aquinas as rude, Frame fails to discuss Van Til's main criticism of Aquinas and instead spends an entire chapter evaluating Van Til's critique of Aquinas in terms of an argument that Van Til never made.

Without going into all the details, the heart of Van Til's criticism of Aquinas is that Van Til objects to Aquinas importing the Greek concept of the Great Scale of Being into Christian theology.¹⁸ In terms of that Greek view, being ("form") and plurality ("matter") are at two opposite ends of the scale. Plurality arises from non-being on one end of the scale, and pure being is achieved by removing all plurality, thus leaving it, as Frame says, a "bare existence."¹⁹ When all content is negated from the nature of God, God becomes an empty concept, a "that" without a "what." In Aquinas' own words: "God is a supremely simple form, as was shown above (Question [3], Article [7]). . . . Reason cannot reach up to simple form, so as to know 'what it is;' but it can know 'whether it is.'"²⁰ The Christian view does not allow God to be equated with that kind of pure form because God is triune – the one and the many are equally ultimate in God, rather than originally in abstraction from one another. Even though, as Van Til puts it, "Thomas, the theologian,"²¹ wants to assert that God is the triune Creator, his adoption of

¹⁸ See Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor*, 73-105, 217-219; and. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 169-175.

¹⁹ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 265.

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 12, Article 12.

²¹ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor*, 96.

the Greek scale of being as “Thomas, the philosopher,”²² is incompatible with it and other Christian doctrines. To the extent anything exists, it is part of abstract unity (i.e. part of “God”), and to the extent anything does not participate in abstract unity, it dissolves into non-existence. This view is inconsistent with a God with content to His nature who communicates with content to a real creation that is distinct from Him.²³

The Greek scale of being not only undermines Christian orthodoxy, it is also irrational. Nothing rational can be said about a unity with no content – a pure blank – or about a diversity with no unity – pure chaos. And these two irrational concepts cannot serve as the basis for the rational world.²⁴ Aristotle’s unmoved mover that Aquinas posits as the first cause of the world is an irrational principle of blank unity that cannot serve as the cause of the diverse world of which we have intelligible experience. If “no argument proves bare existence,”²⁵ as Frame says, that’s because the Greek view is indefensible and should be rejected by Christians rather than attempting to integrate it into Christian theology as Aquinas did.

In contrast to the Greek view, the Christian view of God, that unity and diversity are related to each other in God from all eternity, allows for a rational world. The Christian worldview begins with the absolutely rational as ultimate, rather than the irrational as the Greeks taught, and so is able to account for rationality in the world created by the absolutely rational God. Van Til derives a number of Christian doctrines

²² Ibid.

²³ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 57; and Cornelius Van Til, *Who Do You Say That I Am?* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 45-47.

²⁴ See Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 320.

²⁵ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 265.

from the concept of God as the ultimate One and Many, as we will see below, but the number of those derived doctrines is not the issue with his criticisms of Aquinas. The issue is simply to show by the transcendental argument for the existence of God (“TAG”) that plurality must be equally ultimate with unity in God’s being, rather than God being an empty unity – a concept with no content. But since Frame dismisses Van Til’s “unfair” but admittedly accurate criticism that Aquinas’ adoption of Greek categories entails irrational and anti-Christian assumptions and conclusions, and substitutes a critique of Aquinas that Van Til never held, it should be no surprise that Frame’s application of that critique to how many doctrines of Christian theism Van Til’s TAG is supposed to prove is off target.

Christian Theism as a Unit (CTU)

In *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, Frame refers to Van Til’s phrase “Christian Theism as a unit” as evidence that Van Til meant that “the whole of Christian theism can be establish by a single argument, . . . [proving] every element of Christian theism.”²⁶ At first glance, Van Til’s use of the phrase might seem to justify Frame’s view:

For better or for worse the Protestant apologist is committed to the doctrine of Scripture as the infallibly inspired final revelation of God to man. This being the case, he is committed to the defense of Christian theism as a unit. For him theism is not really theism unless it is Christian theism. The Protestant apologist cannot

²⁶ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 72.

be concerned to prove the existence of any other God than the one who has spoken to man authoritatively and finally through Scripture.²⁷

Frame assumes what Van Til means by “Christian theism as a unit” without providing a close-reading analysis of how the phrase is used in Van Til’s writings.²⁸ To understand what Van Til means here, we should see what kind of arguments Van Til uses to support the claim. This will indicate what the nature of the claim was to begin with. Of course, it’s possible that Van Til made claims that were overreaching – that he failed to adequately support. But we owe him the courtesy of trying to understand his various statements as consistent with each other.²⁹

Following the quote above, Van Til argues for the necessity of special revelation, noting that “Even before the entrance of sin, as already noted, man required supernatural positive revelation as a supplement to revelation in the created universe around and within him.”³⁰ And since God saw that it was necessary to give Adam information through special revelation in the state of innocence, *a fortiori*, special revelation is needed after the fall when man suppresses the knowledge of God through creation and needs redemption, which is not a part of natural revelation: “If then even man in paradise could read nature aright only in connection with and in light of supernatural positive revelation, how much the more is this true of man after the fall. . . . Of God’s intention to

²⁷ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 122.

²⁸ Maybe that’s because Frame was writing on a popular level, but careful scholarship requires more.

²⁹ This is a principle that Aristotle endorsed in *Poetics*, sect. 1461a-b, but not because his form/matter scheme is true, but because he borrows capital (created faculties, common grace, natural revelation) from the concrete universal God that made and sustains him!

³⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 123.

save a people for his own precious possession he could learn nothing from nature.”³¹

Furthermore, Van Til points out the fact that since Scripture is the voice of the absolute God, Scripture is absolutely authoritative in every matter of which it speaks: “The proper attitude of reason to the authority of Scripture, then, is but typical of the proper attitude of reason to the whole of the revelation of God. The objects man must seek to know are always of such nature as God asserts they are. God’s revelation is always authoritarian.”³² He concludes that this leads to a particular apologetic methodology:

When these matters are kept in mind, it will be seen clearly that the true method for any Protestant with respect to the Scripture (Christianity) and with respect to the existence of God (theism) must be the indirect method of reasoning by presupposition. In fact it then appears that the argument for the Scriptures as the infallible revelation of God is, to all intents and purposes, the same as the argument for the existence God. . . . No proof for this God and for the truth of his revelation in Scripture can be offered by an appeal to anything in human experience that has not itself received its light from the God whose existence and whose revelation it is supposed to prove.³³

In short, Van Til’s argument for “Christian theism as a unit” is that Scripture was made necessary by the Fall, and this Scripture is absolutely authoritative because it derives its authority from its absolute Author; therefore the argument for the existence of an

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 125.

³³ Ibid., 125-26.

absolutely authoritative God is basically the same for the argument for an absolutely authoritative Scripture.

Notice what Van Til has not done. He does not attempt to prove every detail of Christian theism that is taught in the Bible with a single argument. Nor does Van Til's argument here involve any historical details like proving that Abraham was from Ur rather than from some other city because it's necessarily true as the precondition for rationality. The only aspect of that detail that involves transcendental necessity is that, because the detail of Abraham's hometown is spoken by God, it must be an absolutely accurate historical fact. You don't even see Van Til arguing for all the details of Christian theism that are necessary for Christian orthodoxy, like the fact that Christ rose from the dead. This should indicate what Van Til means, and does not mean, by his phrase "Christian theism as a unit."

One other thing to note about Van Til's explanation of "Christian theism as a unit" quoted above is that he uses "Christianity" as short-hand for special, redemptive revelation in distinction from natural revelation about God's existence: "to the Scripture (Christianity) and with respect to the existence of God (theism)." In this context, Van Til's use of the word "Christianity" does not mean that he trying to prove every detail of Christian theology, just the absolutely authoritative nature of redemptive revelation. (There must be some detail of course. There can't be a "that" without a "what.") This is consistent with the context, and the suggestion will become more of a firm conclusion as we continue to look into Van Til's views.

