

THE ROLE AND USE OF EVIDENCE IN REFORMED PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

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To César Moreno Pérez, my Daddy, who first
modeled to me a life of faith seeking

IV. POSITIVE APOLOGETICS.

Hereafter, we want to apply the understanding gained above as our norm for the practice of the task of apologetics. According to one possible criteria of classification, there are two major approaches in apologetics: positive and negative.ⁱ

Following these classifications, positive apologetics is the attempt to provide reasons that support the faith for people that would believe provided that they had such reasons.ⁱⁱ Examples of this would typically be the so-called “classical” arguments for the existence of God. However, if my understanding of the considerations reviewed in the preceding section is correct (particularly that of the self-attestation of the Word of God), there seems to be no room for this kind of apologetic.ⁱⁱⁱ If, as noted above, the Word of God is self-attested, it does not call for further “strengthening,” “support” or positive proof.

Notwithstanding the above, I do not mean to say that there is no room for the apologist, the Christian philosopher or the theologian, to explicate and articulate the truth so that it is not rejected, neglected or attacked due to misunderstandings or misrepresentations.^{iv} Evidence can have a heuristic value, serving to explicate and clarify what we can validly know and believe (presuppose) without it.^v This makes room for a philosophy of religion or “natural theology” (in a restricted sense) which is dependant on and subordinate to, but at the same time supplementary of, the specially revealed theology *stricto sensu*.^{vi}

Having said this, we are able to realize that the aforementioned objection to “positive apologetics” (very similar to Plantinga’s objection to “natural theology”) is leveled against the deductive type of arguments. That is, against the arguments that, starting from independent premises, attempt “to drive us inescapably to the conclusion that God exists,”^{vii} or to demonstrate other aspects of the Christian belief. Yet, there are also inductive arguments which can validly start from the assumption that the Christian worldview is true (presuppositionalism) and show that it is the one which best explains the facts or variables provided by evidence.^{viii}

This takes us back to the self-attestation of the Scriptures. It is remarkable to realize that, whether unconsciously or unwillingly, even the enemies of Christianity

actually have to battle against the basic presuppositions of the Christian worldview by proposing “alternative explanations.” This is an evidence of the reality and strength of the general revelation, or even of the *sensus divinitatis* imprinted in every man.^{ix} The Christian belief is so rooted in and tied to the objective reality that it cannot be easily escaped. Denying it requires argumentation for an alternative explanation of the facts. In this, the opponent is challenged to see if his worldview better explains the objective reality. Thus, the opponent enters the arena of inductive argumentation. It is in this inductive approach (and only in this) that Van Til’s regard of presupposition as a good evidence is accurate. In the practice of law in the courts of justice, such an evidence is called “circumstantial evidence.” Interestingly enough, and unlike in philosophy, in the courts this evidence is regarded as the “queen evidence.”^x In this setting, the only burden for the holder of the Christian worldview, in a valid “positive apologetic,” is to show how his presupposed worldview matches and explains the observable facts better than any other worldview. That is, the Christian apologist need only show that, consistently with the guidelines reviewed in the preceding section, the truth of God’s revelation is established by presenting the Word of God as articulately and clearly as possible, claiming every single corner of reality to the lordship of Yahweh by means of “seeing it” through the Christian worldview.

The question remains concerning the mere probability that an inductive argument can afford. We have already mentioned the logical problems with a deductive argument. In the aforementioned book, Richard Swinburn presents a comprehensive case for the strength of probabilistic conclusions. I would add only that a valid deductive conclusion closes a discussion since there is only one possible valid inference. An inductive conclusion, by its nature, cannot close the discussion (as definite and true as it might be!). It is “formally” open to alternative explanations. However, once the Christian presents his case, the burden of the proof is put on his opponent. In order rationally to reject the Christian case, the opponent needs to produce an explanation that rules out the Christian one or better explains reality. Unless and until he is able to do that, the opponent is not justified in his rejection of the Christian faith.