In Van Til's terminology, the opposite of treating "Christian theism as a unit" is the "block-house methodology." The next section of the chapter just discussed in *The*

Defense of the Faith has “block-house methodology” as the title. Looking at what Van Til means by this phrase will help explain what he means by CTU. In keeping with Frame’s view of what CTU means, does Van Til condemn the block-house methodology as a use of more than a single argument to prove all the details of Christian theism?

Van Til explains “block-house methodology” by saying, “the Roman Catholic and Arminian method of reasoning is bound, not merely to cut the unity of Christian theism in two, but is bound even to prove its theism piece by piece. Romanism and Arminianism lead not merely to dualism but to atomism.”³⁴ This is in contrast to the Protestant method of reasoning in which, “No proposition about historical fact is presented for what it really is till it is presented as a part of the system of Christian theism that is contained in Scripture. To say this is involved in the consideration that all facts of the created universe are what they are by virtue of the plan of God with respect to them.”³⁵ Van Til then launches into a lengthy philosophical discussion about why the non-Christian view of the one and the many undermines the possibility of rationality. He points out that:

[E]ven the mere counting of particular things presupposes a system of truth of which these particulars form a part. Without such a system of truth there would be no distinguishable difference between one particular and another. They would be as impossible to distinguish from one another as the millions of drops of water in the ocean would be indistinguishable from one another by the naked eye.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 132.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 133.

Once again, the issue for Van Til is the one and the many. In terms of the non-Christian view of the one and the many, individual facts lose their individuality when they are placed into a system of logical relationship.³⁷ But the Christian does not have to hold to the “truths of fact” at the expense of the “truths of reason” because the Christian God is self-contained – meaning that His all-encompassing plan for the universe includes the individuals and the universals in eternal relation to each other.³⁸ Thus, he concludes, “It is the actual existence of the God of Christian theism and the infallible authority of the Scripture which speaks to sinners of this God that must be taken as the precondition of the intelligibility of any fact in the world.”³⁹ As the source of all universals and particulars, God is absolutely authoritative when He speaks concerning any facts (particulars) and their meaning (universals). *It’s the unity between the absolute Creator who must exist for the intelligibility of facts, on the one hand, and His absolute authority to speak concerning the meaning of all facts on the other hand, especially through Scripture, that Van Til is referring to by his phrase “Christian theism as a unit.”*

How is the Arminian and Roman Catholic approach to apologetics a “block-house” methodology and inconsistent with a self-contained God and Christian theism as a unit as Van Til has described? He says,

It is the essence of both the Romanist and the Arminian method of argumentation to agree with the non-Christian that individual propositions about many dimensions of reality are true whether Christianity is true or not. Neither Roman

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 134.

³⁹ Ibid., 135.

Catholics nor Arminian apologists are in a position to challenge the natural man's atomistic procedure. Their own theologies are atomistic.⁴⁰

In other words, the Romanist and Arminian concede to the non-Christian that knowledge of various mundane areas of life can be justified even if God does not exist. They claim that it's just "religious" knowledge that requires us to depend on the Bible to give us the correct interpretation. But Van Til is saying that, because no facts of any sort would be intelligible unless they were created by an absolute God according to His comprehensive plan for the world, we must submit to this God's interpretation regarding all facts of all types. Once again, we see that the issue of Christian theism as a unit versus the block-house methodology is a recognition of the implications of the transcendental proof for the existence of God for an absolutely authoritative revelation. A fact is what it is and means what it means because God has made it so. Van Til never says that he is arguing against the use of multiple arguments as means of proving all the details of Christian theism. He is arguing against deformed views of Christian apologetics by demanding that the implications of one argument, the transcendental argument, be honored when the various empirical arguments are given in defense of the Christian faith. Empirical evidence for Christian theism must be presented in terms of a Christian-theistic philosophy of fact in which facts are intelligible only because they are God-created, God-interpreted facts.

To make sure that we are not making a hasty generalization from this one discussion in *The Defense of the Faith* to describing Van Til's thinking in general about "Christian theism as a unit," let's look at another book. At the end of the last chapter of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 139.

A Survey of Christian Epistemology Van Til offers this summary of the position for which he has been arguing:

These most important matters were somewhat as follows: First of all, we note the necessity of seeing clearly that Christianity and theism are intricately woven. If one is really a theist he cannot stop short of being a Christian, and Christianity cannot build upon any foundation but that of a sound biblical theism.

Accordingly, the argument must constantly be for Christian theism as a whole.

We cannot separate, except for the sake of emphasis, between an argument for theism and an argument for Christianity. The absoluteness of God and the inspiration of the Bible are involved in one another and one cannot defend the one without defending the other.⁴¹

This line seems to prove Frame's interpretation of Van Til right: "If one is really a theist he cannot stop short of being a Christian." But when we look at the context again, it's "the inspiration of the Bible" that must be defended with the same argument as the one that proves "the absoluteness of God." Of course, the inspired Bible will give us all the details of Christian theism, but it's not every one of those details that has transcendental necessity, but the fact of an absolutely true message that is inspired by the absolute God. We have another example here of "Christianity" being used as short-hand for special, redemptive revelation.

This paragraph is a summary of a previous argument, as indicated by his statement that "These most important matters were somewhat as follows." Going back a

⁴¹ Ibid., 222.

page and looking at the argument that Van Til is referring to confirms the interpretation just given:

To be sure, it is true that we should never seek to defend more than it is strictly necessary to defend. But our contention is exactly that it is strictly necessary to defend the absoluteness of Scripture. If one does not defend the absoluteness of Scripture, one cannot defend the absoluteness of Christ or of God. . . . The whole dispute between theism and atheism as far as the subject of knowledge is concerned is whether the human consciousness can or cannot function apart from God. If we now conclude that it cannot function apart from God, then when it functions it is wholly reinterpetative in its work. And if then, because of sin, the redemptive work of God is necessary, as according to Christianity it is, it follows that when the human consciousness functions in connection with this redemptive work of God, it must once more be wholly reinterpetative and therefore be wholly submissive to the Absolute interpretation which comes to it.⁴²

Once again, Van Til's argument for "Christian theism as a unit" is an argument from the absolute God to the absoluteness of His revealed word in the interpretation of facts.

Could Van Til have been clearer if he meant to say what I am claiming? Yes, but of course Van Til is notorious for using some confusing phrases, like his denial of "identity of content between the mind of man and the mind of God,"⁴³ while also affirming that "two times two are four is a well known fact. God knows it. Man knows

⁴² Ibid., 221.

⁴³ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 165. In context "identity of content" means that man's knowledge is exhaustive, like God's.

it.”⁴⁴ Other phrases in Van Til’s writing have caused a similar confusion, but they can be seen to make sense when examined closer. Likewise with CTU. Despite the fact that the phrase “Christian theism as a unit” would initially lead one to think it means what Frame says it means, one should be open to the possibility that the CTU phrase will appear in a different light once the context of its use is examined, as I believe I have begun to show.

Two other teachings in Van Til’s writings add support to the interpretation I have given to the CTU phrase: 1) Van Til’s association of TAG with natural revelation rather than the additional knowledge given through special revelation, and 2) the essential role that Van Til gives to empirical evidence in the defense of Christianity.

TAG as Natural Revelation

Van Til holds the traditional view that the means of salvation is only made known through special revelation. Yet Van Til also holds that the transcendental argument only proves that which is given through natural revelation, so such essential doctrines to Christian orthodoxy like the atonement and the resurrection of Christ would not be revealed through the transcendental argument. This contradicts Frame’s claim that Van Til required the whole of Christian Theism to be proved by a single transcendental argument.

In his book *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Van Til discusses, well, systematically, the issue of what God reveals by natural revelation compared to special revelation:

⁴⁴ Ibid., 172.

Coming now to what man would learn about God directly from God himself instead of indirectly from a study of nature and man, we may say that *whatever was not involved in the concept of God as the presupposition of the universe as it was when it was created had to be directly revealed to man if he was to know it at all.*⁴⁵

Thus we see that, both with respect to nature and respect to man himself, men should have known God as Creator, as Preserver, and as Judge. They should have known his divinity. They should have known him as the Absolute One. They should have known him as the one through whom alone all human predication, applied either to nature or to man, has meaning. They should have known him as the presupposition of the intelligibility of the universe.⁴⁶

We see here that Van Til is equating what can be known through the presuppositional argument to what is known about God through nature, which is less than the full revelation that is given through special revelation. He is not claiming to prove “every detail of Christian theism” through this one argument as Frame alleges.

The traditional Christian view is that nature does not reveal the way of salvation, and Van Til strongly affirms this in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 74, emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 106

It is indeed true that nature does not reveal God's grace to man. This objective insufficiency of present general revelation is plainly taught by Paul. The whole argument of the first few chapters of Romans establishes the fact that all "righteousness" which is of men, whether among Jews or Gentiles, places all under the condemnation of God and that in general revelation there is no remedy for this condition. Men are lost without Christ – and he is not revealed in nature. . . . It is true that nature does not reveal grace to us, but it is also true that man, as he was originally created, did not need grace. . . . In consequence of his sin, then, man needs both new or additional revelation – a revelation of grace.⁴⁷

There should be no doubt that, as a founding member of the conservative Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Van Til affirms that the means of grace, such as Christ's death for our sins, involve doctrines that are necessary for orthodoxy. And since Van Til associates the presuppositional argument with natural revelation, Van Til does not hold that the presuppositional argument is supposed to entail all the doctrines necessary for Christian orthodoxy. Van Til warns against attempting to do such a thing:

We may therefore speak of the "system of truth" contained in Scripture if only we are careful to note that *its various doctrines are not to be obtained by way of deduction from some master concept*. There is no doubt consonance between the "doctrine of God," the "doctrine of man" and the "doctrine of Christ" as found in Scripture. But even when conjoined and seen in their fullest harmony, these and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 111.

other doctrines together do not begin to exhaust the riches of God's revelation to man through Christ and his Spirit.⁴⁸

We will see that Van Til does deduce some concepts from the "master concept" of a self-contained God, but much less than all those doctrines necessary for Christian orthodoxy. God's revelation is voluntary, including His revelation in nature in that God freely chose to create nature.⁴⁹ But choosing to create the universe meant that those attributes of God necessary for the facts of the universe to be intelligible would necessarily be revealed to any mind that had the capacity and inclination to consider the matter.⁵⁰ Through nature, God is known truly, but not exhaustively: "Saving grace is not manifest in nature; yet it is the God of saving grace who manifests himself by means of nature."⁵¹ Van Til says of Adam in Paradise, "he knew the nature of God as far as it had been revealed to him. . . . He needed not to know about God comprehensively to know him truly."⁵² Other attributes of God could be revealed after creation at God's discretion in special revelation: "As God's plans and purposes of salvation were increasingly realized and made plain to his people, he revealed more of himself to man."⁵³

⁴⁸ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (rev. and abr. ed.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1967), 7, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Cornelius Van Til, introduction to *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* by Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1948), 35.

⁵⁰ Natural revelation also includes concepts that are innately planted in man that involuntarily spring up within him. See Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 194-95.

⁵¹ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 29.

⁵² Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 100. Of course, even with a completed Bible, we can't know God exhaustively, since we are finite and he is infinite.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 201.

In *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, after having introduced the distinction between what can be known through “the concept of God as the presupposition of the universe”⁵⁴ and the additional revelation that can only be found in special revelation, Van Til sets out to explain in the chapters that immediately follow what can be known through nature through a presuppositional reasoning process. He says, “We would think of a man in the midst of heathendom and remember the elements in the revelation at his disposal in order then to see what logical conclusions he ought to draw if he reasoned correctly.”⁵⁵ Van Til then lists six logical conclusions that man ought to deduce from nature after the Fall:⁵⁶ 1) The existence of God as a Creator, 2) the providence of God, 3) common grace, 4) man’s fall from original perfection, 5) special grace somewhere in the world, and 6) a final judgment.⁵⁷ This is an impressive list of deductions that line up with Biblical revelation, but it is hardly “the whole of Christian theism” or even the whole of Christian orthodoxy. One might find other deductions that Van Til makes from TAG, but

⁵⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 79-80.

⁵⁶ God could have chosen to create mankind so that we always freely chose the good and never evil. See Ibid., 248. But given that man fell into sin, and given that God chose not to immediately send all mankind (the two of them) into eternal damnation, mankind must have continued only by grace: “It is not a valid argument against this contention to say that no one could in advance of its coming argue for the necessity of a gift of grace, since grace is a free gift. We do not say that men ought to have been able to argue in advance that grace should come. We say rather that the world did as a matter of fact exist in the way that it did by virtue of grace alone as soon as it fell into sin.” Ibid., 80.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 80. Also see Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 69-70; Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 21; and Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 106, 107.

whether the deduction of those implications is considered “one argument” with the proof for God’s existence or multiple arguments, they still cannot be viewed as proving every element of Christian Theism since Van Til associates them with natural revelation as opposed to special revelation.

Although associating Van Til’s TAG with natural revelation is probably a novel idea to many readers, it fits with the nature of Van Til’s argument. The argument is about the intelligibility of facts – any facts whatsoever. The argument is that the existence of God is necessary for any fact to be intelligible. So correctly reasoning about any of the facts of creation that confront any person in creation should lead that person to conclude that there is a Creator, just as Romans 1 affirms. Van Til outlines some implications that this has for man’s moral state and a need for salvation, but the argument directly concerns knowledge of facts in general and not the means of salvation.

But doesn’t Van Til talk about the priority of Scripture in our understanding of God? Yes, he does. But he talks about a sense in which nature has priority in a sense as well:

But to speak thus of the necessity and priority of Scripture is not in the least to deny that there is, in another sense, a priority of the works of God.⁵⁸

We may say that the doctrine of creation and of providence form the foundation of the idea of Scripture. But on the other hand we should know nothing about the

⁵⁸ Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1967), 123-24.

truth of creation and providence if it were not the Scripture as God's Word that tells us of them.⁵⁹

There is a temporal priority of nature in that God created the world that reveals His glory before there was a need for redemptive revelation. Also, the need for redemptive revelation only makes sense in terms of an absolute Creator as the one against whom man has rebelled. And third, Scripture comes to us through nature – through men created in God's image who receive a message verified by miracles in nature, and through the physical preservation of the inscribed divine message through earthly history. All of these require an absolute God to be the Creator and Sustainer of nature, man and history: "Surely there could be no inspiration in the sense in which Warfield describes it unless God's providence is what he thinks of it as being, i.e., that which controls all of history, and of each man as a particular contribution to history."⁶⁰ Per the transcendental argument, only because God created the facts of nature and the human personalities through which Scripture is delivered do these facts and human personalities have any meaning. The only alternative is a void in which man "has no self".⁶¹

On the other hand, there is a sense in which the Scriptures have priority because of the sinfulness of man. Although men ought to see clear proof of the existence of the true God in nature, we "suppress the truth in unrighteousness." (Rom 1:18) We need redemptive revelation to come to acknowledge what we ought to see about God through His creation. Therefore nobody will have reasoned according to the transcendental

⁵⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 25.