V. NEGATIVE APOLOGETICS.

The preceding paragraph reminds us, once again, that the task of apologetics is developed in the setting of a warfare: the Word of God versus the words of men (many different words from many different men). We have said that once the Christian worldview is shown to explain the objective reality better, the burden of the proof is put on the non-Christian. In exchange, the non-Christian attacks the Christian belief by trying to show that it is not as reasonable as the Christian presupposes it is. As mentioned earlier, one of the first and basic attacks is precisely to the rationality of presupposing the Christian belief.^{xi} But the attacks do not stop there. In this clash of worldviews, the worldviews contending against the Christian worldview will try to undermine each and every imaginable element of it, from the existence of God to the validity of the Christian experience, passing through the doctrines of special creation (versus evolutionism), the flood, as well as the historical reliability of the Scriptures and their inerrancy.

According to the above-mentioned classification, the other kind of apologetics is “negative.” The task of negative apologetics is, standing on the presupposition of the Christian beliefs, “to show that apparent reasons against theistic belief ... are not as strong as they appear, that they will not stand up under careful scrutiny and so on.”^{xii} To use some imagery, the role of “positive-inductive” apologetics is to build a strong fortress primarily with the specially revealed truth. On the other hand, the role of “negative apologetics” is to defend this fortress, to resist the attacks that attempt to destroy it. Of course, the success of the defense is a consequence of the strength of the fortress. Still, the defensive armies need to know how to take advantage of the strength of the fortress. The first is the role of systematic theology and philosophy of religion.^{xiii} The second is to be found, however, in every corner of the theological endeavor. From the “biblical studies” that need to deal with the theses advanced by the historico-critical schools, to the philosophy of religion or systematic theology that has to deal with contending concepts of God,^{xiv} the Trinity, the person of Christ, salvation, or the human person.

Nicholas Wolterstorff has said that the Reformed tradition has “characteristically gone on the attack against objections to Christianity.”^{xv} This can be characterized by the following quotes from Calvin and Bavinck. John Calvin wrote:

If I were struggling against the most crafty sort of despisers of God, who seek to appear shrewd and witty in disparaging Scripture, I am confident it would not be difficult for me to silence their clamorous voices. And if it were a useful labor to refute their cavils, I would with no great trouble shatter the boasts they mutter in their lurking places.^{xvi}

Herman Bavinck:

When speaking with an unbeliever, a believer cannot be content to assert: I believe and therefore it is true. He must seek grounds, not for his own faith, but to make it more acceptable to the outsider, to silence criticism, and remove all excuses for unbelief. Apologetics is the fruit, never the root, of faith.^{xvii}

When Bavinck writes about making our faith “acceptable” to the outsider, I do not think he means to make it attractive or to accommodate it to his standards, criteria or presuppositional framework. Because of the context, I think Bavinck means to show the unbeliever (the “outsider”) that he holds beliefs upon similar justifications (like Plantinga’s example of other minds). But, back to the whole quotation, what is important to notice is that Bavinck’s apologetics are clearly aimed to silence criticism in the first place, and to remove at least some excuses for unbelief (negative apologetics). They are not to be a ground for his own belief, but a result of his faith.

However, this does not mean that this kind of approach is limited to the Reformed-presuppositional tradition. Two examples of this kind of approach in non-Reformed “evidentialists” are the following:

- Josh McDowell, in *The Resurrection Factor*,^{xviii} presupposes the biblical data concerning the resurrection (including the resurrection itself), and defends this presupposition from the naturalistic attempts to offer an alternative explanation to the facts of reality.
- Craig Blomberg, in *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*,^{xix} assumes the truth of the Christian beliefs and states, “Much scepticism about the gospels’ reliability stems from faulty methods used in analyzing the gospels or from faulty presuppositions on which those methods depend.”^{xx} Throughout the book, he shows how the alternative views proposed are flawed and are not worthy of credit. Furthermore, he devotes the last chapter to questions on historical method, where he writes under the heading “The burden of the proof” the following words:

Once one accepts that the gospels reflect attempts to write reliable history or biography, however theological or stylized its presentation may be, then one must immediately recognize an important presupposition which guides most historians in their work. Unless there is good reason for believing otherwise, one will assume that a given detail in the work of a particular historian is factual. This method places the burden of proof squarely on the person who would doubt the reliability of a given portion of the text.^{xxi}