⁶¹ Ibid., 26.

argument to come to the six propositions that Van Til deduces from nature without having read the Bible or heard it preached to him. “Christ said that no man can come to the Father but by Him. No one can become a theist unless he becomes a Christian.”⁶²

And:

God continued to reveal himself in nature as the self-sufficient and self-subsistent rational God even after man became a sinner. If therefore men would reason analogically they should be able to reason from nature to nature’s God. But sinners until saved by grace do not reason analogically. They reason univocally.⁶³

We don’t turn to the Bible to get our salvation after having come to acknowledge God through a study of nature in isolation from Biblical revelation. Rather, “We get our theism as well as our Christianity from the Bible.”⁶⁴ This last statement, it should be noted, follows his affirmation of a distinction between his philosophical argument for theism and the defense of Christ’s resurrection and other historical claims of Christianity: “It is apparent from this that if we would really defend Christianity as an historical religion we must at the same time defend the theism upon which Christianity is based and this involves us in philosophical discussion.”⁶⁵

In *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* Van Til says: “The Bible must be true because it alone speaks of an absolute God. And equally true is it that we believe in an absolute God because the Bible tells us of one.”⁶⁶ In the first sentence we are validating

⁶² Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 36.

⁶³ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 101.

⁶⁴ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 24.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 12.

the Bible based on a conception of an absolute God. Why is that? Because TAG proves the necessary existence of such a God for the possibility of rationality: "unless there were an absolute God their [unbelievers'] own questions and doubts would have no meaning at all."⁶⁷ Van Til recognizes that this philosophical way of arguing for the existence of God will lead some to a mistaken understanding: "[S]ome fundamentalists may have feared that we have been trying to build up a sort of Christian philosophy without the Bible."⁶⁸ But the opponent of Christianity who sees TAG as "prejudiced" by the Bible will be more correct:

The position we have briefly sought to outline is frankly taken from the Bible. And this applies especially to the central concept of the whole position, viz., the concept of an absolute God. Nowhere else in human literature, we believe, is the concept of an absolute God presented. And this fact is once more intimately related to the fact that nowhere else is there a conception of sin, such as that presented in the Bible. According to the Bible, sin has set man at enmity against God. Consequently it has been man's endeavor to get away from the idea of God, that is, a truly absolute God.⁶⁹

We need to learn of the absolute Creator through the redemptive revelation of Scripture because in our sinfulness we suppress the truth about God revealed in nature (cf. Rom 1:18-32). Thus the second sentence above is that "we believe in an absolute God because the Bible tells us of one."

⁶⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Even though Van Til often says things like his “starting point” is the “self-attesting Christ of Scripture,”⁷⁰ this should not be understood as giving salvation logical priority over the doctrine of God in his philosophical apologetic. Christ is self-attesting in Scripture because He is the eternal, self-sufficient God. God as He is in Himself rather than in relation to creation and man is the center of theology and apologetics for Van Til:

[I]t should always be remembered that Christ’s work is a means to an end. Even if we think of the fact that Christ is the second person of the Trinity, we ought still to remember that it is the full Godhead with whom we ultimately have to do and about whom, in the last analysis, we wish to know. Hence, theology is primarily God centered rather than Christ centered.”⁷¹

Van Til often talks about the transcendental necessity of the ontological trinity and not the transcendental necessity of the economical Trinity because the center of his philosophy and theology is God as He is in Himself rather than in relation to the world.⁷² He criticizes James Daane because “he would substitute ‘the revelation of God in Christ’ for the ontological trinity as ‘the Christian’s most basic interpretation.’”⁷³ He likewise criticizes Karl Barth because his “main principle is ‘the revelation of God in Christ’ to the exclusion of the God who exists from all eternity within himself, independently of his relation to the world.”⁷⁴ Van Til’s transcendental argument proves the existence of a

⁷⁰ Van Til, “My Credo” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Theology of Cornelius Van Til*, edited by E. R. Geehan. Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 3.

⁷¹ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 2.

⁷² See Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 410.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

self-contained God, on which the meaning of Christ's historical redemption logically depends.

The one and the many is the issue on which Van Til builds his transcendental argument: "The whole problem of knowledge has constantly been that of bringing the one and the many together."⁷⁵ As we saw above, Van Til's basic argument is that God is necessary as the precondition for rationality because in God the one and the many are equally ultimate. He refers to this aspect of God's nature that is transcendently necessary in various ways: "the self-contained God," "the self-sufficient God," "the originality of God," "the absolute God," "the concrete universal," "the Eternal One and Many," and others.⁷⁶ As the source of all that exists and the precondition for rationality, Van Til sees this type of God as the center of Scripture and the Christian faith:

We use the term Theism to signify biblical Theism, of which we take the notion of an absolute, self-sufficient, personal God to be the central metaphysical concept.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 10. See Rousas John Rushdoony, "The One and the Many – The Contribution of Van Til," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, 339-48.

⁷⁶ "Self-sufficient": See Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 102. "Originality": See Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 205; Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 69. For "Absolute," "Concrete universal," and "Eternal One and Many": See Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 42.

⁷⁷ Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1955), 34n.1.

In the Reformed Faith the freedom of God, the self-contained God is central to everything.⁷⁸

[O]nly in Reformed theology does one find an attempt to take the fundamental motif of Scripture, the self-contained ontological trinity, and understand all the teachings of Scripture in terms of that motif. It is because of this unique conception of God that the doctrines of Scripture such as creation, fall, covenant, redemption, etc., take on their particular Reformed structure which speaks first and always of the glory of God.⁷⁹

Van Til sees his mission as defending the Reformed faith as expressed in the historic creeds.⁸⁰ While not every doctrine within those creeds can be proven as a transcendental necessity, Van Til's TAG is a defense of the Reformed faith in particular in the sense that TAG proves the doctrine most associated with the Reformed faith, the sovereignty of God, arguing that the only alternative to an absolutely sovereign God, one who determines whatsoever comes to pass, is pure irrationalism.

But Frame claims that there is not one center in Van Til's philosophy: "There are, of course, various doctrines that Van Til considers central or crucial to the Christian

⁷⁸ Van Til, *The New Modernism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1947), 387.

⁷⁹ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 76-77.

⁸⁰ "Now the basic structure of my thought is very simple. . . . My business is to teach Apologetics. I therefore presuppose the Reformed system of doctrine. I try to show my students that it is this system of doctrine that men need." Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 23.

system. However, these are indeed various; there are many ‘centers’!”⁸¹ He lists the historical fall, temporal creation, predestination, and the Trinity as various centers. However, each of these relate to the one issue of God being the ultimate one and many. Regarding the historical fall, Van Til says that, “There could be no evil in God; evil would have destroyed God’s self-sufficiency. Accordingly, evil must have come in by the hand of man.”⁸² For Van Til, God’s “self-sufficiency” means that God is the ultimate One and Many: “God, as self-sufficient, as the One in whom the One and the Many are equally ultimate.”⁸³ Temporal creation means that all laws (one) and facts (many) are under God’s control.⁸⁴ Predestination is true because God, as the one who determines all facts (the many) and the concepts that apply to them (the one), “has definitively interpreted every fact, including the condemnation of the lost, before the foundation of the world,” to quote Frame’s own words.⁸⁵ As I’ll explain further below, the doctrine of the “ontological Trinity” that Van Til often refers to means that the one and the many are equally ultimate in God.⁸⁶

In *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Van Til discusses several of the attributes of God. True to form, he emphasizes God’s self-sufficiency in discussing the various divine attributes. Specifically, he frames his discussion of the divine attributes in terms of defending the “originality of God,” meaning that He is the “absolute” source of

⁸¹ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 173.

⁸² Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 80.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁸⁴ See *ibid.*, 22-23, 187.

⁸⁵ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 88.

⁸⁶ Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism*, 132.

all unity and diversity in the universe, “while everything with respect to man is derivative.”⁸⁷ Some of the attributes that he discusses, like aseity, understanding, wisdom and holiness, he largely equates with God’s originality. As the origin of all that exists, God is the source of all being, knowledge and ethics, which tell us a lot about what it means for God to have these attributes, especially in contrast to secular worldviews, which don’t see being, knowledge and ethics as having their origin completely in God.

Other attributes cannot be deduced solely from God’s originality, but given that God is the origin of all unity and plurality, some implications for those attributes and how God operates will logically follow. We have already seen how God’s decision to extend grace to sinners was not necessary, which means the redemptive revelation of the Bible was not necessary; but since God is absolutely authoritative, it follows that God’s words in the Bible will necessarily be absolutely authoritative.

Van Til devotes an entire chapter to the Trinity in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*. Of course, Van Til relates the Trinity to the issue of the one and the many and why God’s existence is necessary as the precondition for rationality. He says that we “offer this triune God without apology as the only possible presupposition for the possibility of predication.”⁸⁸ Yet – and this will surprise many people – there is no instance in which Van Til argues that three is the necessary number of Persons in the Godhead to account for the intelligibility of facts.⁸⁹ God’s triune nature means that the

⁸⁷ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 205.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁸⁹ The lack of transcendental necessity for threeness in the Godhead may be why Frame is justified to have doubts about the profundity of analyzing everything in terms of triads: “How is perspectivalism useful? There are some moments when I think it is a kind of deep structure of the universe and of Bible truth. Other

one and the many are equally ultimate, but how many compose the “many” is irrelevant to the transcendental argument. Any time Van Til mentions the necessity of the ontological Trinity, his argument concerns the equal ultimacy of the one and the many, and nothing about the necessity of threeness, such as in this statement: “[T]he Christian church has in its doctrine of the Trinity not a useless super-additum, but that it forms the foundation of philosophy and theology. In the Trinity unity and plurality live in eternal harmony.”⁹⁰ Since the particular number of plural persons in the Godhead cannot be deduced from the transcendental argument, that there are three persons can only be known through Scripture.

Another example would be that God’s plan to become incarnate is not something known through natural revelation, but given the incarnation, we are bound to view it in a particular way based on the transcendental argument. The incarnation cannot be seen as God lowering Himself on the Greek scale of being, or in terms of the Kantian freedom-nature scheme. The distinction between the Creator as the eternal one-and-many and the creature as the derivative, temporal one-and-many must be maintained in the nature of the incarnate Christ, as the Chalcedon Creed teaches: “[T]he principle of unity and the principle of diversity as it finds expression in the Chalcedon creed and in the theology of the Reformers who accepted this creed, is rejected by both men in terms of the principle

times (most times) I think of it more modestly, as a pedagogical device.” John Frame, “A Primer on Perspectivalism,” (Revised May 14, 2008), http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2008Primer.htm (accessed 18 September 2010).

⁹⁰ Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism*, 132.

of unity and diversity as required by the notion of the freedom-nature scheme of modern would-be autonomous man.”⁹¹

In some “Retractions and Clarifications” Van Til says, “Apparently I have given occasion for people to think that I am speculative or philosophical first and biblical afterwards.”⁹² He wants to dispel that notion, saying, “Whatever measure of justification there may be for this charge, I would today certainly try to make it abundantly clear that I speak about the ontological trinity only because it is taught in Scripture. It is, I would repeat, the self-attesting Christ of Scripture as our absolute authority, Who must instruct us on all things.”⁹³ This may seem like a repudiation of his earlier statements giving philosophical priority to God as He is in Himself and a transcendental argument that can’t prove the number of persons in the Trinity. But we have seen the sense in which we must begin with Scripture according to Van Til, which is consistent with his point here, and that this does not negate a sense in which Van Til is philosophical first, because there is a type of priority to the transcendental argument as part of natural revelation that reveals the God who gives meaning to all facts and who provides the necessary metaphysical basis for the historical drama of redemption recorded in the Bible. Van Til’s rejection of proving a general theism first by evidence and philosophical arguments and proving Christianity second must be understood in the autonomous sense of trying to understand God and the world apart from and contrary to His absolutely authoritative revelation (as

⁹¹ Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1979 [1963]), 59: Also see Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 226.

⁹² Van Til, *Toward a Reformed Apologetics* (Scarsdale, N.Y.: Westminster Discount Book Service, 1995 [1972]), 24.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

in terms of the Great Scale of Being), and then trying to prove the truth of Scripture on the basis of that autonomous foundation.⁹⁴

This survey of what Van Til does and does not attempt to prove by his transcendental argument shows that the argument has a singular focus, on God as the self-sufficient, ultimate one and many, and this has wide-ranging implications for Christian theology. In particular, TAG has implications for the doctrine of Scripture, which allows Van Til to speak of Christian theism as a unit, a unity between natural revelation about the Creator and special revelation about redemption; but Van Til does not see TAG as sufficient to prove every detail of what the Bible reveals, or even all the doctrines necessary for Christian orthodoxy. TAG concerns the character of God revealed through His creation in terms of proving the character that God must have in order to make any fact of creation intelligible, but this natural revelation is far less than all the information provided in special revelation.

The Legitimate Role of Empirical Evidence in Van Til's Approach

That Van Til's use of the phrase "Christian theism as a unit" does not mean that he requires one argument to prove everything about Christian doctrine is also seen in Van Til endorsement of probabilistic, empirical evidence in the defense of the faith, including the use of such evidence to prove important issues like the canonicity of claims to divine revelation and the resurrection of Christ. This is in contrast to his rejection of probabilistic arguments for the existence of God in favor of the certainty of the transcendental argument:

⁹⁴ See Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 131-132 under "Block-House Methodology."

To say that the evidence, when fully and fairly considered, merely shows that God probably exists, is tantamount to saying that he does not at all exist. The God of Christianity is the God whose counsel or plan is the source of possibility. The word possibility has no possible meaning except upon the presupposition of the existence of the self-contained ontological Trinity as the source of it.⁹⁵

Not all arguments about the truth of Christian teaching are about the source of possibility in universe. By allowing probabilistic arguments in contexts other than those involving transcendental necessity, Van Til is implicitly recognizing that TAG cannot do all the apologetic work, contrary to Frame's claim. Frame notes Van Til's endorsement of empirical arguments to defend the faith.⁹⁶ But again, rather than finding a way to reconcile this with Van Til's phrase "Christian theism as a unit," Frame mentions it as an inconsistency between "Van Til's philosophical and strategic recommendations."⁹⁷

The following passage is one example of Van Til's endorsement of probabilistic, historical evidence as a supplement to the philosophical argument. Whereas Frame wants to characterize Van Til's approach as using one big apologetic gun of an argument to prove the whole of Christian theism, in this passage Van Til characterizes the "vindication of Christian theism as a whole" as warfare by an army of soldiers with a variety of weapons. The atomic-powered transcendental argument (the "philosophical argument") is the biggest, but still only one weapon among many:

We may, therefore, perhaps conceive of the vindication of Christian theism as a whole to modern warfare. There is bayonet fighting, there is rifle shooting, there

⁹⁵ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 114-15.

⁹⁶ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 181.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

are machine guns, but there are also heavy cannon and atom bombs. All the men engaged in these different kinds of fighting are mutually dependent upon one another. The rifle men could do very little if they did not fight under the protection of the heavy guns behind them. The heavy guns depend for the progress they make upon the smaller guns. So too with Christian theism. . . . Yet in defending the theistic foundation of Christianity we, in the nature of the case, deal almost exclusively with philosophical argument. In apologetics we shoot the big guns under the protection of which the definite advances in the historical field must be made. In short, there is an historical and there is a philosophical aspect to the defense of Christian theism. Evidences deals largely with the historical while apologetics deals largely with the philosophical aspect. Each has its own work to do but they should constantly be in touch with one another. If we are to defend Christian theism as a unit it must be shown that its parts are really related to one another.⁹⁸

Notice that Van Til calls for defending “Christian theism as a unit” in the immediate context of endorsing the need for historical evidence in addition to philosophic argument to defend Christian theism. At least in this case, “Christian theism as a unit” cannot mean what Frame claims that it means. The unity that Van Til is speaking of here is that any presentation of historical facts in defense of Christianity must be supported by a philosophy of fact that is consistent with and supportive of Christianity: “To interpret a fact of history involves a philosophy of history.”⁹⁹ Van Til’s main point in this paragraph

⁹⁸ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 1-2.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

is the interdependence of the different apologetic weapons. The stress on interdependence seems to have caused some students of Van Til to overlook the fact that in this description he assigns a distinct and indispensable role to historical evidence in the defense of the faith.