VI. OFFENSIVE APOLOGETICS.

Beyond the classifications used up to this point, I want to suggest that there is one further approach to apologetics which is more consistent with the biblical theme of holy war and which uses evidence in a manner consistent with the biblical teachings held by the Reformed presuppositional tradition. In the preceding numeral, we used the imagery of a solid fortress and a guard defending against the attacks trying to undermine the fortress. Following the imagery, I want to suggest that evidence can and should be used to attack the heart of the contending worldviews. Almost three decades ago, Josh McDowell wrote that the best defense is a good offense,^{xxii} and there is a lot of truth to this. More recently J. P. Moreland published a text on apologetics with a title (*Scaling the Secular City*) that reflects this same idea, as it is made clear by the reference to Proverbs 21:22 at the beginning of the book:

A wise man scales the city of the mighty
And brings down the stronghold in which they trust.

Without offensive apologetics, negative apologetics is incomplete. It is not enough just to show that the attacks against the Christian belief are not successful. It is necessary to go to the sources of such attacks and to demolish them. This is a proactive approach that takes the initiative to attack instead of just waiting to react to the attacks. In doing that, the Christian warrior of the Word is able, in a very real sense, to follow Paul’s model, “casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”^{xxiii}

Paul himself gave an example of this in Mars Hill. He not only set forth the truth of the specially revealed Word of God, showing that it was the best explanation for the phenomena of which the Athenians were already aware, but he first attacked the Athenians view. In fact, he made fun of it by simply using common sense (Acts 17:24-25)! This is also the approach that we find in the stage of transition of the prophet Elijah, in his polemic against the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18).

It is important to make clear that this offensive apologetic is to be aimed not at isolated particular “arguments” against Christianity. We need to identify and attack the cornerstone of the contending worldview. The clearest example for us in our western societies would be naturalism.

Examples of this kind of apologetic have already come both from Reformed and non-Reformed scholars, and also from both presuppositionalists and evidentialists:

Reformed presuppositionalists:

- Dr. Ronald H. Nash, in his book *Life's Ultimate Questions*, devotes a chapter to attacking the postmodernist denigration of truth, and several recurring sections to attacking naturalism.
- Alvin Plantinga's efforts have been more oriented to the merely negative apologetic and to the development of a Christian epistemology. However, he has also done offensive apologetics. An example of this is his article “Is Naturalism Irrational?”^{xxiv} which debunks naturalism quite successfully.

Reformed non-presuppositionalist:

- R. C. Sproul, the “honorary presuppositionalist,” wrote a book several years ago entitled *The Psychology of Atheism*, recently re-published under the title *If There's a God, Why Are There Atheists?*^{xxv} This is an interesting exercise in negative apologetics in which Dr. Sproul responds to the attacks coming from different naturalistic-humanistic theories against religious belief. However, the exercise also becomes an attack, returning against themselves the opponents' arguments and showing the folly of their views. Interestingly enough, Dr. Sproul himself almost apologizes in the preface for this not being “a comprehensive defense of the Christian faith” because it does not provide evidence for the existence of God (positive apologetics). However, this original contribution to the actual environment of the present culture is much more valuable than what a recapitulation of old arguments could be.

Another valuable contribution by Dr. Sproul is his book on philosophy of science entitled *Not a Chance: The Myth of Chance in Modern Science and Cosmology*.^{xxvi} Although the argument has a close resemblance with some varieties of the cosmological argument, it is important to notice that the book is not aimed to demonstrate the existence of God, but to disprove an essential element of the major

alternative view in the western world: naturalism and its mythological view of chance.

This kind of apologetic does not constitute a direct argument for the existence of God. What it does is to nullify the contending alternative, thus setting apart God as Lord over all. This destroys the excuses which the fallen man uses to suppress the *sensus divinitatis* in him, and if it does not produce conviction, repentance and conversion, it at least leaves him naked without excuse for his rebellion, and condemns him in the tribunal of his own conscience. This can, by God's grace, trigger in an individual the forming mechanism of belief in the Christian faith.