A clear rejection by Van Til of the idea that he intends for “the whole of Christian theism,” or the whole of Christian orthodoxy, to be proven by the transcendental argument is his statement that the resurrection of Christ must be proven by empirical evidence:

Historical apologetics is absolutely necessary and indispensable to point out that Christ arose from the grave, etc. But as long as historical apologetics works on a supposedly neutral basis it defeats its own purpose. For in that case it virtually grants the validity of the metaphysical assumptions of the unbeliever.¹⁰⁰

The job of the transcendental argument is to show the invalidity of the metaphysical assumptions of the unbeliever so that the historical evidence of Christ’s resurrection will be seen in its proper context. As Thom Notaro explains in his book *Van Til & the Use of Evidence*, a faithful Jew living at the time Jesus walked the earth would not examine the evidence for Jesus’ Messianic claims neutrally. He would presuppose the existence of the God of the Bible and interpret the empirical evidence provided by Jesus in the light of God’s previous revelation that predicted the Messiah.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 146.

¹⁰¹ Thom Notaro, *Van Til & the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 109-123.

Van Til also discusses the necessary role of several empirical tests for proving the canonicity of a claim to revelation. In *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* Van Til lists the following tests for canonicity: Consistency with previous revelation, fulfillment of prophecy, theophany (which he equates with the morality of the prophet's life), and miracles.¹⁰² Except for the first one, these largely involve empirical investigation. Van Til points out that each of these three empirical tests would be incomplete in itself because each one could true of a false prophecy.¹⁰³ Although failure of a prediction to come true proves that a prophecy is false (Deut 18:21–22), false prophets can perform miracles (apparent ones at least) and have predictions come to pass: “[I]f the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, ‘Let us follow other gods’ (gods you have not known) ‘and let us worship them,’ you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer.” (Deut 13:2–3). Likewise, prophets usually exhibited godly lives, but Van Til points out there is the case of the lying prophet who later spoke a true prophecy (1 Kgs 13).¹⁰⁴ Consequently, “All of this shows clearly that prophecy must be considered as a body.”¹⁰⁵ These tests are “mutually corroborative.”¹⁰⁶

In the legal field this is often referred to as a “totality of the circumstances test.” An example of this kind of test is the determination of where you are legally domiciled. It usually involves a number of different sources of evidence: where you get you mail,

¹⁰² Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 128-29. Also see Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 123.

¹⁰³ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 128-29.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

the address on your drivers license, where you live most of the year, the geographical area of your employment, the location of items of sentimental value, and many more. One area of evidence might indicate one place of domicile, while other pieces of evidence would indicate another place.

In contrast to the certainty that Van Til claims for the transcendental argument, these tests of canonicity involve uncertainty, especially at the beginning: “As far as the immediate appearance of the matter was concerned it was not always possible to distinguish clearly the true from the false.”¹⁰⁷ But as evidence built up from the various mutually corroborative tests, “these tests would increase in clarity as time went on.”¹⁰⁸

In a rare case of Van Til failing to mention the transcendental issues involved in a philosophical concept, he says in this discussion that the test of new prophecies being logically consistent with previous prophecy is “a sufficient safeguard against such apparently true but really false prophecy.”¹⁰⁹ But this must be qualified by insights that Van Til makes in other places regarding the use of the law of contradiction. Van Til teaches that there can be unresolvable apparent contradictions in Scripture.¹¹⁰ So not even logical consistency is a self-sufficient test. It would have to be used in corroboration with the other three tests.

The Westminster Confession of Faith sets forth various proofs for the truth of Scripture:

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 129.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 128.

¹¹⁰ See Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace & the Gospel* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 9, 67, 165.

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.¹¹¹

One would expect Van Til to reject these multiple tests if Frame's characterization of him were true, but all are compatible with Van Til's apologetic so long as they are seen as tests based on the presuppositions of the Christian theistic worldview. Van Til explicitly endorses this section of the Westminster Confession: "The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks eloquently of the heavenly character, the consent of all the parts, etc., of Scripture."¹¹²

Van Til also accepts probability rather than absolute certainty in determining the accurate transmission of the Scriptures:

That the Bible is the Word of God pertains only to the original autographs. The versions and translations may fairly be said to be faithful reproductions of the autographs. But they cannot be said to be exact replicas of them. . . . Do we not in any case have to rely on that which we think is *generally* reliable without its being *absolutely* infallible? In reply to this objection the following remarks are in order. There would be no *reasonably reliable* method of identifying the Word of God in

¹¹¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1, section 5.

¹¹² Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 31; also see 33-34.

human history unless human history itself is controlled by God. . . . [I]t is not a matter of great worry if the transmissions are not altogether accurate reproductions of the originals. Then the very idea of “substantial accuracy” or “essential reliability” has its foundation in the complete control of history by God. Then it is proper and meaningful to say that God in his providence has provided for the essentially accurate transmission of the words of the original.¹¹³

While a God that completely controls history necessarily exists as the precondition for rationality, that necessity does not apply to the accurate transmission of every one of His words through the course of history.

In their book *Faith Has Its Reasons* Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman cite the following passage as proof that Van Til “flatly rejected” probabilistic, empirical evidence in apologetics:¹¹⁴

Over against this contention that theoretically any hypothesis is as relevant as any other, we place the Christian position which says that no hypotheses which exclude the necessary self-existence of the triune God of Scripture can be relevant to any group of facts. There is only one absolutely true explanation of every fact and of every group of facts in the universe. God has this absolutely true explanation of every fact. Accordingly, the various hypotheses that are to be relevant to the explanation of phenomena must be consistent with this fundamental presupposition. *God’s self-existence is the presupposition of the*

¹¹³ Ibid., 27-28, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁴ Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith* (Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster, 2006), 476.

relevancy of any hypothesis. If one should seek to explain the claim of the disciples of Jesus that their Master's body was raised from the tomb by offering the hypothesis of hallucination, we reply that the hypothesis is irrelevant. Our further study of the factual evidence in the matter is no more than a corroboration of our assertion of the irrelevancy of such an hypothesis.¹¹⁵

We have seen where Van Til denies that Christ's resurrection can be deduced from the transcendental necessity of God's self-existence, but here Van Til is claiming that somehow the hallucination explanation of the resurrection excludes "the necessary self-existence of the triune God of Scripture." A possible resolution might be found in observing that, in context, Van Til is only speaking about those who reject the self-existent God and the Scriptures that provide the "absolutely true explanation of every fact" and the only way that sinful men come to acknowledge the self-existent God. He does not have in mind someone looking at the evidence in a God-honoring way – comparing Christ's words and deeds to the Old Testament predictions about the Messiah. So Van Til may be saying that, given the evidence for the resurrection and the Scriptural interpretation of what would happen when the Messiah came, the hallucination explanation should not be considered as a relevant hypothesis to explain the evidence. Nevertheless, if Van Til is contradicting his other statements that would deny that the resurrection could be deduced from the absolute nature of God, then this statement does not epitomize Van Til's thought on the matter, but is the exception to what I have shown to be a fairly well-thought-out program of apologetics that requires empirical investigation into Christ's resurrection.

¹¹⁵ Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences*, 56-57, emphasis in original.

Although the evidence for Van Til's endorsement of empirical evidence in defense of the faith is fairly strong, Frame is not the only Vantillian to fail to give it the place that it deserves in Van Til's thought. There is no more formidable defender of Van Til than Greg Bahnsen. Bahnsen wrote an essay called "The Impropriety of Evidentially Arguing for the Resurrection."¹¹⁶ The title is often taken to mean that it is always improper to evidentially argue for the resurrection. However, the argument in his essay is mainly that empirical evidence is not religiously neutral and should not be presented as such by the Christian apologist, which is a position that is completely consistent with what I have argued in this essay. Bahnsen says that "there are many reasons why the evidentialist's building a case for Christianity upon neutral ground with the unbeliever ought to be avoided."¹¹⁷ The key word here is "neutral." There can be no religiously neutral ground when there is a God who claims all ground as His. Yet, there is no way that those who walked with Jesus would have known that He was the Messiah of God simply by presupposing it. Others could, and did, claim to be Messiahs. Christ offered empirical evidence for His messianic claims – the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, the miracles that He performed, and His own predictions that came true.¹¹⁸ A

¹¹⁶ Greg Bahnsen, "The Impropriety of Evidentially Arguing for the Resurrection," *Synapse II* (Westminster Seminary, January, 1972), <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/PA003.htm> (accessed 11 September 2010).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Christ's resurrection may have been his most important prediction to come true, but the most publically verifiable one was His prediction that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed within one generation – about 40 years later (Matt 23:36; Matt 24:1-3, 34). In fact the Roman army did just that in A.D. 70. See James B. Jordan, *The Handwriting on the Wall: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Powder Springs,

Vantillian who rejects such empirical proofs of Christ's messianic claims is an obscurantist and unfaithful to Scripture.

Unfortunately Bahnsen has led many Vantillians in that direction to a degree. The only legitimate use of empirical evidence that Bahnsen offers in his essay is that “we may momentarily silence the belligerent claim of the skeptic by showing that even on his tacit assumptions the resurrection is not a sheer impossibility (as evidence would indicate).”¹¹⁹ He fails to indicate any positive use of evidence on the basis of Christian theistic assumptions. Bahnsen cites Jesus' exposition of what “all the prophets have spoken” (Luke 24:25) to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus as an example of apologetics relying on the word of God “rather than offering them compelling evidence of the resurrection.”¹²⁰ But the conversation began with the disciples saying that they were bewildered at finding Jesus' tomb empty (Luke 24:22-24), therefore a better explanation of this scene than pitting Scripture against empirical evidence is that Jesus was showing them the correct interpretation of the empirical evidence that they had already seen.

In his posthumous magnum opus on Van Til, Bahnsen defends the legitimacy of using historical evidence in apologetics and even quotes Van Til's statement that “Historical apologetics is absolutely necessary and indispensable to point out that Christ

Ga.: American Vision, 2007), 341-42; and N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), chapter 8.

¹¹⁹ Greg Bahnsen, “The Impropriety of Evidentially Arguing for the Resurrection.”

¹²⁰ Ibid.

arose from the grave, etc.”¹²¹ But Bahnsen’s one attempt to explain how the use of empirical evidence integrates with Van Til’s transcendental argument is this analogy: The presentation of empirical evidence to defend Christianity is like watching a replay of a dramatic sports event after it happens.¹²² This hardly gives empirical evidence the “absolutely necessary and indispensable” role that Van Til gives it. Proving the resurrection of Christ by empirical evidence is not merely creating a less vivid imitation of the “real” argument – the transcendental argument. The two arguments have two distinct and essential functions. TAG mainly concerns proving the existence of the concrete universal God, and the empirical arguments mainly concern proof that the presupposed God has intervened extraordinarily at particular points in history.

The two most well-known expositors of Van Til have adopted an unfortunate version of the form/matter scheme in their apologetic methodology. Frame has rejected the One in favor of the Many in arguing for the existence of God. He rejects a single, certain, atomic-powered argument for the existence of God in favor of a multitude of probabilistic arguments with a transcendental goal of showing the impossibility of the contrary that’s never completely achieved. Bahnsen rejects any empirical, probabilistic arguments in defense of Christianity, even if the issue is not the existence of God, except as those arguments are seen as pale reflections of the one transcendental argument, like the shadows on the wall of Plato’s cave produced by the light of the Good outside the cave. Van Til’s actual apologetic program allows for both the One and the Many in

¹²¹ Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1998), 634-48, quoting Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 146.

¹²² Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, p. 645 n.200.

integration with each other in the apologetic task of proving the whole of Christian theism, with the one transcendental argument proving the existence of God, and a multitude of empirical arguments proving whether this transcendently-necessary God has spoken through a person at a certain point in history.

Boa and Bowman commend Frame's "integrative approach" of using both TAG and empirical evidence in the defense of Christianity.¹²³ I believe I have shown that the most reasonable interpretation of Van Til is that Van Tillian apologetics does not need to be integrated with evidential apologetics because Van Til himself allowed an essential role for evidential apologetics, when done the right way. But since as Christians we don't worship any mere man, a more important question is what relationship TAG should have to evidential apologetics, regardless of what Van Til taught. Even if I have misinterpreted Van Til's meaning to "Christian theism as a unit" and Frame is right about how Van Til used the phrase, isn't the relationship between TAG and empirical evidence that I have defended the most reasonable one to adopt?

Inter-systemic and Intra-systemic Responses to False Faiths

Many people ask how Van Til's approach to apologetics can deal with another religion like Islam. The concern is that Islam seems to teach an absolute God, so if Van Til's argument only deals with those who reject an absolute God, how would he be able to reject Islam? What I have argued above about the scope and limits of TAG provides the tools to answer this question.

¹²³ Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 476.

One approach is to show how Islam's Allah is not really absolute. In a rare mentions of Islam, Van Til says that the "ethical religions" like "Mohammedanism" do not truly teach an absolute God: "Yet in no case is the moral law conceived as proceeding with inviolable authority from an absolute God."¹²⁴ The "ethical religions" do not require man to "look nowhere else for his joy and peace" than to God, "who can in no sense tolerate sin."¹²⁵ Van Til seems to be saying that these religions view salvation as a product of man's efforts, rather than God's grace, and man's efforts are always corrupt in some way, so they can never achieve the perfect righteousness that an absolute God must require.¹²⁶

But even if there is no transcendental challenge to be made against Islam, it can be judged like a claim to revelation within the Christian worldview – by consistency with previous revelation and empirical evidence of miracles, fulfilled prophecies, etc. We might say that both of these approaches are "presuppositional," but we need to distinguish between two senses of "presuppositional": 1) An inter-systemic critique in which the presuppositions of the opposing belief system are different from Christian theism, which involves showing how their presuppositions reduce to absurdity by

¹²⁴ Cornelius Van Til, "The Ten Commandments," from *The Works of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. Eric Sigward; CD-ROM; New York: Labels Army Co., 1997).

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Also see, Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 81-83, and Greg Bahnsen, "Presuppositional Reasoning with False Faiths" *Penpoint* VII:2 (Feb./Mar., 1996),

<http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pa208.htm>, (accessed 11 September 2010). In *Christ and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1968), Van Til argues that Judaism undermines the absoluteness of God by making God's law an empty form to be filled by the evolving wisdom of autonomous man.

undermining the possibility of rationality; and 2) an intra-systemic critique in which the other belief system presents itself as a new revelation adding itself to the Biblical canon, in which case the presupposition of the absoluteness of God and other doctrines entailed by it are assumed to be true, at least for the sake of the argument.¹²⁷ With Islam and other religions that claim a biblical origin, both types of critiques are legitimate options.