Non-Reformed, non-presuppositionalists:

- J. P. Moreland. We have already mentioned his grasp of offensive apologetics as it is evidenced by the title of his book *Scaling the Secular City*. However, Dr. Moreland does not follow this line, moving rather within the realm of "positive inductive apologetics."^{xxvii} However, in the book of reference, this subtle understanding of "holy war" is reflected in the introduction where, in explaining the importance of engaging in apologetics, he says that "apologetics can focus attention on some of those secular structures, call them into question, and release the self to view the world in a way more compatible with a Christian worldview."^{xxviii}

Another interesting contribution from Dr. Moreland that can be characterized as offensive apologetics is his *Christianity and the Nature of Science: A Philosophical Investigation*.^{xxix} This book is a polemic against the epistemological side of naturalism, namely, "scientific imperialism" or "scientism." In it he goes one step forward in order to nullify the source of many attacks to the Christian faith, rather than waiting for those attacks to come and then trying to respond to each of them separately. In doing this, he also opens the door for the Christian worldview to enter the scene and to make its voice sound in the arena of ideas.

- Phillip E. Johnson is one who, being neither a philosopher nor a theologian but a lawyer, has focused his work in terms of offensive apologetics. A simple review of the titles of his books makes that obvious: *Darwin on Trial*; *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education*; and *Objection Sustained*. His book against evolutionism, *Darwin on Trial*,^{xxx} serves as a good example. In that book, Johnson is not trying to prove special creation. He is going out to slaughter naturalism and its son evolutionism, precisely in the area in which naturalism and evolutionism attempt to discredit the Christian worldview. In a sense, he is not defending the Christian worldview, since the area to be defended is still the subject of internal debate for its articulation,^{xxxi} yet that does not stop him from waging war against the enemy. Holding for himself the presupposition that the Christian worldview is true,^{xxxii} he has a standing point to combat a contending worldview.

VII. CONCLUSION.

Evidence as a direct, positive, demonstrative tool, not merely as a heuristic or complementary tool (as in “positive inductive apologetics”), has no room in vertical argumentation (from immanent to transcendent). The transcendent God has already worked his way down to make himself present. However, in the horizontal level, evidence is in its jurisdiction and, duly submitted to the Lordship of Yahweh, can militate in the holy war against unbelief, demonstrating the folly of these creaturely attacks against God. This holy war pits the City of God with the Word of God against the city of man and the word of man.

It is now my desire to encourage my fellow Reformed presuppositional apologists to engage in offensive apologetics. I urge them to claim the use of evidence to the Lordship of our God, both developing it and taking advantage of the work already done by our fellow brothers in Christ, giving it the proper scriptural focus and use, and putting it to the service of the kingdom in order to fight the good fight, the holy war, until the King appears to consummate his victory.

Soli Deo Gloria

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ⁱ Cf. George I. Mavrodes, “Jerusalem and Athens Revisited,” in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*, op. cit., pp. 192-217; and Nash, *Faith & Reason*, op. cit., pp. 14-18.

ⁱⁱ Mavrodes, op. cit., p. 197.

ⁱⁱⁱ I grant that my understanding of this could be mistaken.

^{iv} In the last of a series of lectures published under the title *Christian Evidence*, the late Reuben A. Torrey talks about the causes of incredulity and, among them, a misunderstanding or ignorance of what the true Christian faith is. Someone’s apparent rejection of Christianity may be the rejection of a doctrine or teaching that does not really pertain to the Christian faith. Therefore, the task of the apologist in such cases is to establish the truth by articulating it properly, but not really to defend it.

^v J. P. Moreland says that “apologetics encourages a life of faith seeking understanding. Further, apologetics can actually encourage spiritual growth. A person’s ability to grow in Christ is in some measure dependent on what that person is able to see in the Scriptures and the world around him. Some people cannot see patterns in a great work of art even though they are staring at the canvas, because they have not been trained to see those patterns. Similarly, some people cannot see God at work in the world or understand and appropriate certain features of the Bible because they have not been trained to see those patterns. Instead, they view the world through secular glasses. Their subconscious structures cause them to interpret events and statements in ways which stifle growth” (*Scaling the Secular City*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987; p. 12). It is interesting to notice that in this quotation Dr. Moreland (who would not be considered a presuppositionalist) is assuming an inductive presuppositional approach.