“Fristianity” is a hypothetical challenge to Van Til’s claim about the transcendental argument proving the “impossibility of the contrary.”¹²⁸ It originated in a Van Til discussion list in 1998 in a post by David Byron. He said,

The question, then, is what to make of the Fristian Theist, who appeals to authoritative revelation (in which the apparent inconsistencies are masked by an appeal to mystery) to provide a philosophical account that is similar to Christian Theism in many respects, but different in some key ones--say, it propounds a dual godhead rather than a triune one, and allows for human sacrifice and has no sabbath. Simply asking where such a religion comes from is inadequate, since the

¹²⁷ Greg Bahnsen made such a distinction when he said, “if they can answer the problem about rationalism at all, they are doing so because they are relying on the Bible; and that may be true about Islam, Judaism, and some forms of the cults. But to the degree they do that, what are they doing? They are *heretically* following the Bible; that is, they are picking and choosing, distorting and all that. And consequently the way you reason with them is on the premise of the Bible.” “Dialectic Tensions” in *The Philosophy of Christianity* audio lectures, GB222.

¹²⁸ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 205, 206, 223.

person propounding it can always claim to be its prophetic conduit from the transcendent realm.¹²⁹

By design, the Fristian religion shares all of the doctrines of Christianity that can be proven by Van Til's transcendental argument, so the inter-systemic critique would be of no use to distinguish the two. The question this raises is how can Van Til claim to prove the "impossibility of the contrary"¹³⁰ by TAG if the argument can't exclude a heterodox religion like Fristianity? Again, the approach to Van Til's apologetic that I have defended in this essay provides the tools to answer this question.

The last sentence in David Byron's quote above is false according to what we have already seen from the tests that Van Til gives for canonicity. Just because someone claims to be a "prophetic conduit from the transcendent realm" does not exclude the alleged revelation from the intra-systemic tests that include empirical tests about "where such a religion comes from." Like Fristianity, or more so, the false prophecy by Hananiah in Jeremiah 28 has all the trappings of a true prophecy: He delivers it from God's temple and neither God's sovereignty nor anything entailed by it are denied in the false prophecy. God's prophet Jeremiah is even willing to consider Hananiah's words to be from the Lord: "Amen! May the LORD do so! May the LORD fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the LORD's house and all the exiles back to

¹²⁹ David Byron, <http://www.baroquepotion.com/vantil/archive-Feb-1998/msg00042.html>, (Feb. 15, 1998) (accessed 11 September 2010). For an overview of some posts related to the issue, see David Byron, <http://www.baroquepotion.com/vantil/archive-Aug-2001/msg00015.html> (Aug. 8, 2001) (accessed 11 September 2010).

¹³⁰ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 205.

this place from Babylon” (Jer 28:6). But Jeremiah also warns about the possibility that historical events could prove the prophecy to be false: “But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD only if his prediction comes true” (Jer 28:9). God was so angered by the false prophecy that he didn’t leave the people of God waiting for two years to see if the Babylonians would bring the temple articles and the exiles back to Israel. God vigorously defended the integrity of His word by giving Jeremiah a predictive prophecy for Hananiah that was fulfilled within two months: “This is what the LORD says: 'I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the LORD.' In the seventh month of that same year, Hananiah the prophet died” (Jer 28:16-17).

Since there can be only one absolute, both Christianity and Frisianity could not both be true. The false one would have to invent historical events to include in its false Bible, the falsity of which would be exposed through empirical investigation. Like with the false prophet Hananiah, God would vigorously defend his true revelation by leading His sheep to discover the relevant empirical evidence so that His sheep would hear His voice and not the voice of a thief.

Furthermore, Frisianity would share the Christian view about the depravity of man, and that has an important implication about where the Frisian revelation could come from. Van Til says,

Nowhere else in human literature, we believe, is the concept of an absolute God presented. And this fact is once more intimately related to the fact that nowhere else is there a conception of sin, such as that presented in the Bible. According to

the Bible, sin has set man at enmity against God. Consequently it has been man's endeavor to get away from the idea of God, that is, a truly absolute God.¹³¹

Man's hatred of an absolute God means that man would not invent a religion like Frisianity in historic independence of the true revelation. Frisianity would have to be a fraudulent imitation of Christianity that someone copied from the Bible. It would be like other religions that claim to have their origin in Biblical revelation, like Islam, Mormonism, and Jehovah's Witnesses, except that Frisianity tries to completely hide its dependence on the Bible. But God would not let the evidence remain hidden.

An interesting issue that David Byron raises with a two-person Godhead for Frisianity is whether Van Til's TAG proves a three-person Godhead. Although Van Til often talks about the transcendental necessity of the "ontological trinity," we've seen that his argument is that the one and the many must be equally ultimate in God; and a specific number of manyness does not add anything to the argument.

So what does this mean for the "impossibility of the contrary" claim? It means that all the possibilities are covered for those doctrines that are necessary to account for rationality, which I understand to be the issue of whether the one and the many are eternally related, or its negation – that the one and the many are originally in abstraction from each other.¹³² If the negation is false, the positive proposition must be true, and there are no other possible options for that issue. The impossibility of the contrary does

¹³¹ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 11. Also see Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 61.

¹³² See Michel H. Warren, Jr., "Christian Civilization is the Only Civilization, In a Sense, of Course," <http://www.christianciv.com/ChristCivEssay.htm> (accessed 11 September 2010).

not apply to every doctrine of Christian orthodoxy, since not every one of them can be deduced from the transcendently necessary proposition.

Since the “impossibility of the contrary” does not exclude a heterodox religion like Frisianity, should Van Til claim that he proves “Christian theism” by demonstrating the “impossibility of the contrary?” I have shown how Van Til uses the phrase “Christian theism” to refer to the limited doctrines of an absolute God and an absolute Scripture. Maybe someone can come up with a different phrase that explains more precisely what is proved by TAG. But regardless of the name, even with its limits, TAG serves as an essential, “atomic-powered” weapon, though not the only weapon, in the arsenal of the Christian apologist.

In summary, Van Til’s arguments against attempting to prove “that” God exists without proving “what” kind of God exists and his demand that apologists defend “Christian theism as a unit” are not demands that all the doctrines of Christian theism be proved by a single argument. They relate to the transcendental argument that the one and the many are equally ultimate in God, rather than God being an empty abstraction and facts being isolated particulars. Any fact in nature reveals a concrete universal God in terms of the argument that the intelligibility of any fact depends on the existence of a concrete universal God. Thus TAG is a form of natural revelation.

But as Protestants have traditionally held, the Bible reveals much more about God than is revealed through nature, especially concerning the means of redemption.

Therefore all the doctrines of Christian orthodoxy cannot be deduced from the attributes of God proved by the transcendental argument. To determine whether any particular event in history is a special communication from God, TAG is insufficient and empirical,

probabilistic arguments become necessary. Also, after the Fall, man will not acknowledge God's revelation through nature without being confronted by the special, redemptive revelation of the Bible. This makes TAG dependent on the Bible in a sense.

On the other hand, the empirical arguments in defense of the Bible depend on TAG. Empirical arguments require the apologist to presuppose the existence of the God proven by TAG, because TAG is a philosophy of fact that proves that no facts can be intelligible unless this type of God exists. The type of God proved by TAG is a God with absolute authority. As the Ultimate One and Many who determines the relationships between all created universals and particulars, God's revelation, whether through nature or Scripture, is absolutely authoritative regarding the interpretation of all facts. The Bible's absolute authority is derived from God's absolute authority, thus the argument for the nature of the Bible's authority is TAG, even though TAG is not sufficient to prove all of the Bible's content. Van Til's demand for certainty regarding God's existence has implications for the defense of the Bible, yet he allows probabilistic, empirical arguments in defense of the Bible in other respects. These two strategies are not in conflict, but constitute an apologetic program of multiple types of arguments that operate in mutual dependence and support.