^{vi} Here we are not talking of the kind of natural theology to which Plantinga would refer when he talks about the Reformed objection to natural theology (which would be a rather Thomistic-Aristotelian one). Examples of what I mean are some of the issues addressed in Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983; although this kind of work also fits into a category that will be commented on later. Furthermore, this paper itself is a modest attempt of the kind of philosophy of religion about which I am speaking. The fact that it is not an “autonomous” natural theology can be seen in that the Christian involved in this task (when he is faithful and responsible) makes sure that his arguments do not conflict with the doctrinal standards he has gotten through special revelation.

^{vii} Nash, *Faith...*, op. cit., p. 117.

^{viii} For more on inductive arguments see Richard Swinburn, *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979; (chapter 1). It is argued that the switch from a deductive to an inductive method is not a smart move since one loses logical certainty. Provided that it will be further explained later, one needs to realize that logical certainty is limited to the realm of abstract theory: math, geometry and logic. Additionally there are logical problems with an argument that starts from immanent premises to arrive to a transcendent conclusion. On the other hand, if one adopts a presuppositional approach with a deductive method, one is incurring in an invalid circular reasoning, which makes void any claim to logical certainty. It is interesting to notice that such has been the traditional Van Tillian methodology. In recent times, however, one of its proponents (John Frame) confesses that he has “*become a bit more favorable to the use of probability in*

apologetics,” and another “bit” (?) “*more guarded in my defense of circularity*” (Frame, op. cit., p. 219). This “two-bit-movement” implies departing from Van Tillianism and heading towards an inductive presuppositionalism like the one of Dr. Ronald H. Nash.

^{ix} Cf. Prov. 8:31; Eccl. 3:11; Rom. 1:18-23. In addition to the historical facts to which the biblical worldview is tied as a result of God’s action in history (the flood, the existence of Israel, the existence of such documents as the books of the Bible, the existence of the Christian church), such objective realities include: reason, ethics, man’s “thirst” for transcendence, etc.

^x No “inclusive language” intended. In Latin, French, and Spanish, the forensic word for evidence (proof) is a feminine noun.

^{xi} And Alvin Plantinga has made an important contribution producing a remarkable defense to such attack.

^{xii} Mavrodes, op. cit.

^{xiii} Also such apologetic works as Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, 1990) in such historical sections as the formation of the canon.

^{xiv} This is the other category in which *The Concept of God* would fit.

^{xv} Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Is Reason Enough?” *The Reformed Journal*, 31:4 (April 1981): 23. Cited in Mavrodes, op. cit., p. 198.

^{xvi} Calvin, *Institutes...*, op. cit.

^{xvii} Herman Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, St. Catherines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1901; pp. 22-23.

^{xviii} San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, 1980.

^{xix} Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1987.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 240.

^{xxii} McDowell, op. cit. (preface). It is interesting to notice that, in spite of such a remark, most of the book of reference is an exercise in positive apologetics (both inductive and deductive) and negative apologetics, without much offensive apologetics.

^{xxiii} 2 Cor. 10:5. In case anyone is entertaining the idea that I might be doing here what I criticized earlier concerning 1 Pet., let me point out that the apostle himself is using figurative language which serves as a general illustration that can be valid to different particular cases. Although it should also be noticed that even if the issues addressed are not identical, they overlap in many points.

^{xxiv} In James F. Sennett, editor, *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998; pp. 72-96.

^{xxv} Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 1997.

^{xxvi} Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994.

^{xxvii} Having said this, I need to express reservations to his insistence in neutrality rather than acknowledging openly and without reservations (when he is in the “debate podium”) the fully Christian presuppositions upon which he operates, and which he transpires (when he is not in the “debate podium”) as a faithful and godly servant of the Lord Jesus. It is also fair to emphasize Dr. Moreland’s contributions in the area of philosophy of religion (which, as already said, is a tool of “positive inductive apologetics”).

^{xxviii} Moreland, op. cit., p. 12.

^{xxix} Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989.

^{xxx} Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1991.

^{xxxi} This is a task for positive inductive apologetics as a tool of the especially revealed theology.

^{xxxii} Even when *he* does not know with precision the exact shape of the truth in the area of this debate.